Do I have Asperger's syndrome? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

Do I really have Asperger's Syndrome? The other day, one of my friends suggested that I was showing some autistic signs, which made me quite worried. I thought something may have been wrong with me. Since then I've taken several AQ tests on the internet and most of them say I may be an "Aspie." I'm too frightened to tell my peers because they'll most like treat me differently, and I'm to embarrased to tell my close family. What should I do to be certain whether or not I have Asperger's Syndrome?

(2) Dear Alice,

I just turned 18, and I'm a girl. I've been diagnosed with Asperger's "traits" by my psychiatrist in the past (I was also diagnosed with ADHD Inattentive Type), but since I've started working at a school for kids with Spectrum disorders, I've started to realize how similar some of my behaviors and reactions to them. For instance, I don't recognize facial expressions, unless they're extreme, I love sensory things ? like rolling one of those squishy toys with the rubber tentacles between my hands ? and I love applying pressure to myself ? like applying pressure to my temples or sinuses when I get a headache or massaging my own hands or feet. I also have actions that calm me, like playing with bumps in my hair caused by my ponytail and biting my nails. I have certain actions that make me want to scream, like when my brother (who was diagnosed with Asperger's) pops his knuckles or taps his fingernails on the tabletop. I'm not overly sensitive to sound, but I hate bright lights and strong smells. I also hate new social settings. Meeting new people freaks me out, and I have a VERY hard time making conversation, even with people I'm very familiar with. I daydream a lot, tend to get songs and rhythms stuck my head for days, and when I'm interested in something, I'm obsessed. I've been obsessed with King Arthur and the knights of the round table for years, and I'd love to tell everyone about them, but I keep my mouth shut because I know that most people don't like that kind of thing. Is it possible that I have Asperger's, or am I simply just showing some traits?

Answer

Dear Readers,

Before getting into the specifics of diagnosing Asperger's, there's another "condition" to be aware of. It's commonly referred to as 'Intern's disease': a condition that many medical and psychology students "come down with" as they study various disorders. The gist of it is that,
as a person learns about signs, symptoms, and syndromes, it's very common to begin self-diagnosing with conditions that aren't actually present. Rather than jumping to conclusions about having Asperger's syndrome (AS), you may wish to consider other possible conditions (including "Intern's disease").

Perhaps throughout the course of your research, you have come across information about AS or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) [2]. Diagnostic labels can sometimes be misleading in that they imply that either you have a certain condition, or you don't. However, Asperger's can be difficult to diagnose: while some cases may be clear cut, for others, it can be hard to tell where to draw the line between "normal" and "abnormal" personality quirks. This is best evidenced by a recent change in diagnostic criteria for the condition.

The most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) has removed AS (though it's still clinically recognized) due to difficulties making a proper diagnosis with previous criteria. Now, someone with AS would likely either fall under ASD or social (pragmatic) communication disorder (SCD) [3] in the DSM-V depending on the severity of the related symptoms. For instance, the characteristics associated with SCD tend to be less severe than ASD and don't have the same repetitive and restrictive behaviors and environmental sensitivity.

That being said, common symptoms for AS emerge in childhood and can include:

- Difficulty communicating and building relationships
- Extreme focus on particular topics of interest
- Reliance on routines
- Either extreme high or low sensitivity to the environment

Consider taking some more time for self-reflection and investigation. Even if you are hesitant to tell your close family about your concern, perhaps you can ask them about behavioral patterns in your childhood. Did you have trouble making friends? Did the adults in your life have any concerns about your emotional or social development? If so, why? Did they ever consult any therapists or health care providers about such concerns? It may also be helpful to ask yourself if your daily functioning at work, school, or in social situations seems to be impaired.

Seeing a health care provider or counselor may be a great place to start if there are aspects of yourself that you wish to change or areas in which you’d like to grow. In terms of AS, there is no cure, but treatment can help people develop skills to better cope with symptoms and lead full, healthy lives. Social skills training, talk therapy, medication for co-existing conditions, and speech and language therapy are among the various treatment options. However, try not to let the Asperger's label overwhelm you, whether or not it actually applies. For more information about autism and AS, check out the Autism Society [4] and Autism Speaks [5].

Alice!
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Communication Concerns [7]
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Resources

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