

## Perspective from David Bonner

I am an adult diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome and ADHD. I have been a teacher of students with high functioning autism for several years. I've spent a great deal of time reflecting on my life. I was asked to help employers interested in hiring someone on the spectrum to better understand us. This is my perspective:

Dear employer,

Thank you for being open-minded enough to consider hiring someone on the autism spectrum. I've come to understand and accept that having Aspergers is neither a good thing nor a bad thing. It just is what it is. Is an orange in a basket full of apples a good or bad thing? The question seems irrelevant, doesn't it? That's because it is. Having high functioning autism or Aspergers is like being an orange in a world full of apples. We're very good at being an orange. Society is very good at being apples. The trouble starts when the apples look at us and wonder why we aren't red. Sometimes a sympathetic apple will offer us a can of red paint and help us pretend to be an apple. Most apples are uncomfortable with bananas, pears, grapes, and even oranges, because we are different. Painting us red only works at the surface. We blend in better, but we're still... an orange. We can be very skilled at having a surface level conversation about the weather or sports, but if you hire us to work for you, you're in for a surprise if you were expecting an apple at the core.

Like the employees in your company, a toolbox contains a wide assortment of tools, each suited to a specific job. Clearly you wouldn't want to use a hammer to sand a block of wood, and you wouldn't use a sheet of sandpaper to drive a nail. Which tool is a person on the spectrum for your company? Like everyone else, people with autism are individuals, perhaps even more so than typical people. We are often like a specialized tool such a staple remover that can do a specific job very well, but may have a harder time with other tasks. We know what we're good at and what we like, and you can count on the fact that we know more about what we're good at than the rest of the resumes on your desk. When we are interested in something, we are interested to the extreme. We will serve you well when working within our interests, but we may struggle when asked to do something new or different. Be patient with us. We can learn new skills, but we may need your help. If you're looking to hire a staple remover, we'll amaze you by how well we can do the job.

If you treat us fairly and provide some basic accommodations, we'll be your most loyal employee. If our basic needs aren't met, we'll do poorly, and disappoint you. This is not an unusual request. All employees do better when they have their basic needs met. You wouldn't deprive an employee of an office chair to sit on. Working from the floor would clearly decrease productivity. You wouldn't set the thermostat to 40 degrees in an office. Clearly the employees would be distracted by the cold. You wouldn't make your employees work for ten straight hours without a break of any kind. People on the spectrum have needs that are reasonable and are typically good for all employees. There are a few things that I need in my workplace. I can't speak for everyone on the spectrum, but these things probably apply to most of us---

**STRUCTURE:** I need a clearly defined job description. A checklist works well for me. The more specific you can make it, the better I will do at meeting your expectations. I also do well when there are no unexpected surprises. If you want to schedule a meeting, let me know as soon as possible. I feel secure when I can plan my entire day. If you make one sudden change, I'll struggle, but adapt. If you make many changes, I'll have a meltdown and not be productive for you. Having meltdowns aren't a choice for us. They just happen. Stress is to meltdowns as sniffing pepper is to sneezing.

**LOGIC & CONCRETE THOUGHT:** We operate in a world that is mostly black and white. If you tell us something, we'll take it at face value. If you tell us you want to talk to us for two minutes, we get stressed if the meeting lasts for much more than 120 seconds. Don't lie to us, not even white lies. We see through people better than most neurotypicals, but we get confused by your mixed messages. Because we don't play social games, being brutally honest with us is usually best. This seems to be the hardest concept for neurotypicals to understand. It's typical etiquette to sandwich bad news between good news. Just tell us the bad news and be done with it. We'll probably say, "oh, ok", and that'll be the end of it. If you sandwich the bad news, we'll fear the worst any time you tell us anything good or bad, and we'll get lost in the irrelevant details.

When correcting us, keep it simple. Just tell us the behavior that needs correction and why, then give us a reasonable amount of time to correct it ourselves. If we have a habit of coming in late to work, tell us that we should arrive before the clients arrive when we open for business because it looks professional to be ready on time. It may take a few days or even weeks to figure out how to correct this behavior, but I will give it my best effort. It's important for you to not punish me in any way while I'm attempting to fix the problem. Don't even give me a scowl when I come in late. Doing something even that small sends a loud message, and I'll be afraid to come to you with other issues all day, and I'll spend the first few hours dwelling on your reaction rather than getting work done. If you can show me that you trust me 100% to fix the problem after you've clearly stated it, I'll want to do my very best to please you. Remember, we're not only extremely sensitive to physical stimuli, but emotional as well. A small emotional response to you is a big one to us.

**COMMUNICATION:** Social conversation for us is fundamentally different than it is for neurotypicals. When we talk, the intent is most often a transfer of information from one hard drive to another. When neurotypicals talk, it is most often serving an emotional need to connect with another person. We don't value "small talk". Even when you meet us for the first time, we'll probably jump into the deepest part of the conversation right away. That's ok for us because in our world that is normal behavior. Some of us have learned to play the small talk game, but we're itching to get to the real conversation. Ask us about the weather if it makes you feel better, but please make it quick so we can get to the real conversation. Remember, conversation for us tends to be about transferring information, so delaying that process is like having a slow Internet connection.

**MOTIVATION:** Most people on the spectrum seem to be either extremely motivated about something, or the other extreme of not caring. There isn't much middle ground. When you ask us to do something

we don't like or aren't excited about, it may not get done as quickly or as well as you would like. What works for me is to convince myself that I like something, then I find myself doing it. I use logic to do the motivating. It may have to come down to, "I like this task because it makes my boss happy that I do it which means I keep my job which means I get paid which means I don't have to worry about finding another job. Doing the task I don't like is better than searching for another job." I need a reason, and it has to be real. Telling us, "do it just because" doesn't work. "just because" isn't a valid reason unless you intend to back it up with a harmful threat. Respect us by being real with us, and we'll respect you for respecting us.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Our working environment has a huge impact on our productivity. I don't work well in a sterile cubical land. I need color and beauty in my surroundings so I don't get depressed. A live plant on my desk and pictures of people I like keep my anxiety down and allow me to work more efficiently. Lighting is a major environmental issue for me. Fluorescent lights flicker on and off 60 times a second. This drains me quickly and gives me a headache. Think of how you would feel if you had to work every day under strobe lights. Computer monitors can have the same effect if the refresh rate is 60 Hz or slower. A good solution is to light the room with incandescent or halogen lighting and use monitors with a refresh rate of 70 Hz or higher. It costs a little more, but think of how much more productive your paid employee will be in return. The best solution is to use natural light from a window.

**SMELLS:** Some ladies like to wear perfume, and some men like to wear cologne. This is pleasant in moderation to the typical nose, but for us it's not. Remember that we tend to be extra sensitive. How would you react if you had a meeting in a small conference room every morning, and each time someone spilled an entire bottle of perfume or cologne? Would you be able to focus? No, of course not. You'd be running for the door! We've been taught that it's impolite to run for the door, so we sit there in agony doing our best to focus. Coffee also has a pungent smell. Holding a cup of coffee seems to be popular for a lot of people in the morning. If we must attend a morning meeting, please let us sit in the corner of the room or next to an open door or window. We're not being antisocial, we just don't want to be miserable.

**DISTRACTIONS:** Most of us have great difficulty with focus because we have ADD or ADHD. These conditions are misunderstood. We don't have trouble focusing, we have trouble not focusing. I focus on everything all the time and my brain doesn't have a filter to sort through what is relevant and what isn't. A wild gorilla rampaging through the room is equally as distracting as the sound of a pencil falling off a desk. Everything is in the spotlight. It takes an enormous amount of energy to get through a day because of this. My work area needs to be as free of distractions as possible. In fact, I prefer being left alone with the expectation that nobody will enter my space unless it's absolutely necessary. It takes a great deal of energy and time to get focused on a task. It's like building up the courage to jump out of a plane when skydiving. When people walk in and distract me, even for important business, I have to start the process all over again. I also need people to not move the stuff on my desk because if something is even the smallest bit out of place, it'll be a distraction.

**SAFE ROOM:** I need a place to go to get away from everything. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. A

storage closet will work. It just has to be a place where I can get completely away for five minutes. I also need the freedom to go to this space without being questioned about it. This is more important for us than the need to take restroom breaks.

**PERSONAL SPACE:** Everyone has a personal bubble. Ours is bigger. We appreciate it when you respect our personal space. Many of us don't like it when people are so close to us that they touch us. Some of us like to be touched, but we don't like to be touched. It's a paradox that even I don't understand, but it's the body I live in. Our personal bubble includes eye contact. We have trouble with eye contact because it feels like an intense violation of our personal bubble. I tend to watch people's mouth when they talk. It helps me decode words in a noisy environment, and it also means I'm not looking into their eyes. To understand this better, think about how dogs react to direct eye contact. They can't stand it. They will either tuck in their tail and whimper away or attack you depending on how much of a threat they perceive you to be. People are far more sophisticated than dogs, so we're going to respond much differently, but the fundamental instinct is the same.

**INSTINCT:** People on the spectrum are much more in tune with their environment because of our hyper-sensitivities. You've heard of animals reacting strangely before an earthquake or an unusual weather phenomenon. We do the same thing when things don't feel right, but we're not usually aware of why. I suspect that I'm far more aware of the inner portion of my brain than most other people are. This is the part of the brain responsible for our most basic instincts. When my senses tell me something isn't right, I feel anxious like a zebra getting ready to sprint when it suspects a crouched lion is waiting in the nearby grass looking for its next meal. The trouble is, there's always something that doesn't feel right, so I'm always on high alert. I tire quickly because of this. Things that don't feel right to me include the switch to daylight savings time, an approaching weather front, a different smell in a room, a change from my routine, or just about anything.

**SOCIAL:** I've heard it said that people on the spectrum don't understand social rules. What I've discovered is that it goes both ways. Neurotypicals don't understand our social rules. Yes, we have our own version of social rules, and for the most part it works pretty well for us. Our rules make sense if you take the time to understand them. I strongly suspect that we follow our own social rules better than neurotypicals follow theirs. The neurotypical social code is like the English language. It's full of exceptions and hard to learn for foreigners. The reality is, people on the spectrum make up less than 1% of the population, so we have to adapt to your rules. If the roles were reversed, I suspect that you'd struggle to understand and follow our rules. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in Neurotypical-ville, do as the neurotypicals do. It might help to consider that we come from another exotic culture. There's actually a lot of truth to that.

**SHARING IN CONVERSATION:** We have a lot to contribute in meetings and discussions, but we don't know when to appropriately come in to a conversation. Americans talk so fast and change the subject so fast that we feel rude when cutting in so we can share. We also tend to have a very small short term memory (but more than make up for it with our long term memory) that if we don't share an idea right

away, we'll lose it. If we blurt something out at an inappropriate time, that's why. We feel it's important enough to share and not lose. It's helpful when the leader of the meeting gives me permission and a quiet moment to share something.

**DYSLEXIA:** This may be unique to me, but I tend to mix numbers and letters around. I also have a processing delay. My brain plays tricks on me. I can look at a "+" sign and literally see a "-" sign. When I look at it again, it changes. It's extremely disconcerting to be aware of this, but be powerless to be certain of anything I'm seeing. Because my mind thinks in black and white, not having senses work in black and white is a major cause of stress. When I type a number into my phone, I check it four times before dialing. The first time is from left to right "555-1234", next is backwards "4321-555", and then one more pass in both directions. It's nearly impossible to mis-transcribe when reading backwards. When I took math tests in college, I answered each question three times. If two of them were the same, I'd use that answer. It took me twice as long, and I failed a lot of tests for that reason, but I eventually registered with adaptive services and was able to do my best. Please don't ask me to put a big stack of papers in alphabetical order. I was required to do this in a former job and was nearly fired because I was certain they were in order, but they weren't anything close. One interesting thing to note is the fact that the orientation of words doesn't seem to register. If a word is upside down or backwards, I can read it just fine, often without realizing it's different. I wonder if the dyslexia is actually caused by an over-active sense of creativity in my brain. I am almost completely a visual thinker, and I can manipulate 3D shapes in my head just as easily as I walk.

**FACE BLINDNESS:** There is nothing wrong with my vision. I can see your face perfectly well in every detail, but my brain doesn't process it naturally like yours does. This condition affects 1 in 50 people from the regular population, but it's very common among people with autism. The human brain has a special piece of software designed to identify and differentiate among thousands of faces. I don't have that software, so I have to rely on other clues such as hair color, face structure, glasses, facial hair, height, tone of voice, the way they walk, smell, clothing, setting, etc. At my work there is a finite group of people that I see on a daily basis, so I can easily identify all of them. When parents come to pick up their kid at the end of the day, I sometimes don't recognize the parents face if they are driving a different car. If I see one of my co-workers when I'm out shopping during the weekend, I'm about 1/3 sure that I recognize them, so I don't initiate contact because the probability is too low. I sometimes make eye contact and hope that they recognize me. 90% of the time, that's how I validate their identity. Face blindness can be a problem in the work place, especially when facial recognition is a matter of courtesy. I have unintentionally offended a lot of people in this way. Name tags help. It also helps when others use names in conversation.

**FACIAL CUES:** People tell me I smile through my eyes. For the rest of my face, there is no direct connection between my emotion and my facial response. I can be extremely happy or extremely upset and have the exact same facial expression. I have to make a conscious effort to approximate the facial expression people expect to help them take me seriously. Sometimes I get distracted and forget.

MISUNDERSTOOD: One more thing about the social - we aren't dumb and we aren't Rain Man. We don't like to be treated differently. A vast majority of us aren't helpless savants. Due to the lack of understanding of autism, people tend to put us in the "diminished mental capacity" category. Some of us may not be as smart as you, but many of us are smarter than you. Albert Einstein was one of us. Don't interpret difficulty in understanding social cues as a lack of intelligence. You wouldn't think that about someone who lost their hearing or eye sight. Think of us as being left handed in a right handed world. Left handed people have a hard time using right handed scissors, and vice versa.

MENTOR: We need someone at the work place designated for us to go to as an advocate and to ask questions to, no matter how dumb they may sound - the discussions in these meetings must be confidential, and the advocate shouldn't be a supervisor.

TRUST US: I've discovered something which I call the "white lie factor". Neurotypicals seem to tell white lies and they compensate for the white lies when listening to other neurotypicals. It seems to be a natural part of the neurotypical world, and it seems to work transparently for them. The problem is, neurotypicals tend to overcompensate with us. If you ask a neurotypical why they were 20 minutes late for work, they might say they got stuck in traffic when the truth is that they hit snooze on their alarm clock too many times and they were only delayed by maybe 30 seconds in traffic. If asked the same question, the first thing out of my mouth will be the brutal truth. I had a hard time waking up this morning, so I hit the snooze button until I felt ready to get up. Although the infraction was exactly the same, I haven't learned how to tell white lies to get out of things, so I get the harsher punishment. I am capable of lying, but I don't do it well, and it takes a lot of thought.

INTERNAL ANXIETY: Two thirds of the stress and energy drain in our life is battling the storm raging in our body and brain. Think of the angst that you experienced as a teenager, and imagine living with the same intensity for the rest of your life. That's the body I live in. When I was a kid, I thought it would be funny to get into my parents car while it was off, turn up the radio volume dial as far as it would go, turn the heater fan on as high as it would go, switch on the turn signal, and turn the wipers on high. The stress reaction my mom had when she turned the car on is probably the same intensity I feel inside my body much of the time. The frustrating thing is that there doesn't seem to be a reason for the anxiety I feel. I still have to go in to work every day and be productive.

LEVELS: Wouldn't it be nice if the weather man called for blue sunny skies, a light breeze, and 70 degree weather every day? If that were the case, the weather man would be out of a job. Everyone has good days and bad days. What's the weather man predicting your internal body weather to be for today? We have internal weather too, but it's far more intense. Our good days are really good, and our bad days are really bad. We can be relaxing on a sunny beach in the Bahamas one moment and be simultaneously hit by a major hurricane and an earthquake the next. A good counselor will help us learn to predict our own weather in an advance so we can duck and cover when necessary. The key is to watch the weather gauges. Each person will have different triggers. I have a list written down in the order of severity so I can use it as a tool. Weather, environmental distractions, mean people, and being

rushed are among the top of my list. I have each one ranked in terms of a number. The more severe the trigger, the higher the number. I have an internal buffer that I think of as a bucket. When I wake up each morning, I take a look at how full my bucket is. On a good morning it may only be 60% full. On a bad morning it may be 90% full. Even if my bucket were 95% full, it wouldn't be a problem. I just have to be more careful. What happens throughout my day is that certain things add water from my bucket, and other things take away water from my bucket. I have to be disciplined to continually monitor my levels. Let's say I started my day with 80% in my bucket. That's an average day for me. I'm calm, relaxed, and follow my morning routine. When I get out to my car, I see that it's covered with frost. Not a huge deal, but it delays my departure by a few minutes. That may add 2% to my bucket. I'm now at 82%. As I drive to work, I find that traffic is unexpectedly backed up because of construction. That delays my arrival at work by 15 minutes. I arrive three minutes before we open for business. This is a moderate cause of stress, perhaps 8%. Now I'm suddenly up to 90%. Not a big deal - yet. I read an email from my boss that the project deadline has been moved to the end of the day instead of the end of the week. Panic. That just added 10% to my bucket. I'm now at 100%. I'm now extremely aware of my stress levels, but things are still fine. At this point I need to immediately retreat to my private closet for five minutes to bring my levels down. The alternative is to rearrange my schedule to do lighter activities for a while. Let's say that I wasn't able to do that while my levels were at 100% and the lead of my pencil broke. That would be only 1/2% added to my bucket, but it would be at 100 and 1/2% enough for water to spill over the rim. At this point I'll have a meltdown. Unfortunately a meltdown adds water to my bucket, so I'm at the point of no return for sure now. Being 1-2% above the rim is a small meltdown that takes a few minutes to an hour to recover from. 3-8% usually takes a few hours to recover from. I've had big meltdowns take as much as a week to ten days to recover from. Before I got counseling, I'd have several 1-2% meltdowns every day, about two or three medium meltdowns every week, and one or two big ones every month. Now that I'm monitoring my levels, I have about two or three small meltdowns every week, one medium one every two weeks, and only one big one maybe once a year. It's been astounding how much my quality of life and productivity has improved. As my employer, it's important that you know and understand this system. The better you get to know us, the more in tune you'll be to our levels. You can just ask us too. "What is your level today?" If it's high, just give us space and save bad news for another time. That will allow us to keep going.

**FOCUS LENGTH:** I have a finite focus length. I can endure about 45 minutes with full focus, another 30 minutes with partial focus, then I'm gone. If I can get up, walk around, or play with something at my seat, I can lengthen that focus time. The best thing for me to do is have several tasks written on my list and rotate among them whenever I get tired of a particular activity. I can go for hours and stay fresh doing that.

**PRIME WORK TIME:** Finally, understand that there is a "right" and "wrong" time for me to work. There are a lot of factors that determine this, but it's either a good time or a bad time to work, and it's not my choice. This is not only true for the work I do for my employer, it's also true for my personal life. I have to work around this schedule that I have no control over. Everyone has a time of day when they are the most focused and do their best work. Some people do the hard tasks first thing in the morning when they feel fresh. Some people naturally do their best work after midnight. I have a prime time of getting

work done, but there's another layer on top of that which has to be taken into account that is more random. If I plan ahead well and work hard during my peak times when they come up, I can get a lot done. If I work during my non-peak time, it drains me quickly and typically takes a great deal of time to recover from. Think of it like cravings for food. Sometimes you have a craving for chocolate. Other times you have a craving for steak. You even have cravings for healthy fruits and veggies. Sometimes I have a "craving" for doing a task that requires a lot of thought. Other times I may want to let my brain rest and do something physical. There are times when I want to be around people, and other times when I don't. If I have a written list of varied tasks that need to be done, I can select the one that would be best for the particular mood I'm in. There needs to be a lot of variation. Having all the tasks involve sitting in front of a computer won't work. Having all the tasks be physical won't work.

GET TO THE POINT: I get really stressed when my time isn't used efficiently, especially when I have a lot to get done. If I can see that I'm making progress, I'll be relaxed. If I have deadlines, but I'm stuck in a meeting where people are doing mandatory small talk rather than letting me get my work done, I often get upset because that doesn't make sense to me to waste time in this way. Go ahead and talk, but let me get back to work.

I know that this is a lot of information. It's a combination of observation of me and others on the spectrum. It took me years to figure this all out and a month to write this. I'm still on a journey to understand myself and my world better, but this should help you understand me and people who are like me better.

David Bonner