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Thinking autism

Mark Chapman observes how the cognitive styles of people with ASD can affect their lives and interactions with others



I have worked in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team for several years and been involved with the assessment and treatment of those diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). I would like to share some of my experiences and observations regarding the cognitive styles of those with autism that really seem to differ from the way most people process information. It is important to bear in mind that not all individuals with ASD have all the cognitive styles I will discuss; indeed, some people never have any of the symptoms I am describing.

Those diagnosed with ASD can demonstrate astonishing cognitive strengths that are really worth considering. Many will display an

uneven profile of cognitive abilities; this means they are noticeably better at some things than most people and not so good at other things.

Individuals living with ASD tend to have exceptional long-term memory for events and facts and many are primarily interested in information and not that interested in fictional works. Equally, some are interested in recalling scenes that happened years ago. In the long-term, these skills can easily be transferrable to the work arena, for example working in research or building intricate mother boards for computers.

Some individuals with ASD often do remarkably well when the material they are reading is technically straight forward, requiring minimal rational skills, and falls into an area of high interest. At school or university,

Very few people are willing to listen to what can become an intense monologue

students with ASD may show above average understanding of subjects like mathematics, science or history. These cognitive strengths can also easily be transferred to creative fields such as music or art.

Distinct interests

Individuals with ASD often have distinct interests that they research

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extensively and enthusiastically. These interests can dominate their free time and interactions with others. Some people with ASD tend to steer away from social conversations unless they are focused on their special interest. One-sided conversations can result and the topic can be discussed at great length, usually without awareness of the listener's level of interest. Alternatively, it can lead to chronic frustration, as the person with ASD often finds that very few people are willing to listen to what can become an intense monologue.

There are, though, lots of advantages of being focused on particular topics of interest. These days, many people struggle to remain focused on specific things or subjects, as there is so much choice in all aspects of our lives. The person living with ASD has the advantage of being focused on their unique interests. I am convinced that we all move towards what we focus on in life. So if someone is focused on music, art or research, they are likely to do exceptionally well, turning their difficulties into achievements.

People living with ASD can struggle with attention difficulties which can also be related to their limited interest in other topics outside their own internal thoughts and fantasies. While showing impressive levels of focus on their preferred topics, they can also demonstrate poor attention to topics of limited interest. These attention problems are secondary symptoms to their ASD and are frequently misdiagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Individuals with ASD can often have significant problems with calendaring, time management and organisational skills. While they may not intend to miss appointments, they are often hyper focused on their own interests and lose track of time and important events in their life.

Executive functioning

Over the years, I have found individuals living with ASD who have highly developed reasoning skills, often scoring in the superior range on standard intelligence (IQ) tests.

Those living with ASD often struggle to adapt from one task to another

I have also found some people on the autism spectrum with very impressive, clear-cut and defined memories that are rich in specifics. Again, these qualities can be symptomatic of highly transferable skills that can be very useful assets and of great worth in this day and age. Indeed, some companies are starting to recognise the worth of these qualities associated with people with ASD when considering their employment policies and decisions.

Using the executive functioning of the brain – which involves our ability to capture, understand and make decisions based on information received – can be a challenge for some people who are on the autistic spectrum.

Smooth functioning requires a person to be flexible and shift easily from one focus of attention to the next. Those living with ASD often struggle to adapt from one task to another. Some tend to dwell on tasks or ideas when the situation requires change. This way of thinking will often persist even when additional information is added that contradicts their original line of thinking.

In social situations, those with ASD can struggle to amalgamate complex information and this can result in artificially splitting decisions into extremes, such as good or bad, or right or wrong. For those with ASD, making decisions can be overwhelming, as most decisions involve thinking about the good and not so good in order to come to an informed choice; the person can often become paralysed by this, causing them to revert to seeing the situation in terms of polar opposites.

The use of polar opposites to make sense of situations in our complex world can help people living with ASD to reduce their anxiety, though, as it



Having a special interest can demonstrate a child's ability to focus.

simplifies their world. For those on the autistic spectrum, the world can be a confusing and complex place. On an interpersonal level, they interact best with others who are straight forward in conversations – those who say what they mean and mean what they say. Again this is a great skill to have as it is always nice to be with people who “speak from their heart” and are honest.

Another cognitive style that can lead people to oversimplifying things can be potentially difficult to navigate. Some people with ASD may tend to view themselves as all good or all bad. They can become acutely self-aware, identifying, more than most people would, their internal sadness, loneliness and anger that is associated with their social isolation. For anyone, being socially isolated can lead to depression, or cause them to devalue themselves. Where a particularly simplistic cognitive style pervades, people with ASD can view themselves in an overly critical way.

Those with ASD often benefit from support targeted to help them understand themselves. Strategies can be taught to help make sense of a confusing world and social stories can be used to help people tolerate ambiguity by helping them see themselves as existing on a continuum and promoting balance.

Cognitive inflexibility

In order to reduce sensory overload, minimise ambiguity and maintain emotional regulation, many people with ASD tend to have an inflexible cognitive style and this needs to be understood, and interventions developed, to support them.

With the right help from others, especially in dealing with the resulting anxiety that accompanies any unexpected change, the person with ASD can often be supported in making the transition to a new way of thinking about a problem. However, this is not an easy shift for them and the person's support network should always be on

People with ASD commonly have trouble learning from their experiences

board with any proposed changes. The key is to be consistent, persistent and structured. If an intervention is tailored in such a way that it keeps these principals in mind, it should be a good start in the move towards positive change.

People with ASD commonly have trouble learning from their experiences. They can have difficulty accurately reading social situations and trouble recognising similar situations in the future. The first step in being able to transfer learning requires an ability to understand the present social situation or interaction. People with ASD can really struggle with in-depth analysis of their own and other people's intentions. They find it difficult to see things from another person's perspective. While they may not intend to hurt someone, their actions may cause harm simply because they did not take account of the other person's needs before acting. In this way, their actions can be unintentionally offensive to others, which in turn can contribute greatly to their social isolation and their internal sadness and loneliness.

At times, people with autism can misperceive events and form mistaken impressions of people and what their actions signify. This is an adaptive liability that is likely to result in frequently failing to anticipate the consequences of actions and misconstruing what constitutes appropriate behaviour. Most people with this degree of impaired social understanding may have difficulty managing basic psychological aspects of everyday living without assistance or supervision. Again, appropriate and accurate interventions can support the person to achieve much higher levels of social competence. It can be done.

I have seen what an accurate, well thought out social intervention can do for a person with autism.

Adherence to rules and routines

Problems with overly simplifying their experiences, abstract reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and reading nonverbal cues can mean that individuals with ASD can become self-appointed rule enforcers. Usually, they adhere to rules because of their literal interpretation of boundaries and they are quick to assign a value to other people's behaviour (such as right or wrong).

Those with ASD are particularly prone to being bullied by others, which can lead to a heightened sensitivity to the concept of “fairness”. Although the social norm may be to ignore others who are breaking the rules, individuals with ASD often cannot disregard even a minor violation and act to enforce the rule. In acting quickly to re-establish the rule, they not only break the social norm, they can also become hyper-focused on correcting the rule-breaker without considering the complex variables at play, or the risks. This can lead to errors in social judgment which have unforeseen consequences. Again, with a well thought out intervention, these difficulties can often be developed into strengths. **SEN**

Further information

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