

Research Project for  
Yoga Therapy Teacher Training

Ananda Seva Mission

Yogic Treatment of  
Aspergers Syndrome

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## **Aspergers Syndrome: A Western Medical and Mental Health Perspective**

Aspergers Syndrome is part of the Autistic Spectrum and the cause of this disorder is yet to be determined. Aspergers Syndrome (AS) is believed to be a neurological disorder and was originally classified in 1944 when a Austrian Doctor identified young patients who lacked the ability to read social cues, especially nonverbal communication patterns as well as having a difficult time empathizing with their peers. In the early 1990s, Aspergers Syndrome was recognized as a diagnosis even though there is still much to be learned about the persons afflicted with this disorder.<sup>i</sup> More recently the mental health community is reviewing the DSM-IV and the recommendation to remove Aspergers from the listing of mental health disorders and incorporate it into Autism Spectrum Disorder.<sup>ii</sup> This debate is quite controversial, as it would impact funding streams and resources that support the ‘Aspie’ community.

There are several prominent features that a person with Aspergers will have. While there is no obvious developmental delays when it comes to verbal or self-help skills, a young child with Aspergers will struggle with empathizing with peers and not be able to engage in direct eye contact and will have a difficult time expressing his/her emotions to others. Further, a young person with Aspergers tends to be extremely rigid in thought and action, sometimes having a very specific, narrow and intense interest in a certain topic (i.e. sports, religion, math). The interest may be so strong that s/he is not able to talk about anything other than that topic. Often times, a young person has significant difficulty when adapting to new situations. It is also very challenging for him/her when taking something learned in one situation and applying it to another situation. A young person may also have sensory integration issues and be incredibly challenged with extreme discomfort or pain when encountering something with one or more of the five senses (i.e. unable to tolerate eating or touching certain textures). There are other diagnoses (i.e. other Pervasive Development Disorders, Schizophrenia) that also must be ruled out before Aspergers is determined.<sup>iii</sup>

This combination of not being able to fully expressing oneself along with not being able to integrate or understand one’s surroundings can inevitably lead to a severe amount of uncertainty and anxiety. The identified person and his/her family experiences experience an enormous amount of distress which impacts daily life experiences that

others may take for granted. Without adequate amount of support and early intervention, a person with Aspergers can become more and more socially isolating and the risk of developing further disorders (i.e. Depression, Anxiety, Substance Use) is high.

While there is no ‘cure’ for Aspergers, the most common Western medical approach includes one or more of the following: providing intensive social skills training, sensory integration therapy, pharmaceuticals and psychotherapy with an emphasis on behavioral modification and/or treating the anxiety that often is part of the client’s experience.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Aspergers Syndrome: A Yogic and Ayurvedic Perspective**

According to Ayurvedic experts, someone with Aspergers has a mind that is severely afflicted by the predominance of Rajas and/or Tamas. This means that at times s/he struggles with too much mental activity, which may also explain why Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, is often a co-occurring condition. This also means that a person with Aspergers may experience the extremes of a Tamasic mind, which explains why often times s/he experiences bouts of depression. Aspergers symptoms also seem to be intensified when the person eats ‘unwholesome and unclean ingredients that consist of mutually contradictory properties’ and a diet that is ‘neglecting prescribed dietary rules’.<sup>v</sup> The Ayurvedic perspective acknowledges how any other disease would aggravate the presenting problem, including other mental disorders or physical health issues. According the experts at CNS Ayurveda Chikitsalayam, another point that the Ayurvedic model identifies is a disturbed mind that is ‘afflicted over and over again by passion, anger, greed, excitement, fear, attachment, excretion, anxiety and grief’. The Yogic approach to understanding this complex condition shines a deeper understanding into how Aspergers is a condition that involves imbalance in mind, body and spirit.

A modern variation on the Yogic approach to understanding this condition is to view those diagnosed with Aspergers (or Autism) as “Crystal Children”. Those that have coined this phrase recognize that there is a significant increase in children being born that operate from their Crown Chakra. The color of the Crown Chakra (Sahasrara), which is the link to the Supreme consciousness or Cosmic Mind, is white, deep purple or crystal. It is said that Crystal Children are actually highly evolved spiritual beings that are

hovering in between the fourth and fifth dimension. This state inevitably leads to much difficulty in relating to what occurs here in the third dimension.<sup>vi</sup> “Indigo Children” are very similar to Crystal Children and often said to have telepathic and telekinetic abilities which also means they struggle with relating to the average human being. As such sensitive beings, both Crystal and Indigo children are often unable to fully assimilate into modern society due to the density and harshness created by other humans’ attitudes and insensitivity, environmental toxins, and pollution.

### **Health and Well Being for Aspergers Syndrome: A Yogic Approach**

As with any healing modality, there is not one specific way to treat a young person that has Aspergers. Rather it is important to thoroughly assess the individual and make recommendations based to that specific client. Based on current research available and on the clinical experience I have serving youth with Aspergers, the following general guidelines should be taken into consideration when working with this population.

#### **Physical Focus:**

Except for the occasional Aspergers client that is particularly interested in physical activity, most clients may present as being very out of touch with their physical body. Slightly more than half of the 25 clients I work with exhibit qualities of the Kapha body type (i.e. gains weight easily, sensitive to dampness, slow to wake up and lethargic at times). Due to years of rigid thought processes and extremes in likes and dislikes, a client may present with an above average Body Mass Index (BMI) and have had limited success in maintaining a physical activity regime.<sup>vii</sup> Clients with Aspergers may also have one or more sensory integration issues that are important to thoroughly understand before engaging him/her in physical activity. For instance, some clients feel unusually uncomfortable with the sensation of water running or dripping on his/her body. Without this awareness, it may be very difficult to encourage a client to shower or explore aqua yoga or other sports that involve water. Bash and Kirby (2005) found that due to the limited socialization skills, the client with Aspergers has most likely learned to avoid situations that might cause him/her to feel awkward or inadequate and would have spent much energy in staying away from group or individual sports.

First and foremost for such client is to find a fun and safe way to become more familiar with one's own physical body. Initially, the client might benefit from guided imagery techniques that allow the client to witness, observe and understand his/her body in a nonjudgmental manner. Another important tool to introduce to the client would be a "0 to 10 pain/discomfort scale". A client who has never had a pleasant stretching experience may actually feel extreme discomfort in even a gentle yoga stretch. Likewise, a client who begins to actively engage in a yoga practice may have a tendency to overdo the pose or stretch and do harm to the body. Both sides of this continuum can be balanced with constant coaching and reminding of mindfulness skills.<sup>viii</sup>

Ongoing positive reinforcement of any progress is crucial to engaging a client with Aspergers. I once observed a very introverted and socially withdrawn client constantly refuse to practice yoga stretches in the presence of another person. Then, one day I was pleasantly surprised to find that the student would actually sneak into the fitness room and do his own 20-minute yoga routine while no one else was around. A gentle reminder for any yoga therapist working with this population is that one is never sure what impact we will have on our clients but it is most important to be genuine and present with the client when offering yogic healing.

### **Mental/Emotional Focus:**

A client with Aspergers most likely also has a high level of anxiety and social isolation.<sup>ix</sup> The client has had years of trying very hard to understand the world around him/her and may have equal amount of time realizing that others may not put as much time or energy into trying to understand his/her experience. This can leave the client guarded, reluctant and feeling incredibly distrustful of any helping professional or healer. Perhaps the most important mental/emotional focus is to assist the client in alleviating the amount of anxious thoughts or feelings through guided imagery or relaxation techniques. Specific techniques and practices will be mentioned in later sections.

### **Spiritual Focus:**

According to Virtue (2003), Crystal or Indigo Children tend to have very open Sahasrara charkas that connect them to the Cosmic Mind yet have very little rooting or

groundedness in any of the other lower charkas. A client with Aspergers would most likely benefit from any type of practice that helps them feel more grounded and connected to the other layers of their minds or Koshas.

One client that I once worked with in psychotherapy requested that over half of our time together be spent meditating. He would bring to our sessions a write up of the things he would like me to say during the guided imagery part of the meditation. The instructions were to allow his Muladhara Chakra to connect to Mother Earth so that she could support and hold him whenever he got confused or overwhelmed. It turned out that his ability to find that inner peace was constantly challenged every time he stepped into a social setting but over the course of a year, I observed him being able to reconnect to his root Chakra on his own.

### **Recommended Yogic Practices**

#### **Asanas**

A client with Aspergers should be thoroughly assessed and all of his/her abilities and limitations should be understood before an asana practice is initiated. Most likely, a client with Aspergers will initially resist engaging in a yoga practice either due to underlying concerns that he/she won't do 'things correctly' or because he/she is simply not the least bit interested in learning something new. If a yoga therapist is faced with such a dilemma as an unwilling client, the best strategy is to not engage in a power struggle. Presenting some poses that can be fun and entertaining is another effective way to engage a reluctant client. If there is a firm and solid therapeutic alliance established, the yoga therapist might invite the client into a friendly challenge such as seeing how long s/he hold a Tree pose. Any attempt on the part of the client should be followed by a fair amount of genuine praise and positive feedback.

Once a client is ready to participate in some asanas, the yoga therapist is best to start with chair or floor seated poses first. The client is surely going to feel reassured and comforted by the support of the floor or the chair that will serve as an energetic grounding. Based on the tendency for the client to feel increased amounts of anxiety, variations of forward folds can be especially beneficial. Teaching Trimun'da Mudra in

between poses might be also helpful with particularly anxious clients. With continual monitoring of the client's progress, eventually cobra and other prone poses can be added to the asana routine. If proper rapport has been established with the client, the yoga therapist might also introduce some partner yoga poses that help the client deepen his/her practice.

### **Meditation**

Most research shows that youth with Aspergers that are 'higher functioning' can benefit from a regular meditation practice.<sup>x</sup> According to the National Autistic Society in the UK and Chris Mitchell the author of the book "Aspergers Syndrome and Mindfulness", guided imagery, relaxing music and short periods of breath work (pranayama) are recommended for beginners. Adriane Kruer describes a meditation technique called "Focus on the Soles of your Feet" to help clients cope with aggressive behavior and angry thoughts.<sup>xi</sup> Due to the tendency to have rigid thought processes and require a significant amount of structure in daily routine, a client with Aspergers may initially resist the invitation to meditate and a skilled Yoga Therapist should be patient and establish rapport before introducing meditation.

One area of caution is Bhakti practices, which may be contraindicated depending on the client's strong opinions or compulsivity around certain topics. For instance, someone that has OCD-like symptoms or is particularly 'obsessed' about any ideology may be very reluctant to be passionate about anything other than his/her topic of choice.

### **Dietary and Nutrition Recommendations:**

There remain as many questions as there do possible approaches to helping a client with Aspergers with diet and nutritional interventions. There is some evidence that certain 'triggers' such as food intolerances (particularly to foods containing wheat, gluten, sugar and dairy products) precipitate the condition, so it makes logical sense to mindfully and compassionately explore dietary changes to help alleviate some of the symptoms.<sup>xii</sup>

Some studies show that a gluten-free diet can assist some clients in reducing the erratic mood swings, anger outbursts and temper tantrums. According to the Ayurveda

Chikitsalayam and Research Center, the root cause of Autism is due to poor metabolism or the process of absorption of ingested food from the intestine.<sup>xiii</sup> The Institute for Remedial Intervention Services (IRIS) strongly recommends that any caregiver of a child diagnosed with Autism or Aspergers should have a thorough assessment to determine Dosha type and proper Ayurvedic diet plans and that a Sattvic diet would be a good starting point as caregivers explore the best diet for their child.<sup>xiv</sup> Many parents report that youth become more manageable when artificial colorants and preservatives like MSG and tartrazine are eliminated from their diets.

Dr. Gangadharan (2009) of the CNS Ayurvedic Center states that homeopathic remedies may be a viable option to synthetic drugs as they have fewer side effects. A holistic treatment plan for someone with Aspergers may include St. John's Wort (for depression), Melissa officinalis (beneficial effect on the nervous system, calming and soothing), Cina (6C, relieves irritability, increase tolerance and prevent temper tantrums), Passiflora (a general nerve tonic that balances emotions), Chamomila (6C, helps those with low pain threshold). As with any treatment, a medical professional whether a Western MD that has some training in holistic health or an Ayurvedic practitioner should be consulted before and during use of herbal supplements.

### **Exercise:**

It is important to remember the various obstacles a youth with Aspergers has had to face in his/her lifetime when a Yoga Therapist makes recommendations for physical activity. Many clients have poor motor coordination, difficulty with balance, sensory integration issues, rigid thinking that makes adapting to game rules challenging, and anxiety regarding competitive and/or group sports.<sup>xv</sup> According to Mylittleprofessor.com (2008), many caregivers hire and consult with physical therapists to work with youth on an individual basis. Some report that engaging the client in some 'rough house' play is beneficial both on a physical and social level. There are various 'proprioception training' exercises, including many yoga asanas, that can help the client improve upon balance and coordination. Another simple strategy that most caregivers or support persons say is helpful is to engage a client with Aspergers in physical chores.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Massage and Relaxation Technique:**

For better or for worse, little validated research has been done to conclusively prove that massage and other relaxation techniques are effective in treating someone with Aspergers. Based on research done at the Children's Clinic in Ireland, young children with Aspergers who received a 15 minute massage before bed exhibited fewer sleep problems, better social behaviors and fewer stereotypical behaviors than children that were read bedtime stories by their caregivers. These clinically significant changes occurred in one month.<sup>xvii</sup> Perhaps one of the most famous forms of relaxation specifically created for people with this condition is the "Squeeze Machine." This interesting machine was invented by a woman that also has Aspergers and conducted research on how the pressure of this machine is particularly soothing and calming to persons with Aspergers.<sup>xviii</sup>

Finally, Reiki might also be explored for clients who are not responsive or hypersensitive to physical contact as it allows the practitioner to work with the subtle energies of the body. Reiki has been shown to produce an overall calming effect and helps alleviate sleep problems, anxiety, stress, tight muscles, headaches and stomach pains.<sup>xix</sup>

### **In Conclusion**

Aspergers Syndrome is a diagnosis that is very complex and puzzling. Western medicine continues to explore ways to understand and treat it. The significant increase of diagnosed cases only further baffles those that look at it from the Western medical and mental health perspective. A yogic perspective seems to offer more clarity and hope for those afflicted with this condition. A yogic perspective and yoga-based recommendations allow for a nonjudgmental approach to serving the individual and with an openness of trying a wide variety of techniques to bring some alleviation of symptoms rather than a bold (ego-based) statement of aiming for a cure. In my years of working with Aspergers, I would agree that the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria offer some general

guidelines to help the clinician in understanding a client's experience. Beyond the guidelines, however, positive outcomes of psychotherapy depend predominantly on "meeting the individual where s/he is" and also on creating an individualized treatment plan. Likewise, an Ayurvedic diet and Yoga Asana practice are developed based on Dosha type and physical ability. A Yoga Therapist must incorporate the age-old wisdom of ancient sutras along with a comprehensive assessment to formulate an individualized program. As with any research paper the infamous phrase of 'further studies are warranted' must come at the end. Perhaps that phrase represents some of the egoless potential that our Western methodology possesses. If our dominant culture can acknowledge that our modern and seemingly 'more advanced' medical system still has much to learn, then that may be where Ayurveda, Yoga Therapy and other holistic approaches to treating Aspergers will be explored and researched. Yoga has been around for thousands of years and it seems the collective consciousness of our culture is reawakening to its healing powers.

It may not be the standard way to end a research paper, but in addition to the "further studies are warranted" invitation to others who serve the Aspergers Community, I also set an intention of the Yogic practice of *Pratipraksha Bhavana* that will recognize the support that we offer our Aspergers clients to ALWAYS be in their best interests. And may our service to our clients genuinely and consistently uphold the Yamas and Niyamas.

Namaskar.

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