

## Practical Autism in Everyday Life

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Hello, I am Stan Hood, retired, mature university student majoring in sociology and member of Autism Spectrum Kiwis - or ASK. I was diagnosed with Aspergers' syndrome in 2008, much to my delight. For the first time, I had an explanation that actually fitted my lifelong conviction that I had been born on the wrong planet among these strange alien beings called humans. They looked to be the same species as me but I never could fathom their funny social interactions. From my earliest years at school, like some other members of the panel you have just heard, I too knew there was something "different" about me.

Some of my story of my difficulties is in the ASK Trust's Welcome Booklet. But right now I want to quickly sketch some other aspects of living in a world which still sometimes stresses me, although much less than it used to. Basically I never had a natural understanding of the alien humans I walked among, so I was forced to adopt what I call my "coping mechanisms" in order to function in human society in the world. As a result, as my life unfolded, I got better at doing reasonably appropriate, rote-learned responses for an increasing number of social circumstances over time. But I was, and still am, in deep trouble if a situation was even slightly different to one I had experienced before. Even a small difference meant I had to work out a new coping mechanism from scratch.

That was probably why, as a young adult I was called immature because I had no better knowledge of how to deal with social situations, and as an older man I have been called inflexible, when the reality for me is that I am still merely coping as best as I can with a limited rote-learned outlook on how to do life.

Alternatively, now and again I am thought of as a bit slow on the uptake, while I stand there passively thinking frantically what the best learned response for this particular social situation is, as the seconds tick by and the neurotypicals around me with their magic social powers have already figured it out.

That happens less to me now, with my larger store of learned social situations.

My diagnosis of Aspergers' syndrome in 2008, I happily told everybody that I was Aspie. It empowered me. After a lifetime of struggle with self-esteem, this ugly duckling suddenly realised that he was a swan. My workmates were astonished at the change in me, they all

said that it was like someone had lit a fire in me. That was true, for at the age of 63 I threw in my job and went to university.

But I am aware of others who have suffered badly from sharing their diagnosis of autism with friends and employers, with supposedly amicable relationships both personal and business, turning hostile. I don't know why discovering one's true nature should become a source of torment or cost one one's job, but sometimes it happens.

At the time of my diagnosis I was living in Christchurch, and found myself welcomed into the regular meetings of the Christchurch branch of ASK, open to autistic adults who are able to make their own way to meetings. There is mutual respect at ASK meetings, we may be socially challenged but we are intelligent beings. But typically Autistics don't do small talk. Meetings can sometimes be quite silent, and that's OK with us. When we talk, we speak literally. There is no banter or irony when we meet, for typically we cannot do those.

I was pleased to be invited, in 2009, to speak at a presentation to University of Canterbury staff for the purpose of making the university more autistic-friendly to students. Following my speech I answered questions from an audience obviously thirsting for knowledge and insight on autism.

Later, along with Dr AvaRuth Baker, who is scheduled to speak this afternoon, I co-facilitated a workshop on autism at the international Kolisco conference, where she was also the keynote speaker. The teachers and therapists in the workshop audience appreciated my answers to their questions, coming from a person, me, with insider knowledge of the work-arounds which at least this autistic had to do to get along in life. And now, having almost achieved my goal of a BA degree, I can soon look forward to a time when I can take up more opportunities to share my pragmatic, practical methods of how to cope on a strange and sometimes fearful planet, and just maybe, pick up a few more coping tips myself along the way.

Thank you for your attention, I have appreciated this opportunity.