

Stallion Sense: Learning the Power of Saying “So What”

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Wisdom Shared
by Autistics
Already Winning
the Race of Life

Jerry Newport,
Column author and host

The best description of Asperger Syndrome (AS) I’ve yet heard came from a five-year old.

While getting his annual physical, Dylan Braxton Hamilton’s doctor started joking with young Dylan about the boy’s AS (they had a good enough rapport to do this).

“I know what’s up with you!” the doctor kidded. “You’ve just got too many wires!”

“No doctor,” Dylan replied. “My problem is that the wires aren’t insulated well enough.”

Hurt feelings are a part of life, whether we’re on or off the autism spectrum. Those on the spectrum, however, probably experience more of them. We read signals wrong, and we send out signals wrong. We’ve been yelled at unnecessarily many times by the time we reach adulthood. And with each misstep along the way, our discomfort grows, as we ponder the next misinterpretation lurking just around the corner. We know there’s a banana peel looming; we just don’t know when we’ll slip on it, or how bad the fall will be.

When we were very young, somewhere inside, we noticed that our peer relations weren’t what they were for other kids. Most of us responded by grabbing onto the adults in our lives as our life preservers, thus needing their approval more. Kids on the spectrum, to sum things up, usually want to please very badly. But that can be a curse and a blessing. Using the glass half-empty, glass half-full analogy, “wants to please” sits side-by-side with “can’t handle rejection” and therein is a source of further pain.

Part of our success in life as adults on the spectrum will be reducing *our reaction* to the criticisms, taunting, and injustice in our lives, as opposed to just finger-pointing at the criticism, taunting and injustice...etc. And as much as I enjoy talking about how the rest of the world



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needs to change, this is a dilemma where the change has to come from within ourselves. We have to become better at letting things roll off our back, for we have been conditioned to be too thin-skinned.

In all likelihood, the person with AS was raised in more or less protected environments, by parents and communities that sensed the heightened dangers we faced, physically, mentally and emotionally. Out of love and honest concern, they erected whatever protective walls were needed. Unfortunately, those parents who did the best job protecting us when we were young were also the same parents who inadvertently curtailed our chance to develop self-reliance and independence, or never learned to let go long enough so we could find out what we were capable of achieving.

As a society our ideas about failure are ever so negative. And yet, failure is something a person on the spectrum needs to experience in order to grow into a functional human being. We are often so afraid of failure that we “forget” that no one succeeds the first time out. We all succeed after getting “it” wrong the first few times. No one’s stayed at their first job—neurotypical or spectrumite—and certainly no one was a good lover their first time, right? We get better at whatever we do by the sheer momentum of continued trying, through practice and perseverance. And our success is equally dependent upon gaining a healthy perspective about our efforts good and bad, which for us mean caring less and less about other people’s criticisms.

As we forge ahead in our lives as adults, we need to feel brave too, just like anyone else. And, as difficult as it is for me to say this, many of us need to get tougher.

Yet that word...“tougher”...When people in our past tried to “toughen” us up it usually resulted in at best, insult, and at worst irreparable trauma. I would offer that the remedy lies in the salesmanship of the message rather than the message itself, that the trick is to make us feel *instructed*, rather than *criticized*. When I was growing up the 70’s, when no one knew I had AS, I benefited from the best of both worlds. After years at (what for me was) a horrible institution, I began attending a school

run by extremely progressive folks - some would call them hippies - who didn’t traumatize me in the name of character building. And on the home front I had the legacy of a father who’d been a Marine Corps pilot, which helped discourage whining and foster within me self-reliance and accountability. Those two worlds were often at odds, obviously, but they also provided a sense of accountability for one another.

Are there proactive ways to thicken one’s skin - or that of a person on the spectrum you love - against the petty criticisms of the world? Plenty, if you’re willing to look outside the box a bit.

1. Travel, train, and travel again. The benefits of travel are many and varied, but there’s a wonderful aspect of traveling that is often overlooked—the fresh start! Whether it’s a visit or relocation to a new city, it’s an instant opportunity to reinvent yourself, to try new things, because nobody knows about your past mistakes. Every time you travel it’s a clean slate, a new beginning. The strength you derive from succeeding in a foreign environment manifests itself as confidence in all other areas of your life, too.

2. If you are a parent or educator, teach realistically. Be vigilant in assessing the **functionality** and real-life application of your child’s lesson plans. Too often neurotypical adults make the mistake of thinking that a spectrum person’s unrealistic sense of the world is based entirely on their diagnosis. Uh-uh. Many people out there in the clinical world are feeding faulty plans to our kids. For example:

- Most social skills curriculums are great at teaching concrete skills, such as how to “shake the neighbor’s hand” but lousy (if they even make the attempt) at explaining the why behind the action. This will hopefully change as social skills curriculums begin to be designed for older populations, but for now, be warned.
- In his sexuality lectures, GRASP Board member, and Organization for Autism Research President, Dr. Peter Gerhardt, cites a court case he’s involved with where an autistic young man went around a mall asking women, “May I touch your breasts?” “May I touch your vagina?” The young man in question, who faces serious sexually-based charges, was only doing what he was taught to do within his sexuality training—that if he wanted to touch someone, he had to ask. Even if he is acquitted, what immeasurable damage has been done to his confidence and self-esteem... all because no one thought through the real-life aspects of the social skills they were teaching him.

3. Teach kids to fake it. Someone once said to me, “Act like you belong.” It was meant as an insult, however I took it as a constructive suggestion. And it worked! It was the perfect phrase to remind myself of what to do when I didn’t feel like I was on the same organic level as everyone else.

4. Teach the good, the bad and the ugly. Explain what pettiness is, what resentment looks like. Teach that it’s OK if someone doesn’t like you, or doesn’t share your beliefs. You may find yourself or your child with a residual disrespect for authority with this newfound freedom, and this may require some additional behavior modification. Accept this

consequence, because it's infinitely better over the long haul than teaching a person to interact with the rest of the world as though they're the individual's captors.

5. Incorporate "So what" into your daily vocabulary.

Encourage the person on the spectrum to say the words, "So," and "what" together. At first, especially for older kids and adults, it'll just feel too weird. S/he might think you're offering some cheap self-help ploy, but try again. You might discover that the origin of their discomfort lies in not having said it very much in their lives, nor feeling they had the freedom to say it. Eventually, I would hope, and I hope you would hope, that losing the obligation to please everyone might become extraordinarily liberating to the individual.

Albert Einstein himself, the prized jewel of autistic spectrum possibility, had something extraordinary to say along these lines. In diaries uncovered in 2004, he is quoted from a conversation he had with Ms. Fantova (an ex mistress) about his old contemporary J. Robert Oppenheimer. Einstein, irked that his friend was taking critics so seriously, said:

"Oppenheimer is not a gypsy like me. I was born with the skin of an elephant; there is no one who can hurt me. Criticism flows off me like water."

It has been many years since Dylan quipped about his AS with his family doctor. Now close to becoming a man, I am hopeful he's been insulating those gorgeous wires of his.



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spoken at conferences, hospitals, universities, and health care organizations and has appeared in the media widely. Along with his (then) 4-year old son, he was diagnosed with AS in November of 2000. You can email him, mjcarley@grasp.org or visit GRASP and sign on to one of their many free elists at www.grasp.org.



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