

INTERVENTION SHEET #2

DOES AN AUTISTIC CHILD KNOW THAT THEY'RE DIFFERENT? IF SO, DOES THIS CAUSE THEM PAIN?

By Brigitte Harrisson, 2002

I would need dozens of pages to answer this question! And my answer is not something but a simple reflection.

My name is Bibi. I'm 41 years old and I have been diagnosed with autism. My level of functioning is very high even if I experience the same problems as other autistics!!

In my opinion, parents are right to think that depending on their level of self-awareness, autistic people may be aware that they're different from others, and this awareness might cause them pain. That's why, at first glance, people with Asperger's and or those with "high functioning" autism are identified as being aware enough to realize this.

But to me, this difference is not our greatest challenge. THE most difficult thing is to be misunderstood by others, to be unable to understand communication, and to live with the incoherence and fear provoked by "non sense."

I remember when I suffered a lot... I couldn't understand my everyday experiences, I lived with inexplicable discomfort, and I was unhappy. I didn't wonder why I wasn't like everyone else because I didn't realize I wasn't... My question was, rather: Why don't things work? I had grown exhausted from everyday life, from engaging with others, and the huge amounts of energy I was continually expending to adapt, minute-by-minute. I was so exhausted that I became detached and even suicidal.

I also remember the stage when I became aware that I was different from others, after several years of intense work once I'd learned I was autistic. Like anyone with any disability, I had to go through the stages of grief to come to terms with my condition. Now I can even see that I have developed strengths that others do not have!!

But my first concern has rarely been to be like everyone else... Autistics have a very long way to go before they fully understand who others are... And what draws us to others is different from what draws non-autistic people to one another. Our ways of being and thinking, as well as our interests and concerns are different because we are not built like you.

Despite this, we, too, are human, and we are much more present than it may appear from the outside. And even if can't easily decode our emotions, I can assure you that they are very much present...

We start out with two emotional states: Fear and "non-fear." Then, if someone wants to help us learn, we might realize that there are other emotions. We will then have to learn to locate them internally to learn how to decode them. What takes time is that we can't transpose situations, so we must re-identify an emotion in every new context we encounter it.



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After reaching a certain level of development, we can manage to consciously create links between the existence of a particular emotion and the internal identification more easily in several situations.

Once we can say "I am sad" or "I am happy," we will have to be taught to look for the why because we are not used to doing so... And it is at this stage, I believe, that we are aware enough to realize whether we are happy or whether we are suffering.

Once we can say, "I am sad because..." we are at the stage where we are able to realize that we are in pain because we are different or because our daily lives are very demanding for us. It is also at this stage that we can create connections with other happy emotions.

We work so hard to manage everyday life that the idea of being like everyone else seems to remain secondary.... This doesn't prevent it from showing up at certain periods of our lives. But I think we struggle most with our condition and all that it entails in our everyday lives, and not so much as it compares with others that most impacts us.

I don't claim to have the answer, but I've used my own experiences to try to answer a question I consider highly relevant... And I believe that an autistic person sharing their experience might be of service to others. I hope my attempt can shed some light on the question... And that perhaps it will only serve to clarify what is happening more precisely. I just hope I was able to help a little...

Sincerely,
Bibi
Brigitte Harrisson, 2002

FOR MORE INFORMATION,
please refer to: Harrison B, St-Charles L.
L'autisme expliqué aux non-autistes.
Quebec City: Trécarré; 2017.