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5 Common Myths About Asperger's Syndrome

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Written by [Michelle Leach](#) | font size | [Print](#) | [E-mail](#)

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In the search for answers as to why 20-year-old gunman Adam Lanza would storm Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., and gun down 26 innocent children and staffers, media and pundits latched on to several possible explanations. One factor that quickly surfaced is that Lanza had Asperger's syndrome. As we collectively struggle to understand why anyone would commit such a crime, some Asperger's advocates say we risk further victimizing many other children who have this disorder, by associating Asperger's with violent behavior and serious mental illnesses. It's not the only misconception about Asperger's that has surfaced in the wake of the shootings. Here are five of the most common myths about Asperger's.

Commentary



Asperger's syndrome is poorly understood by the public; Laney

5. Myth: "Aspies" Are Low Achievers

Since first being recognized in 1944 by an Austrian pediatrician, Hans Asperger, the developmental disorder that bears his name, Asperger's syndrome, has been widely misdiagnosed and misunderstood. One of the most common misconceptions:

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That those associated with Asperger's are low achievers. On the contrary, many individuals with this condition, which is widely considered a high-functioning form of autism, have gone on to accomplish great things. Many great achievers throughout history have either been diagnosed, or are suspected of having, Asperger's, including Albert Einstein, President Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, Beethoven, Michelangelo, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Mark Twain and Andy Warhol. In fact, one of the hallmarks of Asperger's — an intense interest in a narrow subject matter, such as train schedules or baseball statistics — is a key differentiator that separates the "rest of us" from some of the aforementioned geniuses who had very narrow obsessions/passions and went on to positively change and enrich the world. A number of creative types, including actress Darryl Hannah and American Idol finalist James Durbin, have opened up in recent years about their living and thriving with this disorder.

4. Myth: Asperger's Makes People More Violent

While Asperger's may be used in specific — and extremely rare — circumstances to help "explain" crimes, psychiatrists and psychologists alike have resoundingly discounted any alleged links between Asperger's and violence. Those with the condition are no more prone to violence than the general population. Those diagnosed with Asperger's exhibit behaviors that fall into the following three categories: severe social impairment, such as the persistent inability to look others in the eye; unrelenting patterns that are often very restrictive, such as the aforementioned preoccupation with a narrow interest or inflexible daily rituals; and, collectively, these behaviors lead to what could be considered the third hallmark of the disorder — an inability to develop in key areas of functioning, such as socially or in an occupation. These are issues dealing with socialization, not violence.

3. Myth: Asperger's Is A Dangerous Mental Illness

Post-Newtown, discourse about "why did Adam Lanza do it?" has often associated Asperger's with mental illnesses, representing both a lack of understanding about mental illness in general and the syndrome itself. Asperger's is a developmental disorder, not a mental illness. Unlike other conditions, often Asperger's is not diagnosed until a person reaches that age in school where they're starting to really interact with others, and then that stunted development — such as the lack of social cues or "reading" others — begins to present itself. And, while it is possible that Asperger's may coexist with various classes of mental illnesses, the syndrome is not associated with any of the conditions we commonly think of as "mental illnesses," including mood disorders like depression and bipolar disorder, psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, and antisocial disorders. The bottom line: Don't lump Asperger's in with mental illnesses. In fact, there is a growing sentiment in the Asperger's community that Asperger's should not even be labeled as a disorder, but rather as a unique way of looking at the world, a skill particularly valued in many professions.

2. Myth: Asperger's is Easy To Diagnose

The truth is, Asperger's could arguably be one of the most misdiagnosed conditions of its kind. Researchers have made cases both for its over-diagnosis and its under-diagnosis. Some contend that a 1992 U.S. Department of Education directive to enhance services for kids diagnosed with "pervasive development disorder, not otherwise specified," contributed to a flood of simply socially awkward children being diagnosed on the autism spectrum. That further clouded perception of Asperger's, prompting questions such as, "When is a child simply eccentric, an aloof 'oddball,' and when does he (or she) truly have such a developmental condition?"

Because Asperger's is on the [autism spectrum](#), some people tend to associate aspies with autistic children, despite the fact aspies have no problems with language or their ability to think and reason. Aspies are quite often of above-average intelligence. The case has also been made that Asperger's is under-diagnosed, particularly in girls. Researchers contend boys aren't dramatically more susceptible to the syndrome; instead, girls simply present or manifest the disorder in a much different way — for example, through an obsession with perfection (anorexia is, for example, thought to be tied to Asperger's in females) and are going undiagnosed.

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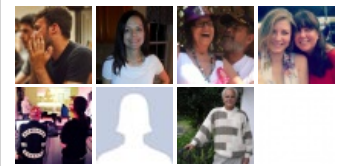
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1. Myth: People with Asperger's Brought It On Themselves

As with other disorders, aspies don't choose to have this challenging condition. They don't participate in risky behaviors that somehow lead to their "developing" this condition. Again, it is considered a "developmental disorder" that they were born with, and while no one knows exactly what causes it, Asperger's may be linked to changes in certain genes or structural changes in the brain. What's clear is that it's a tough and lonely disorder for both aspies, and their parents and other family members. There is no vacation from Asperger's; those with the disorder and their family members must deal with it every day. While [support networks](#) exist for those with the syndrome and their families, these people need understanding and compassion. We can start by taking a very misinformed discussion about Asperger's that has emerged from a tragic event, learn from it, and hopefully be better because of it in the end.

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Michelle Leach's love of writing has taken her to Sydney, Australia, London, U.K. and other exotic locations like Grand Island, Neb., and Clio, Mich. She has developed pieces for TV and radio stations, PR departments, newspapers and magazines. A graduate of Northwestern University and Lake Forest College (also in Illinois) she enjoys running marathons and likes to say when not writing, she's running—but she tries not to mix the two activities.

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