

ALAN: Older man with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Alan is a 58-year-old man with autism spectrum disorder. When he was young there was little support for him and his parents to access, and his difference was not always responded to appropriately, either in or out of school. Alan has always lived in his parents' house, and he continues to live with his father following the death of his mother seven years ago. He has always relied on his parents to make important decisions on his behalf, as he gets overwhelmed when faced with serious choices. Alan's neighbours are familiar with his lack of face-to-face interaction, and they have settled into a routine of merely saying "hello" to him, with no further interaction. Alan's intelligence level is slightly below average, and he has been able to obtain employment in roles that require the completion of repetitive tasks that he can learn the required range of responses to. For the past fourteen years he has held a data entry post that allows him a quiet work environment and clear, specific step-by-step instructions for completing his day-to-day tasks. He works quickly and accurately and he has been praised for his work by the manager. Alan likes this environment, as he can become upset by loud noises and many people talking at once. He feels that being employed is an important part of adult life and feels he contributes financially at home. He takes pride in striving to be a reliable and productive employee, attending work on time and focusing on his tasks.

However, while Alan undertakes his routine tasks to the required standard, his social skills are much poorer. Alan finds it difficult to understand the unspoken social rules of different relationships, and he also has difficulty adjusting his behaviour to that appropriate for different social situations. Alan tends to not notice, or not understand nonverbal cues relating to people's feelings, such as facial expressions, particularly when there are several people around as this overwhelms his senses. This results in him taking literally what people say, for example, not understanding sarcasm and teasing in conversations. At school, this made him an easy target for mockery, and it continues to do so in his current workplace, as do his tics and hand-flapping in response to anxiety resulting from new situations or those he does not understand.

Conversely, a lack of attention to signs of emotional responses means that Alan does not always realise when his own behaviour might have upset someone else. This upset can be caused by him switching off his attention and showing a lack of awareness of the presence of others who were speaking to him if the topic does not interest him. Since childhood, his own behaviours, and those of others, have resulted in Alan struggling to make friends and, although he has had some brief work-related friends in the past, He has not developed any deep and enduring relationships.

Alan's colleagues do not invite him out after work or even to sit with them at lunch time, as they find him effortful to attempt to talk with. Alan finds attempting to mimic their behaviours to fit in can make him feel anxious and exhausted, and both childhood and adult social experiences have led him to avoid unnecessary social interactions. With no experience of romantic relationships, Alan prefers to spend time with his father, who understands his special interests and hobbies, particularly the model-building club he has belonged to for 17 years.

Alan is currently experiencing changes in several areas of his life. A new senior manager has taken over at work with the aim of re-structuring and streamlining operations. Alan has a strong need to know the facts of what is happening but instead is overhearing a lot of rumour at work. He knows that there has been an influx of young employees recently and he is afraid to ask the manager for the facts, in case he is told he is no longer needed. He now finds his workplace unwelcoming and has become suspicious of conversations. He has begun to spend time rocking in his chair instead of completing his work. His tics have got worse, and he often becomes irritable at home and work.

At home, Alan's elderly father has become ill and is requiring an increasing amount of support from Alan to look after himself. He is no longer able to drive Alan to the shops or to his clubs, so, the lack of an informal support network mean that Alan has become more solitary and has begun to feel tired and unwell all the time. Alan's father has suggested contacting Social Services to ask for support, particularly with accessing healthcare and dealing with finances. However, Alan has become very afraid that other people will decide to separate him and his father. Consequently, he is now trying to cope with potentially serious changes at home and in work, when he has relied upon a routinised life, with others taking the various decision-making responsibilities. As a consequence of his father's illness and infirmity, Alan now spends most of his time at home alone, as well as working alone in work, and he is experiencing reduced mental stimulation and few opportunities for social connections.

