



Uncovering Asperger's Syndrome

Popular television series spotlight the misunderstood behavioral traits associated with this syndrome.

Every major television network has a prime-time series that is putting a face on common mental health conditions that affect one out of every four people in our community. And they providing a wealth of educational opportunities for all viewers.

"Penny... Penny...Penny." Fans of the popular *Big Bang Theory* will grin at this reference to Ph.D. physicist Sheldon Cooper's repetitive calling for his neighbor, Penny, through her closed apartment door—his baby chick-like voice followed by staccato knocking.

Unusual and quirky behavior? The general nerdy mannerisms passed off as "normal" for brilliant minds? Think again. Cooper displays several zany behavior patterns: his need to sit in his special chair, wrestle with germaphobia, and speak Klingon. Though not specifically diagnosed on the series, Cooper depicts behavioral traits related to at least one mental health condition—Asperger's syndrome.

Max Braverman in *Parenthood* offers another glimpse into an often misunderstood behavioral syndrome. Viewers feel the frustration of and budding compassion for Max and his family as he angrily demands in a repeated verbal loop, "You promised

me a puppy" or, "I want the vending machine to come back." The Braverman family is on a journey in dealing with the teenager's issues, alongside those of other family members. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety are some of the issues family members struggle with as they confront problems related to infertility, unemployment, adoption, infidelity, cancer and retirement.

Forensic anthropologist Dr. Temperance Brennan on *Bones* provides a third view into the unconventional world of those with Asperger's. Her Spock-like speech patterns dotted with constant clinical and intellectual medical jargon, obsessive thinking, and an inability to appreciate humor continue to reveal facets of Brennan's character and aspects of this disorder.

The portrayal of characters across the Autism spectrum may help reduce the associated stigma.

Characteristics of Asperger's come to life through Dr. Virginia Dixon on the hit drama *Grey's Anatomy*. As a cardiac surgeon, she repetitively spits out countless, usually trivial, facts about the heart and explains surgical technicalities to uninterested patients who don't understand. Outside of her comfort zone, she suffers panic attacks.

The critically acclaimed comedy *Community* follows a group of college students which includes Abed Nadir, whose undiagnosed condition is displayed

through an inability to pick up on social and emotional cues and nuances, such as sarcasm.

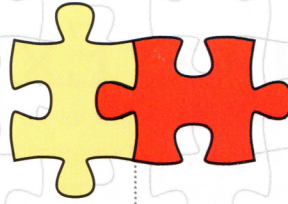
COMPASSION AND EARLY INTERVENTION BOOST SUCCESS

What can we learn and take away from this mainstream educational opportunity TV provides? Common symptoms, compassion, empathy and an awareness that, with early childhood diagnosis and intervention, individuals with mental afflictions often go on to become highly productive members of society.

Whether told through humor or pathos, these shows' portrayal of the autism spectrum and other psychological conditions are educating the universal population about this relatively unknown syndrome, which may reduce the stigma. Asperger's is typically characterized by significant difficulties in social and non-verbal interaction, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities. Unlike autism, those with Asperger's are verbal, but their speech patterns are often formal and lack a sense of spontaneity.

"Children with Asperger's also suffer with symptoms of anxiety, depression and obsessive compulsive disorders," says David Lawrence Center licensed mental health counselor and clinical supervisor Cynthia Burman. She oversees programs designed to help children, who oftentimes have co-occurring developmental issues with behavioral problems. Local programs reaching out to children and their families in their schools or homes include Asperger's Behavioral Health Network, Wrap Around Collier, Therapeutic Behavioral Onsite Services, and the new Collier County Public School Educational Day Treatment Program. Through programs, the children learn social skills. "Creativity, compassion and patience [are] of ultimate importance," says Burman.

Because of their issues with appropriate behaviors, these children typically don't fit in at school. "They see



their world as being very black and white, with little gray area, and they have great difficulty making and keeping friends," Burman says. Some local children are benefitting from a

pilot equine therapy program, which can promote changes in empathy, boundary setting and social respect. Funded in part by the Department of Children & Families and the Naples Children and Education Foundation, these encouraging, innovative, effective community-based programs are changing the lives of area youth.

"When working with children, it's almost impossible to make any real change without also involving the families. Community-based programs allow us to do just that," Burman says. ☺

Caryn Hacker-Buechel is a member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers who holds a Diplomate in Clinical Social Work. She volunteers with The David Lawrence Center, where she is co-chair of the 2014 fundraising gala.



For more information and resources on autism spectrum disorders, contact:

- ∴ **David Lawrence Center** at 239-455-8500 or DavidLawrenceCenter.org
- ∴ **Easter Seals Florida** at 239-277.9817 or fl.easterseals.com
- ∴ **ABLE Academy** at 239-352-7600 or theableacademy.org

