

One of the characteristics of Tae Kwon-Do that most appeals to me is how universal it really is, not only in a geographical sense, but also in regards to the practice itself: no matter how old you are, your physical abilities or anything else, there is always a way to reap benefits from training. There are remarkable stories of people with great physical or mental disabilities, managing to advance through the ranks despite their difficulties.

I know of this firsthand because such was my case. In addition to a marked improvement in physical fitness, I got mental and social benefits from my practice, helping me cope with the effects of a mental condition (Asperger's Syndrome), even though I wasn't aware of it at the moment. Due to being harassed and picked upon during my school years, when I started training I was insecure and aggressive, snapping at my fellow students at the least offense, and seen as an extremely disruptive student. Even when I tried to be friendly and amenable, my lack of social skills made me seem to be insulting and aggressive.

Fortunately, the patience of my instructor and fellow students was stronger than my unseemly behavior, and I slowly learned to deal properly with social situations, both in and out of the dojang. This essay is meant to provide advice for instructors who might have to deal with students with this condition, based on my own experiences. I should point out that I have no studies regarding mental health or therapy, nor should this essay be taken as a medical paper of any sort.

Asperger's Syndrome is a mild manifestation of the autistic spectrum. It is hard to make generalizations about people with it because it doesn't have a fixed set of associated symptoms. Instead, the diagnosis is made based on a list of many possible symptoms, which may or may not be present in any given individual. These are mainly related with difficulties in social interaction, heightened sensitivity and problems with motor skills. It should be noted that Asperger's Syndrome doesn't entail a problem of cognitive development, those with it are not mentally challenged, only wired in a different way that makes it difficult for them to deal with the pressure of regular social interaction. I will focus the present essay mainly in those symptoms I have recognized on myself, and the ways I think instructors could deal with students that show them.

The main problem I've had is great difficulty to understand social cues. For most people, this can sound very strange. After all, the understanding of body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. develops naturally as people grow up: they all know instinctively, for example, when a person has taken a liking or disliking for them, based in those aspects.

For a person with Asperger's, however, this is not the case. Following the previous example, they might think that one person dislikes them when the opposite is true, due to their lack of knowledge of these cues. They must make a tremendous effort to learn them, usually by trial and error. Even after years of this, they might still have difficulties in certain areas of social interaction.

In addition to this, they can have great difficulties with figurative language of any kind, such as sarcasm, irony, or metaphors, which in turn might lead to misunderstandings. For example, a person might jokingly say "If you do ten pushups, I will give you ten dollars". Since a person with Asperger's usually won't catch on the cues that signal it as a joke (such as tone of voice or exaggerated facial expression),

he might get upset at being denied the ten dollars after doing the pushups, even if the person doing the joke had no intention of deceiving him.

It can also happen that, due to the lack of understanding of non-verbal communication, a person with Asperger might use them in the wrong way, ending up appearing serious when he was trying to make a joke, or to be joking when he's being serious. During a road trip, I was on the back seat of a car, next to a baby. The driver asked me if the baby was asleep, and my natural answer (i.e. not trying to be cheeky) was "I don't know, but his eyes are closed". This made everyone else laugh, but it took me a while to realize they had taken it as a joke instead of a straight answer.

In order to avoid this kind of problems, it's a good idea to explain things as clearly and explicitly as possible: remember that a good part of communication is non-verbal, which means a student with Asperger's might miss it. For example, if the student has misbehaved, clearly explain to him what he has done wrong, and why this is so. Also, if the student seems to be acting strangely (saying kind words in an aggressive tone, for example), it might be a good idea to ask him exactly what he meant, in order to avoid misunderstandings.

This literal way of understanding communication can also be troublesome for the actual teaching, since it means they will probably have problems with figures of speech. Thus, if during training the instructor says that the student with Asperger's needs to pull up his socks if he wants to improve their technique, he might observe that he's not wearing socks at the moment, or that he fails to see how the way he wears his socks could make any difference in his performance.

Should this happen, the best answer is patience. Most likely, the student really didn't understand that "pulling up your socks" is another way of saying "putting more effort". Saying "You know perfectly well what I mean!" might be reasonable for a regular student, but in the case of one with Asperger's, it would only serve to increase his confusion and anxiety. Instead, the instructor should take the time to either explain the figure of speech or rephrase the comment so there can be no doubt about its meaning.

Another prevalent characteristic is a great difficulty for lying or falseness in general. This doesn't sound troubling; after all, telling the truth seems to be the mark of an honest and upright person. However, in social situations it is extremely important to know how to be flexible with the truth and the way it is expressed. This lack of flexibility can make the student look rude, while they think they are only being honest. After all, their reasoning goes, if the other person didn't want a completely honest answer, he wouldn't have bothered to ask the question in the first place. This has put me in trouble more times than I can count, both on my studies and during training.

If asked their opinion about something, for example, they might see many flaws, and enumerate them in detail, which can come across as rude or arrogant. To avoid this becoming an issue, I'd suggest a) be careful in the way you phrase questions or requests for an opinion (for example, ask "What aspects of my technique do you think can be improved?" rather than "What do you think of my technique?", and b) remember that the answers are given without the intent of being rude or hurtful.

Many people with Asperger's have a great sensitivity to outside stimulus, usually regarding the senses (i.e. loud noises or bright lights), though this is not always the case: it could also be the pressure of intensive social interaction (such is my case) or being surrounded by people. This is another aspect that is difficult to explain, for not everyone experiences it the same way: some people can't stand bright lights, while others can tolerate them perfectly but get headaches when exposed to loud noises. It is important to keep in mind that there's a certain limit to how much of these can be tolerated before triggering a loss of control, also known as a meltdown.

As with most of the characteristics mentioned so far, a meltdown can manifest in many different ways, from a panic attack to a complete collapse similar to a tantrum, with swearing, thrashing, screaming, crying, etc. It is important, however, to remember that despite the similarities, it is not a tantrum: it is not a childish reaction to something, nor can it be solved by giving way to the individual's wishes. It is a huge sensorial overload, so it shouldn't be treated the same way. In the case of adults, it's more likely that they'd develop ways to cope with these overloads in a less disruptive (though still very traumatic) way.

For this particular problem, I think the most reasonable thing to do would be to ask what stimulus can trigger a meltdown in a student, in order to see if they can be avoided or mitigated. For example, if the training takes place in a noisy environment –like next to a busy street-, it might be advisable to keep the windows closed or allow the student to wear ear plugs.

Just as there are many different causes for meltdowns, there are also different ways to help the student recover from them. A way for stopping the meltdown usually involves taking the person away from the cause of the overload, but in addition to that some people recover faster by using weighed blankets, rocking into place, being hugged etc. It would be advisable for the instructor to know which methods work with his students and, if possible, have them at hand in case a meltdown happens.

In the case of teenagers and adults, not only are they more likely to have developed methods to deal with this overload, they are also more likely to know when they are reaching the limit of what they can manage. For this reason, I think it's advisable for instructors to let them exit the training hall if they feel the need, even without asking for the instructor's permission. Sometimes the overload is very sudden, and something as small as having to talk to someone can take them over the edge.

Another aspect to take into consideration is the fixation some might have with routines. This can vary from easily falling into habits (such as a certain way for brushing their teeth, always the same) to having their day completely structured, to the point where even small alterations (such as having lunch a few minutes later, or someone cancelling an appointment with very short notice) can be deeply unsettling, sometimes to the point of triggering a meltdown. To a certain extent, this fixation with routines can be applied to training, once they become used to it. For the most acute cases, it might be better to be very consistent with the way of doing things (i.e. if the students must bow after working in pairs, ensure they always do so; always refer to a person by the same name, not using different versions such as in "John", then "Jonathan", etc.), avoiding those who are most disruptive for the student.

The fact that not all people with Asperger's show all these characteristics should be underlined. Some might have no problems understanding metaphors but be absolutely blind to non-verbal language; others will have little problem functioning in a noisy environment, but quickly collapse when having to interact with more than a few people. In short, students with Asperger's are still people: they might share certain traits and quirks, but they are always much more than just "that guy/ girl with Asperger's".

It's also worth considering that it is sometimes too easy to dismiss a student as being lazy, or dumb, or having a bad attitude, when he or she actually suffers from Asperger's or Autism without having been diagnosed. This can make everything harder both for the student as for his peers and instructor, especially since it's such an under-diagnosed condition. I know this firsthand because, for thirty years, such was my case. If it hadn't been for the patience of both my instructor and my fellow students, I would probably have been kicked out of my academy on my first few months. Ten years later, however, time seems to have favored me: I am still training, when so many of my peers have abandoned, going on the way to become an assistant instructor and a very good element for my school.

I hope these lines are a help for those instructors who have students with this condition and realize that, if properly handled, they can be a huge contribution to their clubs.