

OTRS: The burden on spouses and children

©Published 17 June, 2013 by Aspergerhustru, www.aspergerpartner.dk

Danish website for spouses and partners of adults with Asperger's syndrome

Spouses and children of adults with Asperger syndrome (AS) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) risk being affected by Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Syndrome (OTRS).

What is OTRS?

OTRS is a trauma-based syndrome, which can affect people over a long period when they are subjected to repeated psychological traumatic impacts within a close relationship.

OTRS is a normal response in neurotypical (NT) people as a result of prolonged traumatic stress in an intimate relationship. Symptoms are similar to those seen in people who continuously, for a long time, are exposed to emotional and psychological torture, both mental and physical. The impact is more serious because the traumatic stress, OTRS, is suffered at home in an intimate relationship, and because the surrounding persons typically deny the reality of what is taking place.

The damage to the NT spouse and children occurs insidiously and can continue for decades.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of OTRS are stress-related health problems. They occur over a prolonged period as a result of violations and disregard of the spouse / partner who has Asperger's syndrome / ASD. Symptoms may be physical illnesses, stress-related health problems, depression, fear, loss of self-esteem, doubt of own reality, loneliness, fatigue, involuntary social isolation, etc. Some of the symptoms are the same as those affecting spouses of sociopaths.

What is the cause of OTRS?

OTRS is due to the psychological trauma, the normal (NT) partner suffers from when living in relationships / family life with a person who has serious limitations in their ability to engage in reciprocal relationships in which they:

- do not exhibit reciprocity;
- do not show empathy or compassion,
- cannot put themselves in the place of others,
- have difficulty with mutual communication;
- do not recognize the NT partner's reality and attitudes,
- cannot read others' intentions and emotions
- find it difficult to learn from experience
- cannot assess complex situations,
- cannot nurture a relationship,
- cannot see his responsibility for own actions,
- cannot negotiate, seek compromises or resolve conflicts;
- is extremely busy solely for their own needs,
- have inadequate capacity for adult impulse control

There is a secondary addition which aggravates OTRS when the surroundings - including professionals such as therapists and doctors - do not know about or do not take the bizarre reality of the NT partner seriously. The NT spouse will typically wait very long to initiate others in what is going on at home, because it is taboo to talk to someone about these things. It feels awkward and is not infrequently also associated with violence within the four walls.

What is Cassandra phenomenon?

If you, as a spouse of someone with Asperger's syndrome try to tell others about it, you will typically experience no one believing you. "He (she)'s so nice!" Is the usual reaction, the normal partner typically runs into. It is not because the surroundings are superficial or indifferent. It has to do with the fact that Asperger's are good at copying other people's behavior so they do not "reveal" themselves, unless they are in unfamiliar situations. This worsens the load on the normal (NT) spouse when you are not believed and do not get support and help.

OTRS has the additional name Cassandra phenomenon. Cassandra was a woman in Greek mythology. She had prophetic abilities, who always spoke the truth and had the gift of foresight. But the god, Apollo, acting in anger when she spurned his advances put a curse on her so that no one would ever believe her.

From the frying pan into the fire

Asperger syndrome is a diagnosis that has first been recognized - and known - in the last 20 years. From the professional side the focus is on the person who has AD / ASD. This usually describes children and young people who are helped to compensate for the problems their developmental disorder causes.

There is limited professional focus on the situation of normal (NT) partners of adults with Asperger's syndrome. Not many professionals have the training and the knowledge that is needed for providing proper support for NT / AS relationship. Some NT partners for adults Asperger's tells us that therapists have advised them to adapt Asperger's bizarre behavior and eccentricity even more.

This is directly harmful. The neuro-typical spouse often lives on a knife edge in stress and fear of the Asperger's eruptions and reactions. The Asperger's lack of impulse control can get the whole family to live in constant fear. The family can be isolated because they are afraid of guests that disrupt the Asperger's routines and egocentricity. The whole atmosphere in the home can be fraught with anxiety. There is no room for pleasure and spontaneity. This is part of the Ongoing Traumatic Relationship Syndrome.

Need for information and advice

OTRS was first described by Karen Rodman, the founder and director of FAAAS Inc, established in 1997. FAAAS stands for Families of Adults Affected by Asperger's Syndrome and is a non-profit organization with contact to people in many countries. FAAAS supports and advises families of adults with ASD and works for education and knowledge of AS of the influence on NT spouses and family members. See www.faaas.org.

References and background for this article: www.faaas.org and "No Team Player" by Judith Newton.