ASPERGER SYNDROME AND ANXIETY
By the same author

Asperger Syndrome and Bullying
Strategies and Solutions
Nick Dubin
Foreword by Michael John Carley
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Asperger Syndrome and Employment DVD
A Personal Guide to Succeeding at Work
Nick Dubin with Gail Hawkins
ISBN 978 1 84310 849 8

Being Bullied DVD
Strategies and Solutions for People with Asperger’s Syndrome
Nick Dubin
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To my late grandfather, Sydney Solomon (1914–2002) and to my parents, Larry and Kitty.
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Foreword

As a psychotherapist, I have spent the last 15 years serving adults on the autism spectrum, mostly people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism. Anxiety is at the core of the problems presented by almost every client I have served. Until this book, there has been no self-help resource I could refer them to that dealt exclusively with the anxiety that comes hand in hand with adult Asperger syndrome.

There are several reasons why this book will be an invaluable resource to you and why I look forward to recommending it to my clients. The first is that Mr. Dubin bases his suggested strategies on two equally important sources of information, which he artfully integrates throughout the book. One is the psychology literature on evidence-based practice. The other is personal experience (the author’s as well as others as featured in multiple vignettes) coping with the anxiety that comes with Asperger syndrome. Mr. Dubin’s knowledge of both allows him to bring you this unique guidebook for navigating the challenges you may be facing in your daily life.

The second reason the book is so valuable to me and my clients is that it embodies a theme that has been extremely important in my work for many years: acceptance. As a cognitive-behavioral therapist, I am frequently helping clients to challenge maladaptive beliefs they hold about themselves and others. A major misconception that many people have about cognitive-behavioral therapy, however, is that we therapists are simply trying to get clients to “think positive” and focus attention away from negative things. In reality, there are often unpleasant truths that have to be examined and accepted before someone is really free to
embrace the positive things that are in one’s life. This is something that Mr. Dubin illustrates beautifully and consistently throughout the book, giving example after example of ways to accept the hindrances and pain that life can bring. He also offers guidance on differentiating the obstacles that are unique to Asperger syndrome from those that are universal to all humans.

Which brings me to the third reason I think you will be helped by this book. Mr. Dubin shows you that Asperger syndrome is not a disease or a defect, but rather a set of differences. Those differences, while making you anxiety-prone, also bring unique talents and strengths. Once you let go of the shame many feel about having the diagnosis, you will have more energy to explore your strengths and share them with whoever you choose. That is the true meaning of empowerment, and that is the gift Mr. Dubin has brought you with this book.

Dr. Valerie Gaus

Valerie Gaus, PhD, has been a practicing cognitive-behavioral therapist since she received her doctorate in clinical psychology in 1992. Currently she maintains a private practice on Long Island, NY, and serves as the staff psychologist for Vincent Smith School in Port Washington, NY. Dr. Gaus is on the advisory board of the Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism Association, the grant review committee of the Organization for Autism Research, and the adjunct faculty at Long Island University/C.W. Post. She was also a founding board member of the New York Metro chapter of the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed.
Assume, for the moment, that you were an alien looking into the possibility of becoming a citizen of the planet Earth. If you studied this planet, you would learn quite a bit from watching the ways human beings behave. You would observe human beings displaying positive and negative emotions: love, hate, fear, jealousy, rage, compassion and many others. You would be horrified to see some people on this planet are homeless and hungry, while others live in opulent homes and consume lavish meals. You would witness thousands of violent acts that frequently take place in war zones as well as cities and suburbs. As an alien, you would see that life is very stressful. Who in their right mind would want to live here?

But wait a minute! As a prospective citizen, you would also learn you have the opportunity to acquire personal power and live a life of dignity and self-worth and perhaps even make a positive difference on the lives of others on this planet. It would actually be possible to leave this planet in a better place than it was before you joined it. You would see human beings engaging in loving, compassionate, and creative acts. Looking at the totality of evidence, you would probably discover many reasons to come to live on this planet while acknowledging that life does involve its fair share of suffering.

Like it or not, here we are, without having the opportunity to contemplate whether we should journey from some other place. Our lives have extraordinary potential in spite of all the greed, selfishness, and injustice that exist. But for people with Asperger syndrome, life becomes even more of a challenging proposition than for “neurotypicals”. People
with Asperger’s actually do feel like aliens on this planet. On a daily basis, we must fit into a world that seems totally foreign to us. This process of integration can be both exhausting and frustrating, but more importantly, it can provoke uncontrolled anxiety.

One reason I wrote this book is to affirm that anxiety is not a unique response for those of us with Asperger’s and it contributes to our feeling like strangers in a strange land. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will admit the world is a fairly terrifying place. Think of the uncertainty each of us faces all the time.

Our livelihoods are questionable unless we can find and maintain gainful employment and meet our daily and long-term needs. Dating and socializing are also major challenges as well, sometimes compromising our ability to form families and create social networks. These challenges, along with many others, present a serious handicap for many of us with Asperger’s, but they are not insurmountable. As you read this book, I am going to be your personal guide in helping you think about how to meet some of these challenges more effectively. If you can learn to control your reactions when faced with these types of challenges, you stand on higher ground in accomplishing your goals and living a satisfying life.

If you are like me, you are tired of the generalities and platitudes about how to become less anxious. While some common-sense advice about and techniques for stress reduction can be helpful from time to time, often you need more substance. This is the first book on anxiety and stress geared toward individuals with Asperger’s. Anyone interested in learning about what it is like to have Asperger’s and the attending issues of stress and anxiety that can complicate the normal challenges of life will want to read this book. I recommend this book for parents of teenagers and adults with Asperger’s, as well as teachers, professors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and anyone else who seeks a better understanding of people with Asperger’s. After all, the better neurotypicals (non-autistics) understand our journey, the more acceptance and support we will receive from them.

No person, including this author, is immune from stress. I don’t think it’s possible for anyone to live without any stress, as stress can serve to motivate and inspire. I will do my best to present effective strategies that can be used to manage and substantially reduce your stress so that anxiety doesn’t limit your opportunity to pursue goals in your life.
You may be wondering what compelled me to write this book. The reason is very simple: I know what it feels like to be hounded by the ever-present feelings of anxiety and panic brought on by life’s usual challenges. I want to try to help others with Asperger’s who may be confronting similar feelings. Encountering stress and anxiety has been a significant and lifelong issue for me. Working toward my doctorate in psychology, I have read a significant number of books that have helped me understand anxiety from psychological, medical, and holistic perspectives and have made my life less stressful and more peaceful. Today, thanks to hours of therapy, my studies, and the help of caring professionals and family, I am a far less anxious person than I used to be. Now, when stress and anxiety arise, I know how to deal with them more effectively. I don’t pretend to live a stress-free life, but rather I face my anxiety head-on.

You might also be interested to know I was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome at the age of 27 in 2004. Understanding the Asperger’s diagnosis was enormously helpful, because it allowed me to understand the source of much of my anxiety. For people with Asperger’s, anxiety is often symptomatic of and aggravated by the neurological difference. I have yet to meet a person with Asperger’s who does not experience a high degree of anxiety in his or her life. This fact is supported by the research I will be providing along with my own experiences.

Perhaps becoming aware your anxiety is a neurological issue versus a psychological one can relieve a burden you’ve been carrying around for a long time. Maybe you’ve judged yourself harshly for the anxiety you regularly experience. Perhaps you’ve been told by others if you would just learn to relax, the anxiety would go away. Well, it’s not that easy. Over a period of time, the anxiety-filled memories from childhood become locked in our brains, tending to make the anxiety stick with us throughout our lives. Anxiety, like rust, is difficult to get rid of. You can’t just wave it away with a magic wand. It requires a lot of focus and hard work. If you are willing to put in the time, however, I believe the rewards will be far greater than you could have ever imagined.

If you could watch a videotape of me when I was in middle school, you would see one very anxious and self-conscious boy. I lived in a constant state of fear. What was I afraid of? Virtually everything. I was afraid of being criticized by my teachers (as I often was); scared of being bullied and teased by my peers (as I often was) and terrified that I would forget
to bring home an important math assignment that was due the next day (as I often did). In essence, I saw the world as a very threatening place. At any moment, I sensed impending doom. Someone was going to humiliate, belittle, criticize, or scold me for something I did. Many of my fears were based in reality so I had good reason to be anxious.

As I grew older, I continued to be just as anxious, even though the conditions in my life had improved significantly. I no longer was a middle school student, nor was I the daily victim of bullying. By the time I entered college, I was doing fairly well academically and I was no longer being criticized for a lack of effort as I had been in the past.

However, certain challenges remained. I still struggled in various areas of my life. At various jobs I had, I was occasionally criticized for making mistakes and lacking social skills. Nowhere were my shortcomings more noticeable than when I failed a student teaching assignment in a second grade classroom. My cooperating teacher, who supervised my performance in the classroom, reminded me of my actual second grade teacher who was always critical of my performance. I found myself unable to accomplish even the simplest tasks. For example, I accidentally broke the school's expensive laminating machine; I often forgot to accompany the children from their gym or music class and walk them back to my classroom; I didn't reprimand students who were behaving badly, thereby failing to control the classroom; and I unwittingly engaged in inappropriate conduct. One day, I came to school wearing a sweatshirt I had bought at a jazz club when I visited Los Angeles a few years back. The sweatshirt had a picture of a martini glass and an olive on the back of it. You can imagine the looks I got from the principal and my cooperating teacher when I entered the building that day. I had no idea that I was doing anything wrong.

Being in that second grade classroom as a student teacher instantly transported me back to when I was a second grader myself. My face was constantly flushed from feeling constant humiliation and I was always sweating from the stress I was experiencing. It was exhausting. One day after school, my cooperating teacher actually caught me napping in a fetal position on the classroom floor. Stress can sap the energy right out of you. What I was experiencing as a student teacher was an example of a post-traumatic stress disorder. This may sound odd since this syndrome (which I will describe in greater detail in Chapter 1), is usually associated with
returning war veterans, but it has broader applications with the Asperger population. I will spend some time talking about traumatic stress later on, but for now, you should realize this disorder is the manifestation of what happens when traumatic experiences lock into our memories.

Although I am far less anxious today, this change didn’t happen overnight. It has taken a lot of self-awareness and insight to propel me to this place. I believe the same can be true for you, as well.

Stress management for an individual with Asperger’s is a three-pronged approach:

1. You must understand how having Asperger’s has contributed to your high levels of anxiety. You can’t truly understand why you are so anxious unless you bring Asperger’s into the equation. That’s how this book is going to be different from anything you have previously read about anxiety. You are going to penetrate the mystery of why you have experienced such a high degree of anxiety for so long.

2. You must understand the manner in which you personally respond to stress and anxiety, i.e. your modus operandi in confronting stress. I am going to put forth a set of self-help tools based on cognitive-behavioral therapy that will assist you in monitoring your cognitions (thoughts) because sometimes thoughts that aren’t adaptive explain the underlying causes of anxiety.

3. I am going to present an array of proven strategies, some of which have been shown to be tremendously effective with the Asperger’s population and some that have been demonstrated to be quite helpful for the general population. You may not initially agree with all of the strategies I present. All I ask is that you keep an open mind.

Since people with Asperger’s typically like to know what the future holds in store for them, I am going to summarize the contents of this book, chapter by chapter.

In the first chapter, we are going to look at the physiology of the stress response and the cognitive mechanisms that enable you to experience the feelings of stress. Our thoughts have incredible power when it comes to making us feel stressed. Thoughts can even influence how our
bodies respond to stress. I will explain why that is the case. You are also going to learn how your brain and body are involved in controlling and mediating your stress as well as the dangerous medical consequences that unchecked stress can pose. It’s extremely important to understand and recognize the underpinnings of our stress response because without that knowledge, your stress will go unchecked. If you have no idea how your brain processes stress and how it delegates responsibility to the rest of the body, you will not understand how to take conscious control of your own stress management.

The second chapter confronts the perennial question of why and how Asperger syndrome contributes to increased levels of stress and anxiety. After you finish reading Chapter 2, you will be aware that having Asperger’s predisposes you to having fewer coping mechanisms. This reality makes it more predictable you will experience a great deal of anxiety. My aim in presenting you with this information is so you won’t continue to browbeat yourself for your high levels of anxiety or attribute this condition to a psychological deficiency. It is not your fault.

In Chapter 3, we begin delving into the stress response in more detail. Specifically, I will introduce cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and an offshoot of CBT called schema therapy. Several practitioners and researchers have shown CBT to be effective for our population. You will learn the basic tenets of this therapy and how the concepts of this therapy can be applied to your life. You will be able to evaluate whether or not CBT might be helpful for you in reducing your stress.

In Chapter 4, we continue to talk about schemas and relate them to an important concept called mindfulness. I will discuss ways to keep your attention focused on the present moment as opposed to the past or future and how this strategy greatly reduces the amount of anxiety you may be experiencing.

In Chapter 5, we look at relationships and the challenges they pose for people with Asperger’s. More specifically, we’ll look at what triggers your anxiety in dating situations and what you can do to lower this anxiety.

Chapter 6 provides an opportunity for self-evaluation of how you react to stress in the workplace. As with the previous chapter, you will be able to look at some of the triggers involved in creating stress and anxiety, then focus on your reactions to these stressors or triggers.

Chapter 7 considers professional therapists and therapies. We’ll explore what kind of attributes to look for in a therapist. Furthermore,
we’ll set forth a list of different therapies so you have some knowledge as to what might be the best approach for you. I’ll also tell you what kinds of therapists to avoid and how you can make that determination based on your own personal preferences and emotional needs.

The focus of Chapter 8 is meltdowns (seemingly uncontrollable outbursts with no obvious antecedents). We will examine why they arise, ways to control them and if there are any benefits to having them. You will see meltdowns usually occur when you feel a sense of chaos while simultaneously trying to create order. One of the main points of this chapter is that most individuals with Asperger’s have an inherent urge to create order from chaotic circumstances.

In Chapter 9, we’ll look at the correlation between shame and higher levels of stress and anxiety. I will introduce you to Carl Jung’s concept of “the shadow” and how it influences us. The shadow is a mysterious sub-personality within our psyche whose level of influence extends beyond our normal conscious awareness. The shadow is our “dark side”, the side of us we wouldn’t even want our dog to know about. Becoming aware of your shadow helps you gain self-acceptance and a greater appreciation of your humanity. We all have this as part of our personality and must integrate and accept it as a part of our being if we are ever to make peace with ourselves.

In Chapter 10, we will discuss the vital roles of exercise, diet, and medication when reducing anxiety levels. There is a consensus among scientists that exercise does lower stress levels by releasing chemicals within us called endorphins, which is like the body’s own morphine. This is what I call a good way of getting high. We will also explore the mind-body connection, and how anxiety can act as a destructive force throughout the body.

In the last chapter, we will try to examine anxiety from a spiritual perspective.

Just one caveat before we officially begin: the advice and information in this book is not meant to replace professional care. If you feel your anxiety has reached a point where you need professional psychological or medical treatment, this author advises you to seek it out and use the book in conjunction with your doctor’s advice.

Let’s begin to explore the most important possessions we own: our bodies and our minds.