



Meet Tony Attwood

AADigest Interview with Author & Asperger's Syndrome Expert, Dr. Tony Attwood

Father of three, husband, writer, avid gardener, practicing psychologist and world renowned expert on Asperger's Syndrome, British-born Tony Attwood is a delightful fusion of nature and nurture. At 55, he has worked with more than 2,000 children and adults with AS, from the very young to octogenarians. A scientist and avid Harry Potter fan, he has revolutionized current thought about Asperger's Syndrome and the people with it through his best-selling first book *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (1998), thousands of speaking engagements in countries around the world, and his most recent release, *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* (2007).

Tell us about Tony Attwood growing up as a young boy.

For various reasons, I was not happy at home, due to divorced parents and all the problems that go with that. As I was growing up I discovered the importance of friendship to self-esteem and happiness. From very early on, I appreciated and benefited from a close relationship with my friends, partly as an escape from home, but also because they provided me with the support I needed. This experience was important

later on in my interest in autism and Asperger's, because these individuals have difficulty with friendships.

Tell us about Tony as a 20-something man.

When I was 19 I met two autistic children and they entranced me. They were so different, and I had so much compassion for their difficulties, that I became very driven to this field. So, in my 20s I knew what courses to take at university, what postgraduate courses, what journals to read, who to have as a supervisor for research...I was very, very single-minded and determined in my 20s to work with these children.

What was it that so attracted you to them?

Their bewilderment with the world - and my difficulty in helping them, because the usual methods of consoling or explaining were not effective. These kids contradicted all the established theories of child development. It literally was as though they came from a different planet, and I had come across a different species.

Who most shaped the professional you are today?

The kids. They have been my professors. What I have had to do is suspend

all my established knowledge of child development and rewrite the books.

Was it easy to suspend the ideas you had been taught, or did you grow into it?

I had to do it straight away. I've always been eclectic in my thoughts and think outside the box. I had to have flexible thinking such that I could try and enter their world. People who are naturally socially skilled and empathic can enter the autistic world. The difficulties are with autistic people entering the typical world. There's a dimension to Theory of Mind (ToM) or empathy, with autism on the extreme end of problems or delays with ToM. Many of the people who work in this area or marry someone with Asperger's are at the other extreme. They are naturally gifted in working out what someone is thinking or feeling. That quality - advanced theory of mind - makes a good teacher of these children and a successful parent.

Who most shaped the man you are today?

My mother. If you met my mother you'd say "that's Tony", in gestures, attitude, optimism, facial expressions, the lot. I think my mother, her optimism and enthusiasm, has had an enormous influence on my character.

What book(s) are you currently reading?

Oh yes, I am reading Harry Potter, *The Order of the Phoenix*, again. This is my second tour - the film is coming out in July so I'm preparing myself. And I adore it! I think it is wonderful escapism. I think it's actually great literature and there's wonderful philosophy in it. It's interesting that psychologists are now connecting with teenagers and younger people in their therapies by using metaphors from Harry Potter.

So you've read all of them? More than once?

Oh absolutely! Every word. It's pure imagination, pure escapism.

What do you do "for fun?"

For me it's gardening, because you can't have an autistic plant. I like being creative in gardening. I call it pyrotechnics (fireworks) with flowers. For me gardening is a physical activity, using completely different parts of the brain than for work. Photography I like too, again because it's being creative with color, perspective, etc.

What about you would surprise most people?

I really enjoy and take note of horoscopes. Some people check the stock market daily; I check my horoscope.

If you were stranded on a desert island with one favorite item, what would it be?

My camera. It's been great over the years to record my children growing up, but it's also great to record the moment and relive that moment through the photographs.

Favorite quotation?

There's a soap opera in England called *Coronation Street*. There's a pub there and a bar lady named Bette Lynch. Two grumpy men sit at the bar with their beer in front of them, being very, very grumpy and she says, "There's a lot in the cemetery would change places with you today." That's not a famous quote,

it's just a line from a soap opera, but indeed it's been my guiding light.

Favorite food?

Lyonnais potatoes from Ruth's Chris Steak House.

Favorite movie?

The next one I'm going to see.

Most awe-inspiring place you've ever visited?

Uluru (Ayers Rock), the big rock in the center of Australia. It was a very spiritual place.

What keeps you up at night?

Worrying about my children.

What's most difficult for you in life?

My son's struggle with drug addiction. If I could change any aspect of my life right now, it would be to resolve this particular problem.

What historical person would you most like to have known?

Winston Churchill, because I think he would have been quite a fascinating character.

What's been your most meaningful professional accomplishment?

My (first) book on Asperger's Syndrome. Oh absolutely, because it has very significantly improved people's quality of life all over the world. It's in 20 languages now, and has sold a third of a million copies.

What keeps your passion for this disorder so alive and vibrant?

I always discover something new, almost every day.

If you could donate \$100 million dollars to autism research, what areas would you give priority?

1. Sensory sensitivity because it has such a profound affect on the daily

lives of those who have it -yet scientifically we know so little about it.

2. Early identification of autism and Asperger's in infancy.
3. In Asperger's, strategies to improve self-esteem. What I'd like is a new form of psychotherapy for people with Asperger's, because all the current psychological models for psychotherapy are based on typical people.

What surprised you most while gathering material for your latest book on AS?

The explosion of information between the first and second books. When I wrote the first book in 1998 there were 100 articles on AS; with the second, there were 2000.

What advice would you give to a parent with a newly diagnosed (young) child on the spectrum?

Love your child. Accept him for who he is. That's not to say don't help him, but he must always feel he is accepted and loved by his parents. This is so important for self-esteem. One of the major issues in long-term psychotherapy with AS adults is low self-esteem. They say of their parents, "You always wanted me to be different. You were never happy with what I could do because it wasn't as good as everyone else." It has such a major impact on the child's life.

What one piece of advice would you give to a newly diagnosed adult with AS?

I tell them this: Neurotypicals are weird. 🗨️

Tony Attwood and his family live in Queensland, Australia. Visit www.tonyattwood.com.au for more information.



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