



On the couch

with Elaine Nicholson



What are your current roles and responsibilities?

I am both the CEO and a counsellor at Action for Asperger's (AfA), a charity I set up in 2008, which now has more than 5,000 clients worldwide. The pandemic has resulted in an increased demand for AfA's services and we have had to adapt accordingly, recruiting more office staff and counsellors. I am also a counsellor in a mainstream comprehensive school, working in the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) unit, as well as a counsellor in a SEND school specialising in the arts. In addition, I have a private practice. I was driven to work in the field of Asperger's syndrome – or autism spectrum disorder as it is now known – after family members received the diagnosis.

Can you describe a typical working day?

A typical working day starts anytime between 6.30am and 9.00am. I have a number of clients in Japan, so a 7.30am start works well with the time difference. I work mainly by video under the current, pandemic conditions, though a gradual return to in-person work will be made from September 2021. I try to ensure that I have at least two days client-free per week. I am also a fourth-year student of body psychotherapy with the Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre.

What are the highs and lows of your working life?

The highs occur when a client who has autism, or who lives with someone with autism, announces that they have felt, or finally feel, understood, often after many years of searching for the right therapist. I love the specialness of the counsellor-client relationship, never forgetting what an honour and privilege it is to be in the client's world.

The lows are that working with people with additional needs involves a higher level of commitment from the therapist, who has to be both robust and resilient. The work is more challenging. For example, people with autism tend to misperceive, because they are extremely literal. The safeguarding element is also heightened, as autistic individuals are

at a 17% increased risk of suicide, compared to the neurotypical population.¹

How did you get to where you are today?

I worked as a medical management consultant for GPs in the 1980s, finally ending up as a practice manager. I then decided to train as a counsellor and became a certificated counsellor in 2005, going on to study psychodynamic counselling of children and adolescents. I didn't complete the psychodynamic course, partly because of family issues, but also because I realised that psychodynamic counselling was an ill fit for autistic individuals. Towards the end of 2007, I enrolled on a postgraduate certificate in Asperger's syndrome, graduating in 2010. I then completed an MA in autism. I am proud to say that in 2016 I was awarded an MBE for my work with Asperger's syndrome individuals, the first time a Queen's honour had referenced Asperger's syndrome.

How do you look after yourself?

As a body psychotherapy student, I am required to have a minimum of 41 sessions of psychotherapy a year, so my weekly therapy definitely keeps me safe. I believe that personal therapy for therapists should be mandatory. It is as important to look after 'self' as it is to look after the client.

What's the most useful thing you have learned?

Over the many years I have worked as a counsellor, the most useful thing I have learned is that the body has a voice and that we should listen to what our bodies are trying to communicate, both in and out of sessions.

If you could make one change, either in your professional or personal life, what would it be?

If I could make a change in my professional life, it would be to write more. I have always enjoyed writing. I also believe I have so much to impart, in terms of my professional and experiential knowledge of working with autism. But if I write more, I have to see fewer clients, which is hard when people look upon you as a world expert.

Who or what is your inspiration?

I know from annual client satisfaction audits that I make a positive difference to lives that were previously lost in a therapeutic system, seemingly incongruent to their needs. The counselling methodology that I have developed for lives affected by autism has bridged this gap. It is my clients, therefore, who inspire me.

What would you tell your younger self?

To study harder. I have studied for 15 years in total, outside of compulsory education. And I am still studying at the ripe old age of 59.

What book would you recommend to other therapists?

The one that I hope to write! Seriously, though, I frequently recommend Barbara Jacob's *Loving Mr. Spock* to clients who are in an intimate relationship with someone on the spectrum.

Do you have a favourite song?

Yes. Stevie Nick's Sara. It spoke to me 40 years ago, and it speaks to me still today.

Who is your fantasy client?

The late Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple. All biographies point to the fact that Steve Jobs was likely Asperger's or autistic. If you ever get the opportunity, listen to the speech he made to Stanford University students in 2005.²

In your dreams, you are....

A magician who has the power to eliminate every variant of the coronavirus with a sweep of a magic wand!

Elaine Nicholson MBE is the founder of Action for Asperger's and a member of BACP. She also has a private practice in Northamptonshire.

References

¹ Cassidy S, Rodgers J. Understanding and prevention of suicide in autism. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2017; doi: [org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(17\)30162-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(17)30162-1)

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1R-jKKp3NA