



## Obsession?

### Those afflicted with Asperger's Syndrome learn being different sometimes means being lonely

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Settling into a metal chair in the lobby of small café, Daniel Szyper plunks down two thermoses and a red, flour-like bag labeled "Yerba Mate" onto a table with a thud.

His light brown hair is slightly parted and sideburns slink down the sides of his face. His eyes stare, rarely blinking through his thick, black-rimmed glasses, as he explains he bought the South African tea on the Internet because it was cheaper than buying it at the health food store. He says it helps with allergies, among other benefits, and he drinks the concoction in place of soda for energy. It is his latest obsession.

He lumbers over to the café counter to ask an employee if she can fill his thermoses with hot water for the tea, recounting the health benefits of the drink to her. As she fills the thermoses, he waddles back to the table and retrieves the Yerba Mate bag to offer some to the employee.

Szyper is like a person who has religion and wants everyone else to be passionate about it. Only in this case, it's not religion Szyper wants everyone to be passionate about. He wants everyone to share his current obsessions.

Szyper, an ASU student, is afflicted with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism that was first recognized in the United States nine years ago. Since then, experts say, diagnoses of the syndrome have skyrocketed.



According to Carol Gray, a teacher and author of several books on autism, people with the syndrome lack a "social sense." This often alienates them from their peers, whether it is students in school or co-workers, making it difficult for those with the a

According to the National Institutes of Health, one in 500 people in the United States has Asperger's Syndrome, more than those diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, Down Syndrome or Cystic Fibrosis.

As is common in most people with Asperger's Syndrome, Szyper's special interests usually become more than hobbies; they turn into obsessions.

## Misunderstood

While seated under a shaded overhang on a crisp afternoon, Szyper, 30, matter-of-factly describes one obsession he had earlier in the semester.

On a quest for better health, in combination with being on the Atkin's Diet, Szyper signed up for a physical conditioning class at ASU. On the first day of class, he found a new subject to be interested in.

A girl.

"She was friendly with me the very first day of class," Szyper says. "I revealed how articulate I was in my speech, and it impressed her, and she was smiling and appeared to be flirting with me.

"Of course, I don't know how to deal with it when that happens," Szyper says. "I can't respond appropriately because I can never figure out what her intentions really are when she does that--any female.

"She said 'I could become smart just by talking with you,' and I took that as encouragement."

As the conversation continued, Szyper found out the girl's major and first name.

He went on the school's database, typed in her first name and major and only one entry appeared. He noticed right away her last name was "clearly Iranian."

That same day, he went out and bought every book on tape he could to teach himself Persian and ordered others so he could impress her.



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In the end, he scared her.

Because of his lack of impulse control, by the end of the next class period, he had told her all of the research he had done to find information about her.

They haven't spoken since.

"I've been really beating myself up over the fact that I scared this poor girl," Szyper says. "I didn't mean to do that. I didn't want to do that, and now she thinks I'm a stalker."

## **Eccentricity**

Mishaps such as those are common for many people with the syndrome because they lack what Carol Gray, a teacher and author of several books on autism, calls "the sixth sense" or "social sense." This often alienates them from their peers, whether it is students in school or co-workers, making it difficult for those with the affliction to hold jobs or survive a social setting like school.

Engineering, library sciences and computer programming are the most likely fields of study people with Asperger's pursue because little socializing is necessary, according to Tony Attwood, Ph.D., a leading researcher of the syndrome.

Attwood theorizes many "great minds" of the past that were known to be "eccentric," like Albert Einstein and Thomas Jefferson, could have had Asperger's.

According to Attwood, Einstein was obsessed with "imagining himself astride a beam of light, riding through space and gazing at a frozen clock tower," which later became the basis for his theory of relativity.

While Einstein's special interest resulted in a positive discovery, Asperger's Syndrome fascinations are not always on "innocent" subject matters such as relativity. Attwood cautions that many with Asperger's sink into deep depression, and their "special interests" are often indicative of their emotional states.

## **Agony**

Prior to moving to Arizona in the fall of 1999, Szyper says, in a paper he wrote to a doctor in order to be diagnosed, he was plagued by a phobia of rabies. He researched the malady for nine years, poring over medical documents and "keeping track of the hapless few Americans who contracted and succumbed to the disease every year." He was living with his parents in New Jersey at the time, but says it was clear his syndrome was emotionally draining them.

Szyper says he would hear his mother crying herself to sleep because she didn't know how to help him

anymore. Finally, his dad said it was time for him to try to live on his own.

So Szyper left on a bus and took it as far west as he could, ending up in Arizona.

He obtained a graveyard-shift job at a local bank after settling into a small apartment in Tempe. He ended up bringing his rabies obsession to work with him. His supervisors were the only social contact he had, besides telephone calls from his parents, and he began to confide in them as if they were friends. He would pass out newspaper articles on rabies, but says he always completed the work required of him, was always punctual and had perfect attendance.

However, after a series of confrontations with superiors over his social conduct, he was fired for inappropriate behavior. He worked at the bank a little more than a year.

Szyper says he contacted the Phoenix chapter of the Autism Society of America just after being fired from his job and was told there was a support group starting up in Tucson.

For four months, Szyper attended the meetings, car pooling with a new friend from Mesa or riding a Greyhound bus. He was severely depressed and says he dominated most of the conversation time with his own complaints.

He didn't understand why he had been fired from a job he put everything into--a job where he had fulfilled all of the requirements asked of him. He agonized over things he should have done better or should have done differently at his old job. He knew his manager had thought he was a kind person, but frequently forgot the good things people said to him and internalized the bad.

Retard. Loser. Freak.

## **Alienation**

Isolated in his apartment, with only a lawn chair, a 13-inch black-and-white television and a mattress on the floor, he sank deep into depression, only venturing out during the day to visit the unemployment office.

At night, he went to the corner store to buy sweets. His favorites were donuts. He would gorge himself on them. Even after he was sick of the taste, he would continue eating them. Szyper says he was committing suicide, but slowly. Soon, he was diabetic.

Szyper had been attending the support group for five months, but in September 2001, the tragedy at the World Trade Center brought his life into perspective. At first, he says, he was numb to the events of the time. He believed that many of the people who died were just like the ones who had always made fun of him and hurt him. He says he was "insulated" by the situation by seeing it on television. But over time, he became more sympathetic toward the massive loss of lives.

In December of that year, he decided to start his own support group for people with Asperger's Syndrome.

He says he hosted several of the meetings himself until there were too many people to fit comfortably in his tiny Tempe apartment. After talking with the manager of the ASU Catholic Newman Center, he was able to use an upstairs room.

In a letter to a friend, just before hosting his seventh meeting in the Newman Center, Szyper wrote, " ... I will greet people, and I will feel important and I will feel needed, because I know that I am bringing people together who have been misunderstood just like I have, and who suffer just like I do ... these people will be talking animatedly and laughing--LAUGHING--like they never have a chance to do in the course of their daily lives."

## Support

Walking up to the Newman Center on an unseasonably warm Saturday afternoon, his arms full of groceries, Szyper is followed by his friend Tara Marshall, whose arms are also full.

Marshall, 29 and recently unemployed, is the co-leader of the support group. Since finding the group, she says she's been able to talk to more people, but still prefers the company of her cat to that of her husband.

They trudge up the stairs, taking a sharp left at the top, through a door to a spacious room overlooking University Drive.

Szyper grabs a long, folding table and sets it against the wall. Marshall commences with organizing an array of breads, deli meats, cheeses, chips and soda on the table.

They set up several metal chairs in a semicircle and sit down. The fan stays motionless on the ceiling in the 80-degree heat, while the windows stay open.

Szyper says he'll keep the lights and the fan off because Marshall, along with most of the group members, is sensitive to bright lights and cold air.

As members of the group arrive, they greet one another briefly and head straight for the table of food.

The topic of conversation first turns to things that annoy each person: The helium-pitched voices of the Chipmunks. The pace and sounds of television.

The "R" word--retard.

No one will say it because, as Marshall explains, it similarly affects them the way

the "N word" affects a black person. They feel safer away from the word they have encountered too often in their lives.

An hour into the meeting, after the group discusses '80s music and Greek letters of the alphabet, Szyper finally gets up for his own plate of food. He says he has an eating disorder, but it's not bulimia or anorexia; it's overeating.

"Food is a sense of comfort when you're deprived of social interaction," Szyper says.

He says he doesn't overeat often now because having friends has made him want to live. They have made him want to take care of himself.

## Acceptance

Since the creation of the social group, through a combination of changes in his diet, exercise and medication, Szyper says he has lost 110 pounds and has his diabetes under control. He works for free as a data entry clerk at a local company and says he won't ask to be compensated until he has "proven" himself--until he feels worthy of being paid for his work.

In his free time, he walks Mill Avenue in downtown Tempe with a social worker who caters to the homeless.

He says he identifies with the homeless because he knows what it is like to be misunderstood and marginalized. He knows what it is like to be alienated from society.

He is still interested in learning Persian, but now it is solely for the reason of finishing what he started. He still struggles with the cruel things people do and say, like when he is walking down the street at night and people hurl objects and obscenities at him.

He still yearns to be loved by the opposite sex, but says he accepts he is "damaged goods" and "unmarketable."

"I'm going to do what I believe is right, so that people will accept me," Szyper says. "So that people will like me. So that they will see me as a person worthy--worthy of social interaction--a person worthy of being accepted, not a monster."

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