

Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome Study Guide

Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome by Liane Holliday Willey

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Plot Summary

Pretending to be Normal is the autobiography of Liane Holliday Willey, which focuses primarily on her experience with Asperger's Syndrome, which is a high functioning form of autism. The author writes the book in part to help others with the syndrome navigate through life and avoid feeling alone. Today Willey is a motivational speaker who reaches out to people with autism.

In the introduction to the book, Willey emphasizes that autism is not a single disease but is a spectrum of disorders including many abilities and disabilities. Asperger's Syndrome involves social impairments, difficulties communicating, and challenges engaging in abstract thought. 'Aspies' or Willey's term for those with Asperger's Syndrome, tend to have very specific interests, highly structured and repetitive routines, unusual ways of speaking and talking, and poor coordination. It is not always obvious whether those you know have Asperger's because many of the challenges can be concealed.

When Willey was young, her challenges due to Asperger's were identified as intelligence and stubbornness. As a child, Willey wanted to be separate from her peers and left with her imaginary friends. She enjoyed organizing supplies to no end and hated sharing. Willey had few friends and had a number of social disasters, although her patient and loving parents helped her along the way. She had to learn to mimic others to get around socially. In her teenage years, Willey was never particularly bothered by her differences. In high school, where it was most important to belong to a group and many behaviors could easily be mimicked by others, Willey had a relatively easier time fitting in. She performed poorly in athletic activities but succeeded in speech and drama competitions.

In college, Willey lost her way because she was largely removed from her support network. She had trouble navigating around school, focusing in class, and developing friends. While Willey knows that she suffered due to her disability, in retrospect she is not sure how much she would have done differently. After four years as an undergraduate and two years of graduate school, she moved onto her next stage of life. Willey could make herself useful to others and follow social rules and quickly sought jobs that would suit her interests, which included teaching, a job she enjoyed a lot. Willey also met her husband, Tom, after her graduation, who was a constant source of support to her.

As time went on, Willey and her husband had children. They adjusted their lives around many of Willey's disabilities without knowing that she had Asperger's Syndrome. When her twin daughters were born, she had the sense that one of them had a problem and it later turned out that her daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's, leading to a similar diagnosis for Willey. Willey now understood all of the challenges in her life and learned everything that she could about the condition. Her family learned to adjust to the unique challenges faced by Willey and her daughter.

Pretending to be Normal has seven chapters and also contains seven appendices for 'Aspies' and those who are members of support groups for 'Aspies.'

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

'Autism' is not any one disease but includes many abilities and disabilities. The book focuses on a particular and mild form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome (AS). AS includes social impairments, communicative challenges, and imaginative limitations. Those with AS have narrow interests, follow repetitive routines, have peculiar speech and language, are clumsy, and have difficulty understanding non-verbal communication. Few of those with AS are diagnosed and may be those lost souls who invade your personal space such as awkward professors. The prognosis for those with AS varies. Nonetheless, those afflicted with AS contribute a great deal to society.



Chapter 1, Remembering When

Chapter 1, Remembering When Summary and Analysis

When Liane Willey, the author, was three years old, a psychiatric evaluation and IQ test told her parents that she was smart and spoiled. Willey remembers her childhood as full of a desire to be separated from her peers and to be with her imaginary friends instead. She wanted real school supplies to play with and lost interest in books that did not smell like new ones. Organizing the supplies was particularly fun. Liane could not stand other children because they would try to stop her from engaging in these tasks. And she was never forced to share. Group dynamics and casual friendship never made sense to Liane, though she eventually learned the skills well enough to have a few friends.

Nonetheless, she experienced social disasters. In ballet class, Liane could not understand what it meant to move like a swan and would hit children who accidentally touched her. Words meant more to her than actions and she followed directions to the letter. Her parents perceived her literally as a challenge to their authority and of making their language fit into hers. Liane's teachers thought her obstinate and mentally retarded. She also hated the chaos and noise of the classroom.

By eight, Liane was good at comprehension and recognizing words if the material was factual. Fiction was hard. She hated active outings, especially to new places. Leaving home was awful because she did not know where things were. She loved crunchy things even if they were poisonous and hated stiff or satiny things, which sometimes led her to strip off her clothes in public. Bright lights and whistles were annoying and her time underwater was peaceful, as was her spot high in a maple tree where she could watch people without interacting.

On the other hand, Liane could assimilate easily with an unusual ability to mimic accents, inflections, facial expressions and the like. She would often imitate people with facial features that were attractive, although not in the usual sense. She was especially focused on straight and linear noses that appealed to her love of balance. Her parents could not understand her desire to copy others. Sometimes Liane would lose her sense of self but she could always find herself by crawling under her bed, squeezing herself into a square and symmetrical bundle and resting for a time.

By her second year of school, Liane learned how to cope during public appearances with several strategies, such as quietly withdrawing when she felt uncomfortable, which often occurred when her sensory system was overloaded. She avoided throwing tantrums in public because it was associated with a lack of physical self-control that made other children appear 'molten.'



Chapter 2, The Gap Widens and Wondering Why

Chapter 2, The Gap Widens and Wondering Why Summary and Analysis

Liane's teenage years were enlightening and interesting. She knew she was unusual but was never really bothered by it. High school students were easy to categorize socially since they ran in distinct cliques. Group membership was safe and dependable. She could give her opinion on things whenever she wanted, although she never knew how far was too far. She still could not find a reason to keep her thoughts to herself.

Liane enjoyed three activities in high school. They were competitive swimming, pep squad dancer, and in drama. The first two activities she performed poorly in because of her bad coordination. Her third activity was in the speech and dramatic arts club, where she found other 'Aspies.' They were very tolerant and appreciated diversity. Linguistics became one of her interests because it had rules and could be made precise. Sometimes Liane was so careful with words that she fell into an obsessive compulsive ritual. Liane could mix her voice with the monologues she wrote, modulating pitch and volume effectively. Liane mostly engaged in radio and television speaking, sitting behind a microphone and reading news copy. Liane usually won competitions. It is not clear to her why she liked competitive speaking so much, although it may be because it is an uncomplicated form of one-way speaking.

The speech competitions taught Liane a lot about herself because she could try the range of human emotions on when she was on stage. She could not pretend off stage and so often isolated herself from her peers. In retrospect, Liane regrets this because she could have learned more from them.

Liane's greatest fixation was on the Wild West and romantic comedies. Neither boys nor girls shared her degree of interest and so Liane stopped talking to her friends about them. She was nonetheless surprised that her friends tolerated her. This may have been because of her friend Craig who acted like a guardian for her. Her friendship with Craig worked for her because she could act as she liked. She did not prefer to be alone when she was around him. Liane never sought out friends, but she did not avoid them either. They just were not that important to her. Liane was aware of the rules her friends set for themselves and so Liane followed them, making mental notes about how they acted.

So long as there were rules, Liane could follow along. If the rules had always been simple in teenage life, Liane would have gone through high school without much trouble. When rules were ambiguous, she did not know how to react. When her friends were nervous, they would often engage in nail biting, tiny muscle twitches, teeth sucking, and the like.



It would be years until Liane realized that she thought many things that others did not. She was never lonely or took offense when others forgot her. She could easily ignore bad old memories. The only thing that her community never gave her in high school was the ability to cope when the familiarity ended and she graduated.



Chapter 3, Losing My Way

Chapter 3, Losing My Way Summary and Analysis

Living well at eighteen carries much promise and requires a support system to bring that promise to fruition. This is particularly true for those with special needs. Liane got into every school she applied to and it was unclear why she would need help initially. The confusion and rambling of a large college was an assault for Liane. She even found it hard to navigate and would often be ten to fifteen minutes late to class in a wet and nervous sweat, not realizing that her AS was behind her challenges. Her challenges grew each day, with increasingly spatial, sensory, and problem-solving problems. Her grades fell due to a lack of attendance.

Liane knew college would change her life but she did not realize how different her social life would be and how much trouble it was to work well with others. Many kids love the freedom of college but Liane found it challenging. People did not simply accept her for who she was and were often cruel to her. She had no desire to join any social groups and sought no friends. In fact, she had no expectations for college social life and by the end of first term she felt socially left behind. Liane could not understand the reason for the rejection and by second term Liane was angry about it. She was worried she would never find her place in the 'big world.'

One day a male friend invited Liane to a college party, but he was a new member of a fraternity and had other responsibilities. Liane spent the whole time alone and could not bring herself to flirt like the other girls. By summer break, Liane was defeated and had barely passed.

A month later some girls invited her to go shopping and while Liane found the prospect stressful, she went. But the girls had simply used her for the ride and said they'd meet her in three hours. The whole year was full of episodes like that. She couldn't understand her peers' conversation.

Life at home was hard too. Her friends had grown up and had new goals. Liane loved academics and writing papers and was successful, though she would sometimes fall back to her old patterns. She also found clay-working to be pleasurable and came to enjoy the art lab and the architecture building. In fact, Liane still loved architectural design and it gives her great joy. As she found activities she enjoyed she cared less about her differences from others, though she still cared about the human conditions. Since Liane did not need any friends, she was a good friend to those who had none. She would often offer friendship to others.

Education was not a challenge for Liane. Had she known about her challenges, she would have done little differently. However, it was difficult to accept that her intelligence was not enough to make it in the world. She felt crippled by her inability to figure people out and that no one was good at figuring her out either. By the end of Liane's first six



years of college, she was deeply depressed and moved towards deep anxiety attacks. This pushed her to see a counselor, who encouraged her to set goals for herself and get out in public, get a job, follow her hobbies, and so on. This was life -saving advice for anyone with AS. All of college was not bad, though. Liane remembered good times with a few friends and a boyfriend who never judged her weirdness and accepted her as she was.



Chapter 4, A Slow Walk Home

Chapter 4, A Slow Walk Home Summary and Analysis

By Liane's mid-twenties, she found herself between a bright college graduate and an off-beat lady talking to pigeons. She recognized her need to mask herself to others, such as not talking to herself in job interviews and to avoid odd dressing habits. She accepted that she had to follow social rules. After getting her MA, Liane moved to Houston, Texas and had no plan save to be near her future husband. Liane still felt that she could do anything she put her mind to. This was a naïve decision, although she found a job in two weeks as an instructor at the University of Houston.

Liane had many freedoms as a college teacher. Teaching was better than attending them with their structure and the spare time in between. The job was near public save the location of the school because it was in a busy urban area that made her very anxious and dazed.

One day everything changed. Liane decided to avoid her anxiety by leaving for work at dawn but this led her to face AS's trademark challenge: social impairment. Liane loved to empty university, its stillness. She felt safe. In her empty classroom in the morning, a man came in who had been in jail and told her about it. Only a small warning bell went out. Her AS kept Liane from seeing the danger but it also helped her avoid it due to her deep disturbance at having her personal space broken.

When he closed in on her, Liane immediately moved back. She never thought to scream. However, a male student came to the class and quickly stopped the man, who quickly ran off. She realized afterward that she should have been scared. That lesson taught her about human behavior and made her realize how much she needed to know.

Eventually Liane quit the university and got a job as an elementary education teacher. She loved working with children but was not comfortable with adults. To deal with the adults, she used her stage talents although she never understood gratitude. She often had to force herself to mimic others to fit in, although few noticed the mimicking. The only one who noticed was her daughter, who was also an 'Aspie.' Echoing allowed Liane to relax, though she knew she needed to stop it because she was pretending to be the other person.

Liane's friends and family gave her the great gift of being able to experience with who she is around others. Her friends Maureen and Margo helped her figure out what is acceptable. They never acted in a condescending manner to her and appreciated her enough to help her figure out when her AS was a strength or a weakness. It helped her believe in herself. With her closest friends, Liane thought she must feel like people with many friends.

Liane however also acknowledges in the book that many AS people will never have close friends, worrying that following a simple equation for friendship will not work for them. Liane wants to help 'Aspies' to understand the differences between types of friendships as well. She worries that AS people will often find no friends no matter how hard they try.



Chapter 5, Crossing the Bridge

Chapter 5, Crossing the Bridge Summary and Analysis

Liane's AS traits fade but many pop up and return from time to time. She feels no shame about poor spelling or difficulty with auditory discrimination. Her community however has been crucial for coping. Liane is married but she never thought she would be. For years Liane's AS properties destroyed her relationships. Tom however, is a lot like her. For instance, they both love quiet and calm. Her husband is one of few words but Liane needs elaboration. During their first few years of marriage, Tom had no idea Liane was misrepresenting his thoughts. When the lack of mutual understanding arose, their conversations became convoluted.

Today Liane must struggle to tell if her lack of understanding is related to her AS or to something discrete. She will sometimes have to confess this to Tom in their conversations. Tom can usually restructure his conversations to decode things for her. She does not think her rigid thinking would be a problem if she could move on, but when she becomes confused she has a hard time letting go of an issue. Tom is always sensitive to her sensory overloads as well. In fact Liane has a list of things like a grocery list to do to keep Tom happy and for other rules. Liane thinks she benefits from the strategy, despite how contrived it seems.

Liane not only finds social situations difficult but her visual perception as well, often making it hard for her to, say, pick objects from backgrounds. When she knows that she is going to be in a situation that might confuse her, she does her best to prepare, such as having her husband draw her a detailed map. Liane never lets herself feel stupid for having to ask for help. When she feels anxious or afraid, Liane has to deliberately calm herself down. She then describes one situation where Tom let her navigate alone outside of a hotel and she became overwhelmed. With the help of a kind stranger, she was able to find her way back home.

Liane is slowly learning to question her actions before she chooses them. Tom helps and came into her life just as her parents were moving out. Somehow she and Tom trust one another. It requires subtlety and so is hard for 'Aspies.' Tom's looks often comfort her and she loves his linear, straight, definite, and chiseled face. She is glad though, that Tom met her later in life when she was more together. Had he met her then he may have cared for her in such a way that would have prevented her from learning to take care of herself and handle her own condition.



Chapter 6, Rocking My Babies

Chapter 6, Rocking My Babies Summary and Analysis

When Liane first saw her twins, she thought she had one baby with two heads. AS made her take the idea of twins that literally. She found that being a parent was difficult because she had a hard time navigating their world. This forced her into a different reality. Parenting brought out the most normal reactions in Liane but also the revelation that she failed without realizing it. Her daughters kept growing and changing, which she felt unsure about. She was comforted to learn that other parents have the same concerns though her experience was shared by no one she knew.

New parenting could easily make her sensory system go nuts. To prepare, Liane structured the children's room so that she could get used to it and so it would appear as she wanted. She could not have too much movement. She found her daughters' constant movement often too much for her. Smells are a major threat, although Liane could handle her babies' noises.

As Liane's daughters grew older, she was forced to confront her AS traits because she had trouble containing her reactions. Language and situations often pushed her over the edge and Liane found that she could not handle her inability to control her environment. Her privacy vanished and there were no longer any closed doors.

However, some issues were easier for Liane than others such as concrete tasks like doctors' visits, though school visits were terribly challenging, like planning a child's class party. No guidelines meant no order for Liane. This was particularly true during a Halloween party when her older daughter was in elementary school.

Life moves on for those with AS no matter how long they want to dwell on an issue. Liane knows that anyone can make mistakes, including herself. She is uniquely challenged when she is required to generalize information to specific situations. She needs real right or wrong answers. On some occasions, Liane often forgets how to balance tasks and handle multiple problems at once. This is evidenced in one case she rushed to school to get her daughters without realizing that she had left the beautician before her treatment was complete. Her twins were terribly embarrassed. And Liane often worries about embarrassing her children. She also often tries to control her children to fit in with her routines and she sometimes says the worst thing at the wrong time, and usually misses the point.

'Aspies' have to be honest and forthright. It is hard for them to do otherwise. While this causes awkwardness, it is sometimes a blessing when others understand her clearly. She tries to give her children her best side but she sometimes has to rely on her children for their judgments. Her children always take her request in stride. She thinks that they see her as a work in progress. Their family is partly defined by Liane's AS but they try to push back some against this.



Chapter 7, Settling In, But Never Down

Chapter 7, Settling In, But Never Down Summary and Analysis

Liane always knew that her second twin would be special. Her birth was difficult and she moved too slowly as a child. Everyone told Liane that she would be fine but something gnawed at Liane and by age six, it was obvious something was wrong with the children. Her twins had serious developmental differences. People told Liane and Tom that their daughter was simply stubborn, just like people had told Liane's parents about her. Yet Liane's daughter was developmentally delayed. With help, she met certain milestones but Liane felt that her daughter was barely holding things together. Liane was worried that she could not have the patience that her father had.

One day, Liane was venting to her friend Sarah about her daughter's difficulties and Sarah asked her if she had ever heard of Asperger's Syndrome. This immediately led Liane to learn everything she could about it. And quickly the mystery surrounding Liane and her daughter's differences was removed. As Liane saw more of her daughter's behaviors as symptomatic of AS, she saw the same of her own behaviors.

While people told Liane she was only being paranoid, she pressed on. With Sarah's help, Liane took her daughter to the Kansas University Child Development Unit to meet experts on Asperger's. After two days of tests, it was obvious that she and her daughter had the disorder and Tom's heart broke. Liane's heart however was filling with self-acceptance. She had finally figured out why she was not normal and she just had to learn to adjust her life to her disorder.

Slowly Liane was able to adjust, though she had an easier time than her daughter. She knows that her daughter's answers to how to cope will be different from her own. And there is the cost that her daughter knows something is 'wrong' with her, making her more ashamed than Liane was at her age. Liane also tries too hard to protect her daughter from what she suffered which sometimes makes her resentment.

Despite the occasional tension, Liane and her daughter have something that binds them together. They see what the other sees and both feel bad they cannot share it with the rest of their family. Her daughter adjusts to life but several anecdotes illustrate her challenges and Liane's challenges as her mother. Both have strong tempers and need constant encouragement. Liane always tells her daughter that she must permit herself to assess and meet her own needs so long as they are within safe boundaries. Her daughter's struggles will be frequent but they can be handled.

Liane again praises her family for their support, for accepting both Liane and her daughter for their differences. Liane encourages her daughters to have a 'higher moral code' of kindness and goodness. Liane has also channeled most of her frustrated energy into AS education and sharing with those who have an interest in the syndrome.



What is considered 'normal' has changed a lot since Liane was a child; today people are more accepting. Today some with AS had many life options and some are even able to live alone and embrace their eccentricities. Many wear their AS more obviously than Liane does; they share their brilliant differences and accept themselves. Those with AS are often creative, smart, productive, kind, warm and gracious, despite their hardships. Liane does not wish for a cure for Asperger's but instead a cure for the need people have to force themselves to an absolute and perfect standard of 'normal'.



Appendix I, Explaining Who You Are to Those Who Care, Appendix II, Survival Skills for AS College Students

Appendix I, Explaining Who You Are to Those Who Care, Appendix II, Survival Skills for AS College Students Summary and Analysis

While the book effectively ends at Chapter 7, the last third of the book is a set of extended appendices concerning how 'Aspies' can cope with various situations. The first appendix discusses how to explain yourself to those who care about you. Some in the AS community do not think full disclosure is a good idea but many need help and so should share with those they need help from most directly. Liane believes in full disclosure. Otherwise she could not be understood. It avoids the need to hide one's self, others are better sources of support, and AS needs wider public acceptance.

However, there are risks. Many are prejudiced and cannot understand what AS is like. When people react negatively, Liane tries to relax, ignore the reaction, control her anger or dissociate from the person who has made her upset. Some think AS is not a real disorder, others will deliberately exclude you from social settings, and the like.

It is up to each person to decide who to tell, but 'Aspies' should tell those who have authority over them, those with whom they have strong, trustworthy and important relationships, and individuals who provide support. Strangers including acquaintances and distant family should probably not be told about the condition. Sometimes disclosure involves giving people research to read about them; others can be invited to meetings. Liane then discusses other strategies.

Appendix II concerns how 'Aspies' going to college can cope. This will often be their first time on their own. While many in universities have Asperger's, the condition still a challenge. College is a big step for anyone but particularly for those with AS. ASers can improve their social skills through communications classes and the like. It will be important to develop special relationships with teachers by talking to them. Asking for special accommodations when necessary is important.

Geographical navigation can be challenging. Handicapped passes, elevator keys, and transportation assistance all help, so does deliberate familiarization with the campus through photography and note-taking. It is important to plan your schedule well. Avoid overstimulation and taking on burdens that make you feel uncomfortable. Build in time to relax. 'Aspies' should study their least favorite subject first, study in the most productive part of the day, find a steady study spot, etc.

Dealing with stress requires learning stress reduction exercises, engaging in one's favorite hobby or interest, listening to music or writing in a journal.



Appendix III, Employment Options and Responsibilities, Appendix IV, Organizing Your Home Life

Appendix III, Employment Options and Responsibilities, Appendix IV, Organizing Your Home Life Summary and Analysis

The third appendix concerns how to get and keep a job. Interviews can be difficult so it is important to find a knowledgeable or even professional friend to help them prepare. 'Aspies' must be self-aware, knowing their skills, abilities and challenges. Developing a career around a key interest is always a good idea. She advises people with AS to worry about the job's sensory elements and interpersonal expectations.

Interview skills are a significant challenge. Role-playing is an important preparation strategy, as are learning non-verbal communication strategies. 'Aspies' also tend to do well in careers that do not require many human emotions or social skill expectations like writing, engineering, researchers, scientists, and electricians. At a job, those with AS should not hesitate to ask for special accommodations, or at least permission to use them for one's self, such as ear plugs, sun glasses, calculators and a quiet office. However, 'Aspies' must always do their best in response to accommodation. They should not underestimate themselves and be patient with others.

The fourth appendix concerns how to organize your home life. Liane makes heavy use of household routines, although she does not like them. She often color codes things to keep everything organized and she even associates people with colors. Mail should be clearly collected and records should be brightly organized, particularly automobile, financial, health, and related information. 'Aspies' should shop using catalogs when they can, often ask for items needed as gifts, use home delivery service, take turns shopping or use a personal shopper.

To make your way through the day with little stress, people with AS should make a list of assignments and 'divide and conquer,' using visual and auditory reminders.



Appendix V, Coping Strategies for Sensory Perception Problems, Appendix VI, Thoughts for the Non-AS Support People, Appendix VII, Support Groups and Other Helpful Resources

Appendix V, Coping Strategies for Sensory Perception Problems, Appendix VI, Thoughts for the Non-AS Support People, Appendix VII, Support Groups and Other Helpful Resources Summary and Analysis

Appendix five explains how those with AS can handle sensory perception difficulties. While more research is needed, some coping strategies are available. 'Aspies' should know that they will often appear strange in public. It is important to kindly ask those who touch you to stop, moving away when annoyance comes. If one likes the feeling of pressure, placing light weights in one's clothes can help, and choosing a fabric is crucial, among other things.

For visual sensitivity, use sunglasses, low watt light bulbs, and so on. Cover your face in large crowded areas when feeling overwhelmed. Auditory sensitivity can be combated with ear plugs for light sleepers, avoiding areas where distinct noises merge together and use auditory integration training if it is available. Food sensitivity involves getting good nutrition while avoided tastes, smells and textures one dislikes. Bulking up soft textured food with crunchy foods helps.

Olfactory sensitivity can be accommodated by carrying something with one's favorite smell on it, wearing nose plugs in private areas, or even asking people around you not to wear strong perfumes or eat smelly foods around you.

Appendix six contains some advice for those who provide support to AS people who do not themselves have the condition. Education is absolutely key. Non-AS people should know that their support is very important. They will often be behavioral role models. They should also find stress outlets for dealing with AS people and draw boundaries when too much is asked. Many cannot snap out of AS traits easily, so this should be taken into consideration. Help AS people avoid pitfalls that make them confused or upset. Reassure them and never condescend.

Educators should know that those with AS have poor organization skills and that their sensory disorders require accommodation. They also have trouble with abstract thinking, so concrete examples are needed. Odd behaviors typically result from stress

and unusual questions should be expected. Avoid sarcasm and idioms and use explicit verbal forms of communication. Visual aids and structured classroom routines also help.

Employers should know that AS people, while lacking social skills, have a great sense of loyalty, dedication and capacities. The AS should be given a job matching their interests and ones with few social skills and little socializing needed. Giving them freelance projects is helpful and use the AS's desire for routine to your advantage. Preparing the AS person in advance for scheduling changes is a great idea, as is a mentoring system from a co-worker. Finally, be sure to ask the AS what she needs directly.

Appendix seven simply lists support groups and other helpful resources; some of these will be out of date as the book is over a decade old. Following the appendix is a helpful glossary.



Characters

Liane Willey

The main character of *Pretending to be Normal*, Liane Willey suffers from Asperger's Syndrome. The book takes the reader from Willey's childhood struggles with Asperger's all the way through her discovery of her disorder in herself and her daughter and her attempts to cope with the disease as an individual and parent. As a child, Willey was thought to be merely intelligent and stubborn. She often threw tantrums, had poor social skills, and disliked other people. Instead, she preferred to be alone, following her structured routines and displaying a serious affinity for the surfaces and textures of objects.

As a teenager, Willey found it easier to handle social life because of how much regularity and conformity there is in high school. She knew the social scripts and her friends permitted her to act on her eccentric tendencies. However, when Willey went to college, she lost her safety net and, accordingly, lost her stability, sometimes barely making it through college. After college and finding a job, Willey met her future husband, Tom, who was understanding and nurturing. This led in turn to children and Liane's struggles to be a parent.

Throughout the book, Liane Willey displays a genuine concern for others, particularly in the Asperger's community and a deep love and appreciation for her family. On the other hand, she displays many of the characteristic challenging personality traits of those with Asperger's such as narrow interests, obsessive behavior, short tempers, and a lack of empathy.

Tom Willey

After Liane Willey had finished her MA degree, she was fortunate enough to meet Tom Willey. Tom does not have a speaking role in the book. He is only described by Liane in her own words. From what she tells us, Tom has been the most supportive and important person in her life. Initially, Liane and Tom bonded due to many common traits. For instance, both of them had an affinity for solitude, order and cleanliness. Tom was unusually tolerant of Liane's behaviors. He did not condescend to her or try to change her. Instead, he largely adjusted to her behaviors and enjoyed his life with her.

This is not to say that Tom was not distressed however. They often had trouble communicating due to Liane's extraordinary inability to process non-literal forms of speech. In addition, Tom was not a particularly talkative person and so they had great difficulty getting Tom to articulate himself in a way that Liane could understand. Tom was devastated by the revelation that Liane had Asperger's Syndrome, crying at the diagnosis. He had to give up on connecting with her, despite the fact that her Asperger's symptoms could come and go.



As a parent, Tom was very helpful and loving. He did his best to manage their children in a way that accommodated Liane's habits and needs and also knew how to handle their Asperger's daughter after having dealt with Liane.

Liane's Parents

Liane claims that she was lucky enough to have parents that were supportive and helped her develop despite her unusual challenges.

Liane's Daughters

Liane has three daughters, two of whom do not have Asperger's and so cannot share the inner life of their mother.

Liane's Daughter with Asperger's

One of Liane's daughters also has Asperger's Syndrome.

Aspies

'Aspies' is Liane Willey's terms for those afflicted with Asperger's Syndrome.

Sarah

Sarah was the friend of Willey that first mentioned Asperger's to her.

The Ex-Con in Houston

While Liane Willey was preparing to teach early one morning, an ex-con came into to her room and nearly raped her before a student stopped him. This taught Willey that she was even more socially naïve than she thought.

Crowds

These are large groups of people that Wiley does not feel comfortable arounds.

The AS Support Group

'Aspies' need a stable support group in order to thrive. Liane was lucky enough to have one and wants to help others build their own.



Objects/Places

Asperger's Syndrome

This is a mild form of autism that creates emotional impairments and sensory and motor challenges.

Autism

This is a developmental disorder that affects people's communicative and emotional capacities.

Willey's High School

Willey had a good time in high school where she felt like she fit in.

College

This is a learning institution where Willey had a difficult time without her support group.

The University of Houston

After getting her MA, Willey taught at this institution for higher learning for a brief time.

Asperger's Diagnosis

Willey's daughter underwent several days of testing to determine whether she had Asperger's Syndrome.

Social Impairments

Willey has great difficulty empathizing with others, rarely needs the attention of others, and takes what others say too literally.

Routines and Anger

'Aspies' live unusually structured lives and can become very angry when they are interrupted or when they face sensory overload.



Sensory Overload

Due to the challenges 'Aspies' face with respect to their unusually sensitive perceptual faculties, they can often become 'overloaded' with sensory information and breakdown.

Coping Strategies

These are the methods that Willey has discovered for handling Asperger's unique challenges.

Life Organization

This is one of Willey's most important coping strategies and it involves tightly organizing the objects in her life to avoid sensory overload.



Themes

Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's syndrome is a disorder that lies on the autism spectrum. Accordingly, it generates problems with social interactions, repetitive behavior patterns, and narrow, intense interests. It preserves language and cognitive development, unlike more severe forms of autism however. 'Aspies' tend to be physically clumsy and perform poorly with respect to nonverbal communication. Asperger's is not clearly distinguishable from high-functioning autism however. Many including Willey have argued that Asperger cognition is simply a different form of thinking rather than a disability.

'Pretending to be Normal' as a title denotes the fact that Asperger's puts Willey in the awkward and challenging position of pretending to be a normally functioning human being with adequate social skills. Not only must Willey control her temper and organize her life so as to avoid being overstimulated, but she must learn how those with a deeper social sense expect her to behave and act accordingly despite the fact that following such expectations does not come naturally to her.

Most of the book is about Willey's experience with autism, although the book contains seven appendices with advice to 'Aspies' and those within their support network on how to handle the disorder. Willey gives advice on how to handle employment, what careers to seek, how to organize one's homelife, and so on. She explains to those in the AS's life how to think about the Aspie's experience and how to help them.

The Importance of Support

A constant theme of Pretending to be Normal is that people who have Asperger's Syndrome face a lot of social and physical challenges. These are challenges for which they need help. Willey is very well aware that she has been lucky to have a support network at nearly every stage of her life. For instance, Willey's parents were constantly tolerant. They did not impose onerous restraints on her and did their best to accommodate her unique needs. While initially they thought she was merely stubborn, they still made her life as comfortable as they could.

Despite difficulties in her adolescence, Willey had a number of friends in high school that helped her deal with her various challenges and generally helped reduce her more severe symptoms by providing a stable environment that Liane could build her life around. While Willey's social network collapsed when she went to college, she eventually met her husband Tom and made a number of adult friends that were, again, a constant source of support. Tom was always understanding and never condescended to her. Willey was even lucky enough to have the support of her non-AS daughters.

To some degree, Willey feels almost over privileged for the excellent support network she has had throughout most of her life. She therefore wants to do her best to help



other 'Aspies' develop their own support network. She also advises those who already are involved supporting 'Aspies' to do the same.

Coping Strategies

Pretending to be Normal is only two-thirds an autobiography. The last third of the book is a set of seven appendices containing advice as to how 'Aspies' can handle certain challenges in their lives. In the autobiographical section of the book, Liane often discusses the coping strategies she learned to develop such as concealing her attempts to reduce her sensory load in situations of high sensory stress. She also talks about coping with social impairments by mimicking others.

However, Willey had to learn many of her coping strategies the hard way. While all 'Aspies' will have to fit coping strategies into their own lives, Willey still thinks that good advice can help other 'Aspies' go a long way towards improving their lives and coping with their unique cognitive challenges. The first appendix explains who to tell that one has Asperger's syndrome and how to tell them. Willey suggests fully disclosing one's conditions to employers, friends and family but to be more careful with others. The second appendix explains how those with AS should handle college which is a unique stressful time because 'Aspies' enter a new environment and often do so alone.

Appendix three contains advice on how to handle employment opportunities, including information about job interviews and acquiring special accommodations from one's employer. Appendix four helps 'Aspies' manage their home lives through using certain home paints, color coding important information and the like. Appendix five covers how to deal with sensory perception problems and appendix six contains information for those in support networks for 'Aspies'. Appendix seven is a simple list of advocacy and support organizations.



Style

Perspective

Liane Willey writes from the perspective of a person who has Asperger's syndrome, which is appropriate given that this is the topic of the book. It is worth making clear at the outset that Willey has no obvious political or religious biases. The book is focused on Asperger's and related issues pertaining to this condition. Hence, it is particularly focused. The first important aspect of Willey's perspective is that it is shaped directly by her Asperger's. She has a tendency to be inordinately focused on particular issues, has difficulty making social and emotional connections with others, and struggles with physical coordination. However, these elements do not come across in the way the text is written and only in Willey's descriptions of herself in the book.

Willey expresses a serious gratefulness for her support system. She is kind to her parents, her children, her friends, and especially her husband, Tom. Everyone seems nice, kind, supportive, and almost entirely lacking in any flaws. Her perspective is littered with gratitude and with a sense of obligation to other people with Asperger's to help them develop similar networks. Her support system is highly unusual and unique for its degree of support and tolerance for her eccentricities.

Among Asperger's patients, Willey had an unusual experience due to how sheltered and protected she was. Her worst experience was being alone and confused at college. Her degree of support was unprecedented for her day and age. Readers should bear in mind how very high-functioning an 'Aspie' Willey is and not expect that her case is at all typical.

Tone

The tone of this book is unusual in a number of respects. First, while Willey maintains that she has difficulties making connections with others and is perfectly fine with little human contact she expresses a deep sense of gratitude towards those who supported her and a deep sense of concern for those who have Asperger's. She also maintains that her Asperger's symptoms come and go and get better with time, which is unusual for a genetic disorder. Thus, the tone seems less dire and concerned than other books written about a disorder than many consider to be a severe disability.

The tone of the book is even-keeled. It is steady, simple, and calm. Willey is not out to tell a dramatic story and while she endures difficulties, to be sure, she often has a happy attitude about them, trying to demonstrate to her reader the challenges she has to overcome due to Asperger's Syndrome. While Willey endured periods of depression and disorientation, they seem only temporary. The tone throughout most of the book is encouraging and helpful.

The tone becomes even less emotional in the appendices. In this final third of the book, Willey aims to give information in the most impartial fashion that she can. While she is sometimes opinionated, she lists facts in a straightforward and matter-of-fact tone. As a result, the book loses its steady chipper quality and becomes a guidebook.

Structure

Pretending to Be Normal has two purposes. First, Willey sets out to tell her story, explaining to the reader the symptoms of her Asperger's and explaining how it presented challenges at various stages of her life. The story also concerns how Willey learned to cope with the challenges presented by Asperger's. The second aim of the book is to help others with Asperger's and those close to them to adjust their lives to their Asperger's just as she did.

The book has seven short chapters and seven short appendices. Each chapter covers a period of Willey's life and each occurs in chronological order. The introduction explains some background on Asperger's, whereas Chapter 1 explains Willey's childhood. Chapter 2 explains Willey's life in high school and Chapter 3 takes the reader through Willey's college experience. Chapter 4 follows Willey out of college and into her first few jobs, whereas Chapter 5 introduces the reader to Tom, Willey's husband and how their relationship was affected by Willey's Asperger's. Chapter 6 covers Willey's daughters, and their family's discovery of Willey's daughter's Asperger's and Willey's own Asperger's. Chapter 7 explains how Willey's family copes with the Asperger's in two of their members.

The seven appendices reviews a number of important topics such as how to tell others about one's Asperger's and the special accommodations needed as a result. Willey explains to the reader how to handle employment opportunities, organize home life, and how to handle the sensory challenges that come with Asperger's Syndrome.



Quotes

"Our civilization would be extremely dull and sterile if we did not have and treasure people with Asperger's Syndrome." (Introduction, pg. 14.)

"Now that my parents understand AS, they are able to describe my childhood with the help of an entirely new perspective; one that makes the choices I made then, as well as the choices I make as an adult, seem far more focused and clear, perhaps even more correct, given the way I perceived the world...There is no guilt, no blaming, no wondering about 'what ifs'. Today, there is harmony. There is order. There is cohesiveness" (Chapter 1, pg. 25.)

"It would be years before I would come to realize I did, and thought, many, many things that others apparently did not" (Chapter 2, pg. 37.)

"I was beginning to see that I might never find my place in the big world, but I could not fathom why or what to do about it" (Chapter 3, pg. 44.)

"When I hit my mid-twenties I was somewhere between the bright new college graduate and the slightly off-beat lady who talks to pigeons in the park. Truth is, I was both." (Chapter 4, pg. 51.)

"I knew I had made a terrible error in judgment. I knew I had just been very, very lucky" (Chapter 4, pg. 54.)

"I worry that an AS person's literal minded thinking might lead them to believe in a magic friendship equation that says 'being nice + sharing today + keeping secrets = friends and invitations to parties'" (Chapter 4, pg. 60.)

"I cannot overemphasize how important a strong support system is for people with AS" (Chapter 5, pg. 61.)

"I truly did think my baby had two heads. While I am not certain this illustrates the literal mindedness that often grabs hold of my AS, I do know it sets a perfect stage for my life as an AS parent" (Chapter 6, pg. 74.)

"I think the girls must consider me a work in progress" (Chapter 6, pg. 82.)

"I gobbled up every speck of information I could find on AS as if it were the very oxygen I needed to breathe" (Chapter 7, pg. 88.)

"I had finally reached the end of my race to be normal. And that was exactly what I needed. A finish-an end to the pretending that had kept me running in circles for most of my life" (Chapter 7, pg. 89.)

"Yet, no matter the hardships, I do not wish for a cure to Asperger's Syndrome. What I wish for, is a cure for the common ill that pervades too many lives; the ill that makes



people compare themselves to a normal that is measured in terms of perfect and absolute standards, most of which are impossible for anyone to reach" (Chapter 7, pg. 96.)

"I believe in full disclosure" (Appendix I, pg. 97.)

"Stress can be crippling. Do what you can to control it before it controls you" (Appendix II, pg. 111.)

"To me, homemaking is an intricate blend of peculiar demands, random fundamentals, chaotic compromises and irksome annoyances; it is a skilled trade I have no plans of mastering" (Appendix IV, pg. 119.)

"Education. This is the key, the very accessible key" (Appendix VI, pg. 129.)

Topics for Discussion

What is Asperger's Syndrome? What are some of its effects on those who suffer from it?

What sets Willey apart from children without Asperger's Syndrome?

How does Willey have an easier time in high school vis-à-vis other periods in her life?

Why is college so difficult for Willey?

Why is a support network so important for those who suffer from Asperger's Syndrome?

Who is involved in Willey's support group and what do they do that was supportive?

How does Willey discover that she has Asperger's Syndrome?

What challenges has Willey's Asperger's Syndrome presented to her in her role as mother?

Review three coping strategies that Willey discusses in the appendices.