

Chairman Wieland and members of the committee:

Hello, my name is William Dow Rieder. I am 47 years old and I have Asperger's Syndrome. I grew up in Fargo, graduated from Oak Grove, and got my Bachelor's degree from Concordia. I have a PhD in Mathematics from Carnegie Mellon. I have worked in industry as a software engineer and consultant, and as an instructor in mathematics at the University of Pittsburgh and NDSU. I have also worked as a private math tutor at all levels from grade school to college.

When I tell someone I have an autism spectrum disorder, the most common first reaction is "Really? But you are so smart." Leaving aside the implicit belief that it is surprising to be smart and have a disability, they don't act like they really think I'm smart. Otherwise, they wouldn't think they could solve problems I have struggled with for decades by ten seconds thought and a helpful general suggestion like "You just need to push yourself to keep trying until it gets easier"

There are things many people find hard that I find easy, like doing math. There are things many people find easy that I find hard, like telling a polite lie instead of the truth. And there are lots of situations that most people find normal or typical that I find stressful.

I was not correctly diagnosed until I was in my early forties. I learned by experience that I was different and thus constantly under stress. I also learned how important it was to hide this if I wanted to succeed and be accepted, so I spent a lot of effort trying to appear normal, or at least normal enough to get by. This made the stress worse. Not only was I doing things I found difficult and unpleasant, I also had to hide how difficult things were.

I learned to cope by planning, using my intelligence to partly compensate for my weak points. This worked for some things but not others. One part of my condition is that I find it difficult to mentally 'shift gears'. If something changed suddenly, or I got interrupted, it would take me time to recover, especially if it was something I did not have preplanned. This caused more stress whenever I was around other people. I learned to dread surprises.

In my twenties I was diagnosed with major depression, in my thirties with anxiety disorder and high blood pressure. Looking back, I think the constant stress, and the prospect of things never getting easier was taking its toll. As I get older, it takes me longer to recharge, longer to recover from traumatic life events like divorce, job changes or moving. Finally understanding my condition has helped give me some hope, but doesn't solve the problems.

With each earlier diagnosis, I was prescribed a number of different medications, some temporarily helpful, some not. None of them helped with my underlying condition, because it isn't something that can be helped with drugs. Most of the other adults with Aspergers that I know have similar stories of incomplete or inaccurate diagnosis and medication, some of them much worse than mine.

Since my Aspergers diagnosis, I have worked with a support group for parents and caregivers of kids with autism spectrum disorders. I have also become an outreach speaker, relating some of my experiences and understanding to groups who work with ASD kids, especially those with Aspergers. It is some comfort to know that my past trauma and stress weren't for nothing, that I can help make the path a little easier for others.

My biggest difficulty as an adult is that our society is optimized for normal people. Most don't notice it any more than a fish notices water. I notice it because it isn't always optimal for me. Instead of a fish, I'm more like a cat. I can swim, but the water is often unpleasant and I keep having to return to the surface to breathe. It can be frustrating to listen to yet another fish saying "I don't know what you are complaining about, the water is fine."

I want to be a part of society. I want to use my strengths to contribute, but I'd really rather not drown while trying. The first step is flexibility, for people to realize that accommodations that may seem silly or unnecessary to normal people can really help. My condition is real and lifelong, even if I am so smart.

I appreciate your getting input from those of us on the spectrum, and I recommend that any group setting policy include at least one adult with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Thank you for your time.