

Look Me In The Eye ~ discussion questions

Characteristics of Asperger's

1. Discuss the phrase, "look me in the eye". At the very beginning of his book, Robison talks about hearing that "whining refrain" throughout his childhood. What does it mean? Why would someone demand that? In what instances might it be difficult to look someone in the eye?
2. What are some of the challenges of living with Asperger's? What are some of the possible benefits?
3. Some characteristics of Asperger's can be positive. What are some of those that helped Robison throughout his life?
4. Robison describes himself as being very direct, and indeed that is a trait of people with Asperger's. He says that's both good and bad because some people appreciate directness while others are offended. What are some situations where directness would be of benefit, and where might it be a disadvantage? Why?
5. In Chapter 3, Robison talks about having "logical empathy" – understanding the bad news that makes people sad, but not having any physical reaction to it. He writes, "I cannot help thinking, based on the evidence, that many people who exhibit dramatic reactions to bad news involving strangers are hypocrites." What does he mean by this? Do you think that's true?
6. Robison describes the way his Asperger's sometimes causes him to display inappropriate expressions. For example, he might smile when many people would frown. Have you ever smiled or laughed at an inappropriate time? What kind of reaction did you get from others? Talk about a time when your feelings didn't match what people expected you to feel.
7. As he explains in Chapter 20, "Logic vs. Small Talk," Robison is also unable to perform the little verbal niceties that often pass for conversation. Questions like "How's your wife?" or "Have you lost weight?" don't occur to him when speaking with friends or acquaintances. Have you ever struggled with small talk? Are there any conventions of small talk that strike you as peculiar?
8. People with Asperger's often have difficulty reading facial expressions and body language and thus don't respond to those cues in a conversation. Today, we regularly put ourselves in a position of communicating without visual (or vocal) feedback (email, chat, texting). What difficulties can this present? Would a conversation in-person resolve some of these?
9. What do you think of Robison's writing style? Do you notice any quirks in the way he expresses himself that might have to do with Asperger's syndrome?

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The Diagnosis and Doctors

10. As a child growing up without a diagnosis, Robison was sometimes called names or labeled "deviant." Knowing why he was different than others might have helped smooth his way. Today, more children are being diagnosed with Asperger's than ever before. Discuss the advantages of early diagnosis. Might there also be disadvantages? How does a label affect how we treat someone? How does it affect the way we see ourselves?
11. In Chapter 24, "A Diagnosis at Forty," Robison meets an insightful therapist who helps him realize that he has Asperger's syndrome. What effect does this discovery have on Robison?
12. In Chapter 22, "Becoming Normal," Robison writes about his transition from "Aspergian misfit" to "seeming almost normal." What is normal? Does having a diagnosis, or label help? Hinder?
13. In Chapter 11, John and his father stopped seeing Dr. Finch. Do you think this was a good or bad decision? Why?

Robison's Experiences with School

14. Robison describes his struggles in school, which culminated in his being invited to drop out. How might the school system have approached this differently?
15. When he eventually aces the GED test, John refuses to pay the \$20 to graduate? Why do you think he did this? What would you have done and why?

Pranks, Jokes and Bullying

16. Why does Robison pull what he calls "pranks"? Did any of them make you uncomfortable? How would you categorize any of them - harmless, humorous, or hurtful? Do you think the way he felt justified his actions?
17. Have you ever played a joke on somebody else that was (intentionally or unintentionally) cruel? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?
18. Consider the relationship between pranks like John describes and school violence today. When John was a child, there was considerably more tolerance for pranks of all kinds, yet serious violence in schools and among American youth in general was very rare. Today, that situation is reversed. Why might that be?
19. "Different" kids like Robison are often teased or bullied at school. Does Robison's story give you any ideas for preventing or stopping that behavior?

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Experiences with Work

20. At the age of 13, Robison receives an electronics kit for Christmas and starts studying electronics in school and on his own. How did this change his life? Have you ever received a present that had a significant impact on your future?
21. In chapter 10, Robison goes to a party with his parents' friends and weaves an outrageous story of his job as a garbage collector. What do you think was worse, the snobbery and pretentiousness exhibited by many people at the party or Robison's storytelling?
22. In spite of his challenges, Robison experienced tremendous success in his work with electronics, sounds systems, and with big name bands. Share an accomplishment of yours that you achieved in spite of obstacles or difficulties (or even naysayers). How does it feel to engage in an activity you love or at which you excel? Does skill or passion for something spell success in that activity?
23. Identify some innovative ideas that Robison brought to the band KISS. Talk about a school or work project you did that was creative and innovative.
24. After his time with KISS and other rock 'n' roll bands, Robison moved into the corporate world. What did he like about his job with Milton Bradley? What didn't he like? If he came to you and shared his upset over his job situation at this time, what would be your advice to him? What made him decide to leave a financially comfortable life as an executive for the uncertainty of starting his own business?
25. Is happiness or money a higher priority when choosing a career path? Which would be more important to you in a job: excitement or stability?

Family Relationships

26. What kind of father is Robison? How is he different from his own parents? Did anything in Chapter 23, "I Get a Bear Cub," strike you as funny? How is "Cubby" like his father? How is he different?
27. At times Robison calls his little brother Snort, then Varmint, his girlfriend Little Bear, and his wife Unit Two. He at one point also called his mother and father Slave and Stupid. Discuss Robison's habit of renaming people. Why do you think he sometimes avoids people's given names? Is it okay to continue to use a nickname for someone if they are offended by it?
28. When choosing a mate, we confront many pieces of folk wisdom, one of which is: marry someone who is similar to you; your shared interests will keep you together. An equally popular piece of advice is: marry someone who is different from you; variety is the spice of life and opposites attract. Do you think a person with Asperger's would do well to find a

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spouse who has Asperger's too? Or would that person fare better with a spouse who doesn't have Asperger's? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Other

29. As Robison gets more involved in the music business, he moves in with band members. How was John's first experience living away from home? Describe what you think your first year away from home might be like.

30. If you met someone tomorrow who acted a bit strange or eccentric, how might the insights from this story affect how you responded to that person?