

# 1

## A Typical Day in Your Life

### *Problems and Solutions*

In today's society, everybody appears to be on the go much of the time, trying to juggle many things at once. Any person can feel pressured under these circumstances, but people on the spectrum may feel even more overwhelmed by the demands of daily adult life than typical people. In fact, when people on the spectrum come to my office for help, they often report a lot of stress in their lives. They describe how getting through the day, trying to complete the simplest things, seems so difficult and taxing. Even when a day is considered successful, they feel completely exhausted by the end, as if a supposedly simple set of tasks had drained all of their resources.

In this chapter I will help you identify the key parts of your life where you are feeling the most pressure or disappointment. First I will walk you through your own typical day to help you pinpoint the trouble spots. Then I will introduce several other people on the spectrum whose struggles may be familiar to you. Reading about these common problems may remind you of some that you experience but didn't identify at first. Then you will learn more about how the growing field of positive psychology, mentioned in the Introduction, can offer solutions to these problems and how this approach will drive all of the strategies and suggestions I offer throughout this book. The chapter ends with a description of self-help techniques that you can use to solve a wide variety of problems, discussed in full in the chapters ahead.

### A Typical Day on the Spectrum

No two days are exactly alike, but I am going to ask you specific questions about each part of your *average* day. If it is hard for you to imagine your typical day, just

pick one specific day from the past week, such as yesterday or last Friday, and use that as your example.

*First think about your morning.* Are there things that happen in the morning that cause you discomfort in any way? Here are some questions to help you assess for trouble spots during that period of the day. Jot down your answers in the blank lines if you find this useful.

- What time do you wake up and how do you wake up? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you use an alarm? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does someone in your family wake you up? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel rested when you wake up? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you able to get up when you want to? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you getting up to go someplace (work, school), or do you typically stay home in the morning? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have enough time to prepare if you are leaving? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have breakfast? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you eat alone or with someone? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you get along with the people in your household in the morning? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have difficulty leaving on time? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you able to find everything you need, or do you struggle with things being misplaced (clothes, books, keys)? \_\_\_\_\_
- How do you get where you are going (car, public transportation)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have any difficulty with your transportation? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you frustrated or bored because you have no place to go (e.g., unemployed)? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you nervous or scared about leaving the house? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you have work or school, what is it like once you arrive at your destination? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you arrive on time, or are you late? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you greet other people when you arrive? \_\_\_\_\_
- How do you get along with your coworkers or fellow students/trainees? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Then move to midday as you picture your typical routine.* The following questions can help you consider sources of stress during this time of the day.

- If you work or go to school, what is it like settling in for the day? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Are you able to be productive with your work? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have difficulty getting your work started? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you able to follow the instructions given to you by your boss or instructors? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel pressured by the work? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you enjoy what you are doing? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you able to use your talents in your work, or are you underutilized? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have time for a lunch break? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do you do for lunch? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you eat alone or with others? \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you reluctant to talk to others? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you try to talk to people but find you are not making connections? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- If you are not employed or in school, how do you spend the middle part of your day? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have meaningful activities or things to do that you enjoy? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Are you bored, depressed, or frustrated because you are at home? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel cooped up at home and wish to be out more than you are? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Are you satisfied with the amount of contact you have with other people, or do you feel lonely? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Now think about the afternoon and how it usually goes for you.*

- As the day moves through the afternoon, do you tend to become more or less productive? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you are at work, does the end of the workday bring more pressure? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have difficulty stopping your work when it is time to go home? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel overwhelmed when the day draws to a close because you did not get done what you had hoped to? \_\_\_\_\_

- If you are a student, is the afternoon a better or worse time to be in class or study? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you have been home all day, do you find more activities to do in the later part of the day, or do you continue to feel bored or frustrated? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have any difficulty while running errands, such as going to the bank or post office? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you commute home from work or school at this time of day, do you have any difficulty with travel, either by car or by public transportation? \_\_\_\_\_

*As the day turns into evening, how do things shift or change for you?*

- If you are arriving home from work or school, what is the transition back to your home like? \_\_\_\_\_
- Who is there to greet you, if anyone? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you do live with someone, what is interacting with this person like at this time of day? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you have been home all day and others in your household are arriving home in the evening, what is it like getting along with them at this time? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you eat dinner? \_\_\_\_\_
- Whom do you eat with, and what is it like getting along with them? \_\_\_\_\_
- Is mealtime with your family stressful? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you eat alone, do you prepare a meal yourself or eat take-out? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel lonely? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have household chores to do in the evening? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you find your household responsibilities overwhelming at this time? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you look through your mail, and if so, do you find anything about that stressful? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have any time for recreational or leisure activities in the evening? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you get bored in the evening? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel more or less energetic in the evening than at other times of day? \_\_\_\_\_

*When the evening turns into late night, or a time that many people go to bed, what do you find yourself doing?*

- Do you go to bed early or like to stay up late? \_\_\_\_\_
- If you are a “night owl,” do other people in your household complain about this? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have difficulty falling asleep? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you spend more time than you meant to watching TV or using the computer because you get caught up in it? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel more depressed or anxious late at night than during the day?  
\_\_\_\_\_

And finally, during the overnight hours:

- Do you get enough sleep? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you fall asleep but then wake up frequently throughout the night? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you wake up much earlier than you'd like? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you starting to get a picture of the best and worst times of your day? To clarify the picture of your day further, fill out Worksheets 1 and 2. If you need an example of what to write down on your worksheets, look at the ones filled out by Blanca, the first person you will meet in the next section. I will ask you to refer to your worksheets later in the book as you do other exercises in the process of improving your satisfaction with your day-to-day life.

### **Common Trouble Spots**

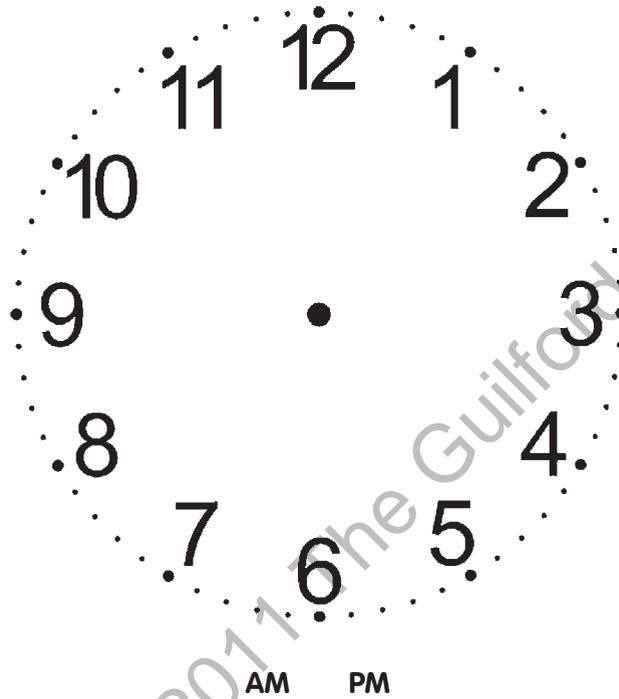
The preceding lists and worksheets may have helped you start to piece together a picture of your own typical day. The following “snapshots” from the typical days of others on the spectrum may help you fill in any gaps. These descriptions illustrate the most stressful point in each person’s day and serve as examples of the most common trouble spots to be addressed in this book. The people in the following scenarios are all quite different, but they do have one thing in common: each person has been diagnosed with AS or HFA.

***Blanca** is 23 years old and single. She lives with her parents and her younger brother. Her most difficult time of the day is the morning. Her day begins when the alarm clock rings at 7:00 A.M. She gets out of bed immediately because she has been lying awake since 5:00 A.M. even though she goes to bed at midnight. She has morning class at the university, where she is working toward a master’s degree in marine biology. She has about an hour before she has to leave to make the 30-minute drive to campus. As she gets ready, she feels very anxious, because she often forgets things she needs for her day.*

WORKSHEET 1

### My Favorite Time

Draw hands on the clock below to indicate your favorite time of the day. Underline AM or PM.



What is it about this time of day that you look forward to?

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From *Living Well on the Spectrum* by Valerie L. Gaus. Copyright 2011 by The Guilford Press.

*She struggles as she packs her book bag because she has difficulty finding things in her messy room. She also has trouble concentrating in the morning because she feels tired from lack of sleep.*

*Henry is age 29 and lives with his father in the house in which he grew up. He holds a bachelor's degree in English and has been unemployed for 6 years. He spends most days home alone while his father works. He tries to look for a job by exploring adver-*

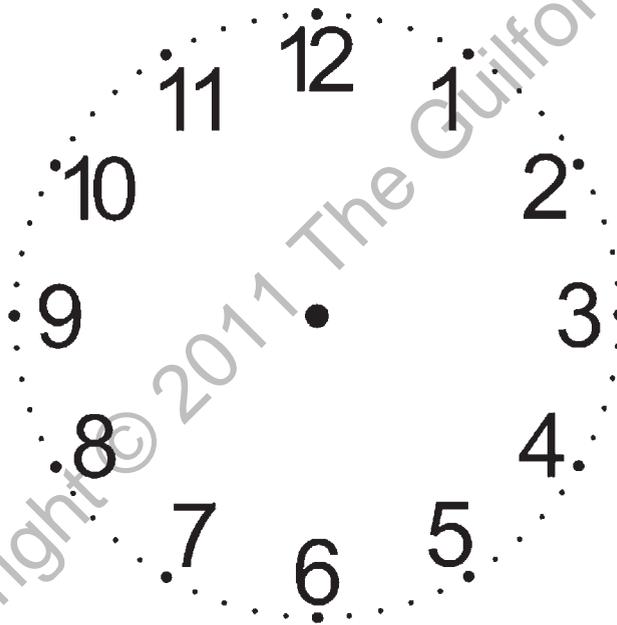
tisements on the Internet. The most stressful time of day for him is the late afternoon, because he begins to feel pressured by the fact that he has not gotten much done. He anticipates the argument that he and his father will have when his father gets home from work. Dad often asks him what he did all day and criticizes him for not having found work.

**Arnold** is an 18-year-old college freshman living in a dorm with two roommates. He dreads the evenings, because his roommates invite a lot of people in to hang out. He

WORKSHEET 2

### My Worst Time

Draw hands on the clock below to indicate your *least* favorite time of the day. Underline AM or PM.



AM    PM

What is it about this time of day that you find stressful or unpleasant?

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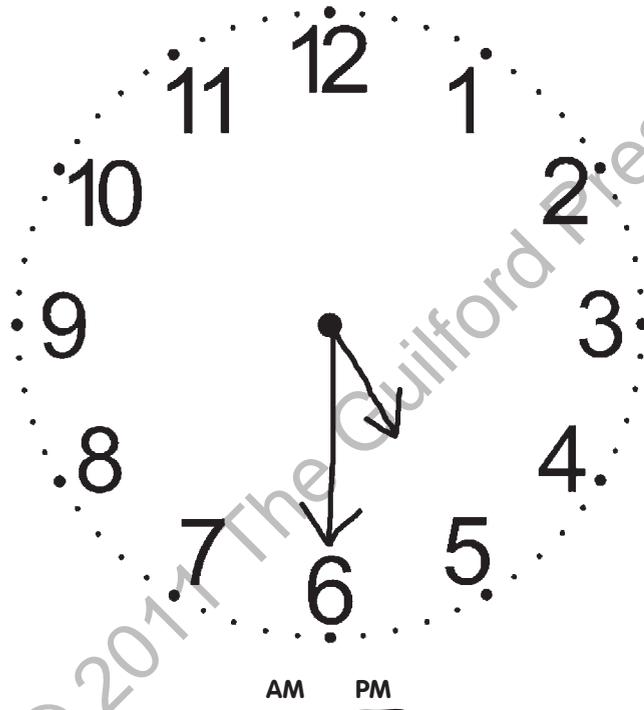
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Example from Blanca

WORKSHEET 1

**My Favorite Time**

Draw hands on the clock below to indicate your favorite time of the day. Underline AM or PM.



What is it about this time of day that you look forward to?

*I look forward to coming home from school and spending time with my little brother. We have dinner together and he is funny.*

*wants to make friends, but he is very shy. He has always tried to “disappear” when around kids his own age, a habit that protected him from the bullies in middle school. Now he wants to be more sociable, but he doesn’t know how to start conversations and even when he thinks of something to say, he is too scared to try. For the most part, his roommates and their friends ignore him.*

**Jake** is single, 20, and living with his parents. He recently dropped out of community college after only two semesters and now works part-time in the dairy department of a grocery store. The most difficult times of day for him are when he has to drive himself to or from work. He got his driver’s license just before starting college and did so very reluctantly. He is anxious on any road other than his own suburban residential street, and his anxiety increases with the number of other cars on the road. He will not drive

on highways at all. The 10-mile commute to work is extremely unpleasant for him, and when the anxiety is particularly high, he calls in sick. Though he does not feel comfortable admitting this to his parents, his fear of driving contributed to his decision to drop out of school.

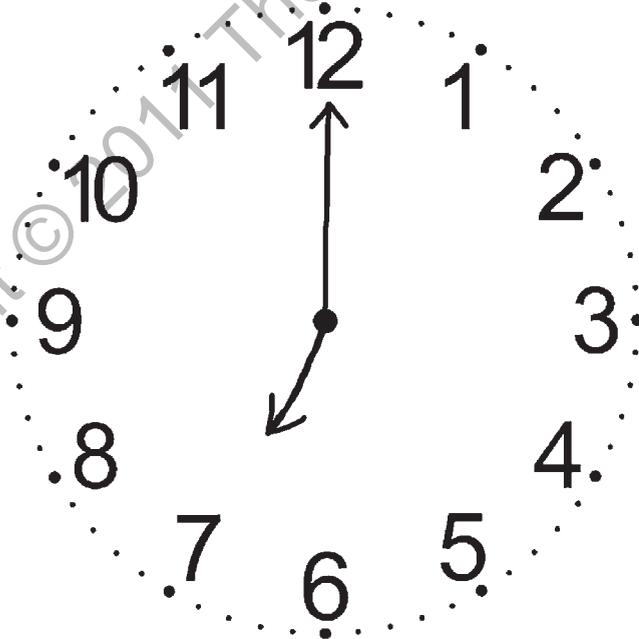
Noel, age 37, owns his own house and lives in it by himself. He works full-time as a computer programmer. The most difficult time of day for him is the evening, when he goes home to his empty house. Weekend evenings are even worse than weekdays because he feels very lonely. He wants very much to get married and have children, but he has had very little success with dating. He has joined several online dating services through the years, but he has gone on only two dates. Each time, he felt very uncomfortable making conversation with his dates, and neither woman was willing to go on

Example from Blanca

WORKSHEET 2

### My Worst Time

Draw hands on the clock below to indicate your *least* favorite time of the day. Underline AM or PM.



AM PM

What is it about this time of day that you find stressful or unpleasant?

*I hate getting ready for school in the morning. I can't find half the stuff I need and I am always running late.*

a second date. He is frustrated because he thinks he is doing something wrong, but he does not know what it is.

**Meredith** is 46, single, and shares an apartment with a roommate. She has a law degree but has never worked as a lawyer. She currently has a part-time job at a nursery/home garden center. She has diabetes, and the most stressful time of her day is the morning, when she must take her first glucose reading and give herself a shot of insulin. The tasks involved in taking care of this chronic medical condition have overwhelmed her for all of her adult life. She often thinks that she would have been able to handle a career in law if she did not have to devote so much time to managing her health.

Even though none of these people is exactly like you, you might find yourself struggling in similar ways. You may have noticed that being on the spectrum can create dissatisfaction or difficulty in any area of life:

- Home life
- Work life
- Educational life
- Community life
- Social life
- Health

In the following pages you'll have a chance to look at your own experiences in each of these arenas of daily life to get an idea of where you struggle most. This self-knowledge will help you figure out which chapters in Part II may be most helpful to you. Each of them covers one of these areas of life in more depth, offering more answers about the causes and solutions for these difficulties.

### Home Life

Think about your life at home. Maybe you live in a house or an apartment. You could live in an urban area or a suburb or a rural area. Perhaps you live alone, or you live with one person or several people, related to you or not. No matter what your situation, your home is the “headquarters” for every other part of life discussed in this book. At the very best, your home can be your sanctuary, providing a place to rest, relax, and take a break from the pressures of the outside world. A positive home life can give you the strength to take on the challenges you face whenever you venture into the outside world. But a home of any kind also imposes responsibilities—from doing chores to maintaining relationships to adhering to the household rules and routines—and these demands can sometimes get difficult to manage. Unfortunately when home *becomes* a source of stress, it can have a negative impact on almost every other area of your life. After all, home is usually where you begin each day. That is why your home life is discussed first here.

**Blanca's** story illustrated problems with getting the day started at home as she struggled with getting enough sleep and organizing her space. **Henry's** problem at

home involved his relationship with his father. Charles also struggles with a relationship problem at home:

*Charles, age 52, lives with his wife and 11-year-old son. He has a full-time job as a high school social studies teacher. The most stressful time of day for him is late afternoon, when he gets home from work. His son usually arrives home at the same time, but his wife doesn't get there for 2 more hours. Charles is always happy to see his son, but he also feels really tense from his own day at work and overwhelmed by the things his son needs at that time. His son talks a lot and very loudly and asks him a lot of questions. After being with his own students all day, Charles does not feel like talking to anyone. Sometimes he snaps at his son, and then he feels guilty.*

Some other common problems reported by adults on the spectrum are described below. Check the box next to any of the comments that make you think about yourself.

*Problems with managing personal responsibilities:*

- "I can't keep my space organized."
- "I am always losing things."
- "I have trouble keeping up with the cleaning."
- "I have trouble managing my time."
- "I procrastinate on tasks I have to do around the house."
- "I can't fall asleep at night, and I stay up later than I want to."
- "I can't wake up when I am supposed to—I sleep through my alarm."
- "I have difficulty sleeping and wake up a lot during the night and early morning."
- "I have trouble paying my bills on time."
- "I have too much debt."
- "I don't know how to handle household repairs when they are needed."
- "I can't seem to prepare food on my own."

*Problems with the people I live with:*

- "My parents don't give me enough privacy."
- "My roommate makes too much noise."
- "My sister is always picking on me."
- "My family has guests too often—I don't like to mingle so often."
- "I have a lot of arguments with my mother [or father]."
- "People in my house get mad at me a lot because I procrastinate."
- "People in my house get annoyed about my sleeping habits."
- "My roommate is constantly hounding me to clean."

- “My grandmother is always watching TV when I want to see my own show.”
- “My spouse/partner does not understand that I need time alone.”

If you checked off several of these comments, be sure to read Chapter 7. There you will find worksheets and tools that will help you solve these types of problems in your own home life.

### Work Life

Now think about your work life. Do you have a job? If not, unemployment and all the problems that come with it may give you a lot to worry about. If you do, you might not be completely satisfied with your job. Unfortunately, too many adults on the autism spectrum are unemployed or “underemployed,” which means working at jobs that don’t take advantage of their training, experience, or talent in a given field or specialty. Research in the science of happiness (subjective well-being) has repeatedly shown a strong correlation between job satisfaction and overall life satisfaction; that is, the higher one’s job satisfaction, the higher the overall satisfaction with life is likely to be and vice versa. So problems in this area of life are likely to be associated with poor quality of life in other areas as well.

**Henry**, for example, is having problems at home, in terms of personal contentment and also his relationship with his father, that can be traced to his being unemployed. But many adults on the spectrum who do have a job are struggling with different aspects of work life, such as Margaret.

*Margaret, at age 61, is divorced and living by herself. She has two grown children who are each married and living on their own. She is an endocrinologist and works with several other physicians in a group medical practice. The most difficult time of day for her is lunchtime at work. There is a lunch room for staff to use during their breaks. Margaret would prefer to eat alone, but there is a shortage of office space, so she is forced to use the lunch room. There are almost always one or two people in the lunch room. She tries to be polite to them, but she has never felt comfortable making “small talk.” She is not quite sure what to say and often does not find any pleasure in discussing the topics that come up in that setting. She has gotten feedback from the office manager that she is not well liked by the staff.*

Listed below are some other complaints that I have heard from my clients about work-related problems. Check the box next to those that seem like they might apply to you.

*Problems getting or keeping a satisfying job:*

- “I can’t seem to find a job.”
- “I get so overwhelmed by the job search that I often avoid it altogether.”

- “I want to look for a job, but I don’t know where to begin.”
- “I get so nervous on job interviews, and I never get called back.”
- “I often go on interviews that I think went well, but then I never hear back from the employer. I don’t know what is going wrong.”
- “I can only find low-level jobs where I can’t use my talents.”
- “I always do well at a new job, but eventually things fall apart and I get fired.”
- “I get bored really easily, and I have quit a lot of jobs in my life.”
- “I’ve given up on trying to work—I have stopped searching for jobs, but I worry because I don’t have enough money to live on.”

*Problems getting work done on the job:*

- “I can’t seem to get everything done.”
- “I procrastinate.”
- “I never seem to have enough time.”
- “I make so many mistakes, over and over again.”
- “I can’t get any work done when I am constantly interrupted.”
- “My desk is always a mess, and I can’t find what I need.”
- “I have to have my work materials arranged a certain way, or I get thrown off.”
- “The schedule is too strenuous for me.”
- “I can’t concentrate because my workspace is too noisy.”
- “I can’t concentrate because the lighting bothers me.”
- “I hate telephone work; I have trouble following what the other person is saying.”

*Problems with work relationships:*

- “I am always getting criticized.”
- “I am worried I am displeasing my supervisor.”
- “I never get promoted, even though I deserve it.”
- “I get upset when customers or clients ask questions that I can’t answer.”
- “I have a lot of arguments with the people I work with.”
- “I have gotten into arguments with customers.”
- “I can’t seem to connect with my coworkers.”
- “I have been told I am not a good team player.”
- “I am always getting irritated with my coworkers or supervisors.”

- “I have trouble sharing workspace because other people keep moving my stuff.”
- “I am afraid to ask my supervisor questions; he/she always looks too busy.”
- “My supervisor gets annoyed when I ask too many questions.”

If you're struggling with one or more of these issues, be sure to read Chapter 8, where you will be given some strategies to try out to improve your occupational life.

### **Educational Life**

If you're not currently a student, this section doesn't pertain to you, though you might have use for it in the future should you return to school. If you're a high school senior, a college student, a graduate student, or a trainee in a vocational preparation program, you'll want to read this section now. People with AS and HFA, by definition, are intelligent people. Some have intelligence measured in the superior range of functioning. If you are in this group, you're in an odd predicament: you and others may expect you to perform academically without difficulty, and yet the differences in the way your brain operates can cause you to struggle. The fact that you are reading this book indicates you are likely a bright person who *is* trying *very hard* to make things better. Still, like some of my patients, you might end up feeling misunderstood. Well-meaning supporters may say things like “But you're so smart—you should be able to handle this” or “You always got As in high school; how come you're failing at college?” or “You're just not trying hard enough—just apply yourself and you can do it.”

**Blanca's** home-related problems (sleep and organization) also affected her school life. Difficulty with gathering her things in the morning often made her late or unprepared for class. **Arnold**, the young man living in a dorm, was struggling with some of the interpersonal aspects of school life, such as making friends. Below are some other school problems reported by people on the spectrum. Check off those you can identify with.

#### *Problems performing the work:*

- “I can't seem to get everything done.”
- “I always run out of time.”
- “I start things at the last minute—I procrastinate too much.”
- “I find myself worrying about my grades all the time.”
- “The schedule is too strenuous for me.”
- “I can't stand sitting in the classroom.”
- “Sometimes I get so overwhelmed, but I have no clue where to get help.”
- “I would rather fail than go get help at the center for students with disabilities.”

- “I will stop going to class if I begin to struggle with a course.”
- “I have too many ‘withdrawals’ or Fs on my transcript.”
- “I get bored easily with the work.”
- “I can’t concentrate in the classroom if there is background noise.”
- “I can’t concentrate in the classroom if the lighting bothers me.”
- “I can’t seem to find a good space to study where I don’t get distracted.”
- “I can’t study when I keep getting interrupted.”

*Problems with relationships at school:*

- “I can’t seem to get to know the other students.”
- “Other students bother me.”
- “I try to make friends, but other students are already in their own groups.”
- “I always end up in conflict with my professors or instructors.”
- “My professors or instructors get annoyed by the questions I ask in class.”
- “Other students get annoyed by the things I say in class discussions.”
- “I have been told I am too loud.”
- “I am afraid the professor or instructor will think I am stupid if I go for extra help.”
- “Other students taunt or tease me.”
- “I am in classes/groups with other students who have obvious disabilities, and that makes me feel uncomfortable.”

If any of these examples sounded remotely like problems you are having at school or in your vocational program, be sure to read Chapter 9, which will show you how to approach this part of your life in a new way.

### **Community Life**

Earlier I discussed the importance of having a satisfying home life, but some people on the spectrum spend too much time at home, trying to avoid the stress of being outside the house. Many of my patients are very uncomfortable participating in community life but also frustrated because they would like to be involved in more activities. For them, home may come to feel more like a prison than a sanctuary.

Take **Jake**, whose life became restricted by his problems with trouble with driving. Another example of someone struggling with community life can be found in the story of Richard.

*Richard is a 25-year-old college graduate with a degree in English literature. He lives with his mother and has been unemployed since he graduated from college 3 years ago. The most stressful time of day for him is the morning, after his mother leaves for*

*work. He feels bored and lonely. He has been working with a state-funded vocational rehabilitation counselor toward finding a job and has become more hopeful about working. Outside of attending these sessions, he does not leave his house by himself. He is very anxious about talking to anyone he does not know. He would like to be able to run his own errands, such as to the bank or post office, join a gym, and use his local library, but he is afraid to address the personnel in any of those places. Simply thinking about doing any of these things by himself makes him highly anxious, because he has always relied on his mother to speak for him. Now, however, he is highly motivated to become more independent, because he does not enjoy sitting in the house all day while his mother works.*

Below are additional comments made by people on the spectrum about community life. Check off any that you may have experienced.

*Problems getting around and managing tasks:*

- “I have had a lot of car accidents.”
- “I am too nervous to drive.”
- “I never seem to carry enough money with me.”
- “I am bothered by the lighting in some stores.”
- “I am afraid of elevators or escalators.”
- “I always seem to be dropping everything [my money, shopping items].”
- “I lose things a lot [wallet, purse, keys].”
- “I can’t seem to figure out the bus/train schedule.”
- “I like to stick to routes that I know; otherwise I get lost.”
- “I get lost a lot, even going to places I have been before.”
- “I fumble when I try to buy my ticket using the automatic machine.”
- “I am bothered by the lighting in my gym.”
- “I love to swim, but I can’t deal with the noisy community pool.”
- “I get too impatient while sitting through long religious services.”
- “There is too much background noise/echo in my church or temple.”

*Problems with people in the community:*

- “I feel nervous when I have to go to any public place.”
- “I get furious with other drivers.”
- “Public transportation [train/bus] is too crowded for me.”
- “I can’t stand to have strangers bumping into me, even if by accident.”
- “I have had arguments with conductors on the train.”
- “I have had arguments with bus drivers.”
- “I am afraid to ask for directions.”

- “I have been told that my clothes are not right for the weather (I either wear too little for the cold or too much for the heat).”
- “I get thrown off if the bank teller asks me something I was not expecting.”
- “I get upset if a clerk seems rude.”
- “I don’t like to ask for help when I can’t find something at the library.”
- “I am always afraid the cashier is giving me the wrong change.”
- “I am afraid to ask for assistance or direction from store employees.”
- “I practically panic if a salesperson approaches me when I am browsing.”
- “I feel really uncomfortable talking to people at my church or temple.”
- “I feel really uncomfortable talking to people at my fitness center or gym.”
- “I get very nervous when I walk my dog and a stranger tries to talk to me.”
- “I have problems getting along with my sports teammates [e.g., bowling, softball, basketball].”
- “I belong to a club related to my hobby, but I don’t enjoy it when people talk about anything other than the hobby.”

If you have any of these problems or similar ones, be sure to read Chapter 10. There you will find a collection of strategies to help you make the most of your community and to help you stop missing out on things you want to do.

### **Social Life: Friendships**

One of the biggest problems that people on the spectrum face is dissatisfaction with the social aspects of life. Difficulty with social interactions is part of the definition of AS and HFA. Your social life involves your relationships with others. I’ve covered family members in the home life section; here we’ll start with friendships.

*Arnold*, the young college student mentioned earlier, is having problems *making* friends. The story of Fred gives us an example of a person having difficulty *keeping* friends.

*Fred is 31 and lives alone in a studio apartment. He works full time at a bank, processing loan applications. His most stressful time is on Friday nights, when he goes out with his best friend to a local sports bar. The two men have been friends since high school and have been meeting every Friday night at the same bar for years. Fred sticks with this friend because they both love sports. However, they get into an argument every week because his friend has different opinions, and it makes Fred very angry. There have been times when his friend has brought other friends along, but the others end up getting frustrated with Fred and don’t come back. Fred has been told that he yells too much and is too aggressive when he states his opinions. Lately his own friend has been threatening to quit their Friday night get-togethers because of the way Fred acts.*

Here are some additional problems many people on the spectrum report. If you think you have any of them too, check the box.

*Problems making friends:*

- “I can’t seem to meet people who have my interests.”
- “I don’t know where I should be looking for friends.”
- “I can’t figure out which acquaintances could be good friends.”
- “I am intimidated by online social networking sites that many people use.”
- “I can’t seem to make ‘small talk’—I can’t keep a conversation going.”
- “I have been told I am aloof and people think I am rejecting them.”
- “I don’t know how to join in when it looks like everyone knows each other.”
- “I have been told I talk too much.”
- “I am too shy—I would never start talking to someone I don’t know.”

*Problems keeping friends once you have them:*

- “I have been told I don’t keep in touch with friends enough.”
- “I can’t seem to make time to do things with my friends.”
- “I don’t like to talk on the phone.”
- “I like to be with a friend one on one, but I don’t like group gatherings.”
- “I don’t know what to do when a friend is mad at me or vice versa.”
- “I don’t like being pressured to do something I don’t want to do.”
- “I am too afraid to say no when a friend asks a favor.”
- “Sometimes I think my friends are using me.”
- “I have been told I am too bossy or that I dominate the conversation.”
- “I have been told I act arrogant or like a ‘know-it-all.’”
- “I have been told that I don’t think of other people’s feelings.”

If any of these thoughts have crossed your mind, you should read Chapter 11, which is full of exercises and strategies to help you reach your goals with regard to the quantity and quality of your friendships.

***Social Life: Dating, Sex, and Marriage***

Out of all the issues my patients are concerned about, this area of social life probably brings the most pain when it is not going well. Of course some people choose to stay single and/or celibate and are content with that. But you may want a romantic life that is more satisfying than the one you have. Maybe you have difficulty meeting people to date, knowing how to ask for a date, getting along with a partner,

dealing with sexuality, or coping with the pressures of marriage or a committed relationship.

Remember *Noel*? He was struggling with dating. The story of Carla shows us how someone on the spectrum who is already married can still have some difficulty with romantic partners.

*Carla, 34, works full time as a veterinary technician at an animal hospital. Her most difficult time of day is late night when it is time to go to bed. Her husband is very affectionate and likes to hold her and hug her, whether they have sex or not. Carla does enjoy sexual activity, but she finds it unpleasant to be held tight for long periods. Her husband gets annoyed with her when she rejects his hugs, and lately they have had more and more arguments about this. She finds herself wanting to avoid bedtime and sometimes stays up late, waiting for him to fall asleep before she goes to bed.*

Listed below are some other common problems reported by people on the spectrum. If any sound familiar to you, check them off.

*Dating:*

- “I don’t know where to meet people to date.”
- “I don’t know when or how to approach someone I want to ask for a date.”
- “I don’t like to go to crowded places, like parties or bars.”
- “I can’t seem to make ‘small talk’—I can’t keep a conversation going.”
- “I don’t understand different gender roles or customs that apply on a date [e.g., how the woman should act, how the man should act, who should pick up the tab on a date].”
- “I want to meet someone to marry, but I have never had a girlfriend/boyfriend in my life—I don’t know where to begin.”
- “I have joined several online dating services over the past few years, and I never got a date.”
- “I have had several relationships on the Internet, but they have all been with people who live far away, and we never seem to get to meet.”
- “I have had several relationships on the Internet, but things always seem to fall apart after we meet in person.”

*Sex:*

- “I feel very uncertain about how to handle sex.”
- “I am embarrassed about being a virgin at my age.”
- “I am very uncomfortable with my own sexuality.”
- “I don’t enjoy sexual activity.”
- “I do not like to be touched.”

- “I have had some unpleasant sexual experiences in the past, and I am afraid to be sexual again.”
- “I doubt I can trust another person enough to become intimate.”
- “I am afraid another person will not understand or accept what arouses me [e.g., specific types of touch or particular fantasies I might have].”

*Committed relationships/marriage:*

- “I don’t know what to do when there is a disagreement with my partner.”
- “My partner is unhappy with the amount of time I spend with him/her.”
- “My behavior sometimes embarrasses my partner at parties.”
- “I get so upset when my partner is upset, but I freeze and don’t know what to do.”
- “My partner tells me I am insensitive.”
- “My partner embarrasses me when he/she corrects me in front of other people.”
- “My partner gets annoyed at me for not doing more chores around the house.”
- “My partner blames all of our problems on my ASD, and it makes me feel guilty.”

If you are having any problems in the area of dating, sex, or committed partnership, be sure to read Chapter 12, where you will find positive strategies to improve the areas of your romantic life with which you are dissatisfied.

## Health

Many of my patients have reported high levels of stress over their own healthcare—maintaining healthy self-care practices or trying to access treatment from professional healthcare providers.

Earlier you met **Meredith**, who was struggling with managing her diabetes. Dan feels overwhelmed by another health-related problem.

*Dan lives by himself, is 51, and works for an information technology department in a hospital. The most stressful points of the day for him are mealtimes. Dan is very overweight and was recently told by his doctor that he needs to lose at least 60 pounds to become healthy. He has a girlfriend whom he has been with for about 3 years, and she also makes occasional comments about his need to lose weight. There is a history of heart disease in Dan’s family, and he began worrying more about this vulnerability since he turned 50 last year. He knows he has poor eating habits but is overwhelmed by the idea of changing his routine. He is not even sure what his first step should be toward organizing a weight-loss plan. Meanwhile, he continues to eat the same things, feeling guilty throughout each meal.*

More comments from people on the spectrum regarding the stress caused by health concerns follow. Mark with a check those that seem familiar to you.

*Personal care:*

- “I have a chronic medical condition, and I feel overwhelmed by it.”
- “I am afraid I will never be able to take care of my health on my own—I need help from my parents for everything.”
- “I forget to take my medicine on some days.”
- “I always forget to renew my prescriptions until it is too late.”
- “My shower routine takes so long that I prefer to skip it.”
- “I will wear dirty clothes because I can’t get to the laundry.”
- “I don’t remember to brush my teeth every day.”
- “I am overweight, and I can’t seem to follow a diet.”
- “I am a picky eater, and my diet is not balanced; I have been told I am underweight.”
- “I hate to shave but don’t like a beard either.”
- “I sleep at odd hours, sleep too little, or sleep too much.”
- “I get so focused on my diet or exercise routine that I have been told I am overdoing it or that I am ‘obsessed’ with it.”
- “I find it hard to tolerate medication side effects, so I don’t always comply with prescription instructions.”
- “I can’t find the time to exercise regularly.”

*Accessing healthcare services:*

- “I don’t trust doctors, so I hate going on appointments.”
- “I can’t keep track of all of my appointments.”
- “Doctors talk too fast, and I can’t follow what they say.”
- “I constantly worry that something is wrong with me, but I am afraid to be examined by a doctor.”
- “I am afraid to go to the dentist.”
- “I get nervous when I have to talk to receptionists to schedule appointments.”
- “I am afraid to ask questions when I don’t understand what my doctor says.”
- “I get confused when the pharmacy staff asks me about my insurance.”
- “I become very angry if the office staff talks to me in a rude way.”
- “I have difficulty describing my symptoms to a doctor during a visit.”
- “I have been told I have a high pain threshold or I don’t feel pain until a

condition gets out of control [e.g., infected tooth], so I don't get help when I should."

- "I have been told I have a low pain threshold or I feel pain almost all the time, even when the doctors can't find anything wrong."
- "I never know whether to go to the doctor when I don't feel well because I have been told my pain is 'psychosomatic' or that I am a hypochondriac."

If you're having some difficulty with some aspect of caring for your health, read Chapter 13, which covers the strategies you can use to improve your self-care and/or work more effectively with professional healthcare providers.



In sum, you are probably under tremendous pressure to get along in a world that is populated and designed largely by people who do not operate the same way you do. This book will help you better understand the specific reasons you are struggling with certain activities and situations. Now that you've identified the areas where you have the most pressing problems, the next step is to focus on your strengths.

## Human Strengths and the Autism Spectrum

When I started putting together my ideas for this book, it seemed only natural to base it on the psychology of human strengths. For years I have been listening to my patients tell me their stories of survival. Over and over again I have heard about incredibly creative strategies my patients have come up with, on their own, to help themselves endure extremely painful situations in their lives. One man, who was not diagnosed with Asperger syndrome until he was in his early 40s, had learned as a young man that he could comfort himself by listening to folk music. The lyrics of some songs, he found, validated his experience of loneliness and isolation and helped him feel more connected to other people, even though he had trouble relating to them in real-life situations. He eventually became a very knowledgeable fan of this music genre, and attending music festivals was a continual source of great enjoyment for him. After his diagnosis and entry into therapy with me, his capacity to use music for pleasure, self-soothing, and connection to others became an important foundation for our work. Through this experience and many others like it, I came to understand that "Nurturing what is strong must be part of therapy, not just healing what is weak." Those are the words of positive psychology scholars Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, and they encapsulate my approach to helping adults with AS and HFA improve their lives.

## What Positive Psychology Tells Us about Happiness and Resilience

As I said in the Introduction, this whole book is based on the principles of *positive psychology*. But what is positive psychology? Once when I was introducing this concept to a patient of mine, he asked sarcastically, “What is that, only thinking about smiley faces, rainbows, and puppies?” Contrary to what you may think, this approach is not as simple as encouraging people to “think happy thoughts.” Rather, it is a movement in the science of psychology away from the tradition of studying disease and distress and toward the study of human health and well-being. Instead of studying only things that go wrong with the way humans function, positive psychology looks at what goes right. Scholars are interested in what traits tend to be associated with happiness (or subjective sense of well-being) in humans, and that does not mean looking at people whose lives are free of adversity. It does involve looking at what characteristics help a person be *resilient* in the face of adversity. At its very core, positive psychology seeks to identify and understand human *strengths*.

The amount of material that has already been written on the topic is too much to cover here because this book is meant to be a practical guide, not a theoretical text. (See the Resources at the end of this book for a list of further readings on positive psychology.) But there are some key ideas that come from scholars in that field that guide the solutions I offer to you in the chapters ahead.

### Human First

If you were to look in the index of a positive psychology textbook, you would find nothing about AS or autism. However, if you think about the phrase *the psychology of human strengths*, you can see that you really are included in this movement. After all, you are human. Also, you possess strengths, or you would not have survived up to this point. Granted, I have had people with AS and HFA tell me that they feel as though they function so differently from others that they might as well be considered a separate species. It is true that brains of people on the spectrum function in unique ways that often make them stand out from neurotypical people, and I will be giving you many examples of that in this book. But we in the autism community, professionals and affected people alike, can sometimes get so caught up in defining these differences that we lose sight of the fact that every person on the spectrum is bound to every neurotypical person by one thing, and that is a common membership in the same species. Your unique brain is still a human brain. For that reason, the science of positive psychology and human strengths has everything to do with you. After all, you are classified as a human first. Being a person on the spectrum comes after that, though it is just as important as the other factors that shape the individual human you are, such as your personality, gender, religion, and culture.

The scientific study of human strengths has shown that there are a number of

characteristics that can buffer the effects of adversity and serve to prevent mental and physical health problems. Some of the key traits that have been named repeatedly by positive psychology scientists are:

- courage
- rationality
- insight
- optimism
- authenticity
- perseverance
- realism
- capacity for pleasure
- future-mindedness
- personal responsibility
- purpose
- interpersonal skill

In Chapters 2–5, I will cover this in more detail, but the features of AS and HFA can give a person the propensity to possess some of the characteristics on this list. Yet, when I work with my patients, I find that they may not see these strengths in themselves. By the time they reach my office, they have been repeatedly reminded that they are different, often cast in the role of a “patient” and defined as “suffering from a disorder.” After years of being seen that way by others and themselves, it is not surprising that their perspective is more focused on differences as “defects” but not as strengths.

As an exercise, look at Worksheet 3. Take a moment to check off the characteristics on this list that you think you possess. Remember, nobody has all of them. As another exercise, give Worksheet 4 to someone who knows you well. Without revealing your answers, have that person check off the traits you have. Did any of the answers surprise you? Remember, no human being has all of these strengths. Even if you have just one trait on this list, it can be used as a foundation for your plan to improve your life satisfaction. Finding positive solutions to problems often involves tapping into a strength you already have, which may not have been obvious to you before.

## Positive Solutions

In this book you will be shown how to approach your difficulties using the basic strategies of *problem solving* and *coping*. For each problem area you identify, you will be guided to:

1. define your goal
2. identify the obstacles or reasons you are being blocked from achieving your goal
3. choose positive solutions to address the obstacles and tailor them to your individual life

## WORKSHEET 3

**What Are Your Personal Strengths?**

Look at this list of strengths that positive psychologists have found to be part of resiliency. Check off (✓) the ones you think you have. Don't think too hard about it. Go with your first impression.

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courage      | <input type="checkbox"/> Realism                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rationality  | <input type="checkbox"/> Capacity for pleasure   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Insight      | <input type="checkbox"/> Future-mindedness       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Optimism     | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal responsibility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Authenticity | <input type="checkbox"/> Purpose                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Perseverance | <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal skill     |

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## WORKSHEET 4

**Personal Strengths—  
Family and Friends Version**

Your friend or loved one has asked you to fill out this sheet about him/her. Look at this list of strengths that positive psychologists have found to be part of resilience. Check off (✓) the ones you think your friend or loved one has. Don't think too hard about it. Go with your first impression.

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courage      | <input type="checkbox"/> Realism                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rationality  | <input type="checkbox"/> Capacity for pleasure   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Insight      | <input type="checkbox"/> Future-mindedness       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Optimism     | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal responsibility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Authenticity | <input type="checkbox"/> Purpose                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Perseverance | <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal skill     |

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The positive solutions offered by this book are coping strategies that have been shown to be effective in improving the quality of life for all kinds of people and can be tailored to meet your individual needs. *Coping strategies* are the “tricks” or “tools” that people use to adapt successfully to new situations or demands. Like most people, whether on the spectrum or not, you have a natural “bag of tricks” that you can draw from when faced with demands; those tricks come from your *strengths* and can make you more resilient in the face of change or adversity. As with any skill, people vary greatly in terms of the quantity and quality of strengths they have access to in any given situation. Chapters 2–5 will help you become more aware of how your AS/HFA has affected your bag of tricks for better and for worse, so you will finish Part I with a clear sense of which problem areas to focus on. The chapters in Part II will teach you the coping strategies you will need to address the specific problems you are having. These techniques will be explained in detail in Chapter 6. For now, here is a brief introduction.

### **Problem-Solving Techniques**

Problem-solving techniques allow you to take a rational, step-by-step approach to a problem that might otherwise be overwhelming or upsetting. As you know, when you are very upset, it is hard to be objective and your judgment can be clouded. If you follow the basic formula of problem solving that will be presented in every chapter, you will be able to think more clearly and use your strengths to come up with solutions that make sense. The eight-step approach that will be used throughout this book is:

1. Identify and define your problem.
2. Define your goal.
3. Identify the obstacles in the way of your achieving the goal.
4. List several possible solutions to address the obstacle(s).
5. Consider the consequences of each solution.
6. Choose the best one(s) to try out first.
7. Implement the solution and track your progress.
8. Evaluate the solution to see if it met the goal you defined in Step 2.

This problem-solving model will be used to help you choose which of the following eight strategies are most appropriate for meeting your goal as you use problem solving in Part II.

### ***Environmental Modifications***

Sometimes a simple change in your personal space can go a long way toward solving a problem—moving furniture, removing an irritant, or changing a lighting source, for example.

### **Organizational Techniques**

When a single environmental change is not enough, a whole system in your environment can be set up or redesigned to make it more user-friendly for you—organizing a backpack, desk top, kitchen drawer, or closet.

### **Scheduling Techniques**

Most people rely on a schedule of some sort to guide them through the day, week, month, and year. If scheduling does not come naturally to you, there are many strategies and tools that you can use to make this part of your life run more smoothly.

### **Relaxation Techniques**

Your body can become very tense and stay that way for prolonged periods due to extended emotional arousal, which is not good for your health. This book will encourage you to use relaxation tricks you already know and also introduce you to new ideas for how to relax the body and the mind.

### **Emotion Identification Techniques**

Coping effectively with stressful situations often involves changing something to help yourself become more comfortable and functional and/or communicating your needs to another person. Knowing how you feel gives you a clue about what you need; for example, you might recognize that you need a break from your work only if you first recognize that you are feeling very nervous and pressured.

### **Thinking Techniques**

Everyone has an “internal voice” that narrates everything that is happening, and sometimes that voice can say things that are negative and discouraging. Becoming more aware of negative “self-talk” allows you to challenge the irrational statements.

### **Understanding Other People**

People on the spectrum often report that they can't understand other people or their behavior. That's because people on the spectrum have difficulty with *social cognition*, the ability to make good guesses about others' thoughts, feelings, intentions, and/or motives. Fortunately, you can learn techniques that will better enable you to make good guesses about other people, their intentions, and their needs.

### ***Communication Techniques***

Communication is a very complicated human behavior, but there are techniques for ensuring that you get your messages heard by others while also ensuring that you hear their messages.



I hope this chapter has gotten you to think about the areas of your life that are causing you the most stress. I also hope you have begun to think about your goals as well as your strengths. The next several chapters will describe how your brain may work differently because of AS or HFA. They will also illustrate how these differences can lead to both strengths and vulnerabilities.

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