

# So is your impossible husband actually autistic?



**QUIRKY:** Justine Sullivan with her husband Chris

## I love Chris...but it's not an easy relationship

By Rachel Ellis

**D**OES your husband seem to lack any empathy for your emotions and yet get mortally wounded by the most light-hearted of comments you make?

Maybe he is clumsy, useless in social situations and seems to have no friends of his own. Is he, well, just ever more impossible?

This could well describe many middle-aged men – certainly, if you ask their long-suffering wives.

But they could be signs that he is autistic, experts say.

Now research suggests thousands of British men with learning disability autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) have not been diagnosed.

Undiagnosed ASD may be the cause of marriage trouble for many couples, according to a woman who has set up a support group for wives who, like her, are in just this 'devastating' situation.

According to UK charity the National Autistic Society (NAS), ASD in adults can often be a 'hidden disability' with sufferers simply being thought of by those around them as 'a bit odd'.

Indeed, Justine Sullivan, 44, admits that it was his 'interesting and quirky personality' that first attracted her to Chris, her partner of 16 years.

However, despite home ownership and the birth of sons Conor, seven, and Arlo, four, those 'endearing characteristics' quickly became

JUSTINE Sullivan, 44, a television producer, and partner Chris, 46, an animator, live in London with their two sons.

Justine says: 'When I met Chris, it was his interesting and quirky personality that attracted me to him.'

'However, what were fun and even endearing characteristics when we were young and childless became difficult and frustrating when our relationship progressed. He was unable to put himself in my shoes and see

that I needed help and support with the children, he was inflexible and couldn't do more than one thing at once.'

'What he did do had to be in a certain order and he took everything literally. He bought sacks of DVDs after he was told by an accountant he could offset them against tax.'

'He was also terrible with money – for years, I thought he was bi-polar.'

'His diagnosis has not changed him but it has helped me to

understand things and manage my expectations.'

'To say he doesn't feel or empathise is insulting – he feels things very deeply and is a sweet and very generous man – but he often doesn't know how to say the right thing at the right time.'

'It's not an easy relationship to have at times.'

'But I really love Chris, the children adore him and we do have good times.'

'He also has the ability to make me laugh so hard I actually cry.'

'difficult and frustrating'. At Justine's insistence, three years ago Chris visited a psychotherapist and was diagnosed with a type of ASD known as Asperger's syndrome.

The label has brought with it relief: an explanation for their problems, which helped the couple come to terms with their differences.

Alarmed by the lack of support available for the wives and partners of men with Asperger's, Justine and Chris set up the Giraffe Support Group. This takes the form of monthly workshops to help couples like them cope with the challenges of day-to-day life.

Justine says the strain that undiagnosed ASD puts on relationships leaves many women lonely and depressed. Some are unable to cope – and leave their partners.

She says: 'People with the condition are very capable, hard-working and clever, and that can mask the real difficulties that they

have. That means that for years, their partners try to cope with their behaviour or choose to ignore it. They feel alone, unsupported and depressed. Sadly, some couples break up.'

She added: 'Our workshops offer support for women and try to help them understand that their partners have had Asperger's all their life – it may even be what attracted them in the first place.'

**F**IFTY years ago it was said that four in 10,000 children had autism. In 1980, it was recognised as a distinct disorder and today that number is thought to be closer to one in 100 – although wider studies have suggested the true figure could be between one in 38 and one in 64. The increase does not mean autism is more prevalent, but that in the past,

thousands were either misdiagnosed or completely missed.

Jennifer Green, 55, from Hertfordshire, whose husband of 27 years, Tom, 54, was diagnosed with ASD 15 months ago, says that she struggled to understand why the mild-mannered man she married became increasingly angry, critical and withdrawn. She says: 'Why did he not speak to me for days at a time? Why were family days out disastrous and holidays even worse? He took no apparent joy in sharing the parenting of our child.'

Their lives were transformed when, after seeing an advertisement for The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time (a play about a boy with Asperger's), she suddenly had a 'light-bulb' moment and realised her husband was autistic.

He was diagnosed within a month. She added: 'All of the seemingly cruel behaviours could then be

explained. Life has become more peaceful as we read and learn about ASD together.'

Krish Nath, a cognitive behavioural therapist based at the Priory Hospital, London, who specialises in treating Asperger's syndrome, believes diagnosing adults is vital as then relationships can be repaired.

'Growing up, people with ASD learn to function in the world by having very controlled lives and doing things in a repetitive way.'

'It is often when they go to university, start work or a relationship, or have other big life changes like having children, that they become more exposed – they are unable to deal with pressures or take on board another point of view.'

'There are good sides too,' said Mr Nath. 'People with Asperger's are very loyal. The dilemma for many partners is that they know something is wrong – often for many years. But they also have lots of good times together and the difficult side to their partner's behaviour is only exposed periodically.'

'Many people with Asperger's are not being managed and their partners receive no support. But talking to people in a similar situation can really help.'

Men and boys are much more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than women and girls. Studies suggest ratios ranging from 2:1 to 16:1. Genetics are believed to be key – although it is also thought ASD is harder to spot in girls.

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