

# Star Trek: Lessons

By Irene Brody, PhD

What if everyday people realized just how much benefit they might derive from relationships with people with Asperger's Syndrome (AS)? What if people with AS were able to express their deep innermost feelings to the rest of us through instantaneous mind sharing? The result might be nothing short of saving our planet, not to mention the rest of the Universe, from destruction.

The 2009 JJ Abrams' movie, *Star Trek*, portrays a relationship between the impulsive, skirt-chasing James T. Kirk, and the logical, intelligent, conscientious Spock. The two characters appear to have nothing in common. As a young boy, Kirk enjoys zooming around in vintage vehicles, breaking the law and getting into barroom brawls. Kirk exhibits what some psychologists might label ADHD. Contrast this with the young Spock, deep

in studying complex mathematical formulas while fending off insults and jeers from his peers. He tries to suppress his emotions, but because he has a human mother, and loves her, he can completely lose his temper and go into a blind rage if sufficiently provoked. Spock and all Vulcans have many of the features some psychologists might label as AS. Both are underdogs in their own way, and in Hollywood, they are hero material extraordinaire. Kirk and Spock each grow into their own destinies, rise to the top and save the Universe once they learn how to combine brains with bravado.

Earthman and Vulcan start off with mutual dislike and mistrust; Kirk cheats on a test Spock designed, and we know how Vulcans don't like people who break the rules! But by the end of the film, Kirk learns that Spock, with his wealth of information, loyalty, and focus, is his best asset in the fight to save the planet, and Spock learns that cheating can be the best course depending on the circumstances, and that sometimes one has to take risks even if the rationally calculated odds are against you.

Spock's father informs us that despite appearances to the contrary, "emotions run deep" in Vulcans, and they are not completely without feeling.

I think anyone who understands AS will acknowledge the truth of that statement. Spock's father at first tells the young Spock that he married his mother because it was his job to understand and develop diplomacy with other countries. "It was logical." Later on, he confides to his son that he married her because he loved her.

# for Our Times

The synergy of the Kirk-Spock relationship unfolds in other ways. Spock learns that Kirk, with his impetuous nature and spontaneous risk-taking, is not only courageous but also can make sound decisions. Towards the end of the movie, enemy cornered, it is Kirk who offers a last chance for the villain to save his skin, whereas it is the logical Spock who would rather simply destroy him. From my own experience, this can fit the AS profile as well, because revenge fantasies, like emotions, can often “run deep.” Perhaps this very human-to-us-all tendency is heightened in AS individuals who have both a history of repeated painful ostracism and a strong sense of right and wrong.

While mutual respect develops early on between these two, deeper understanding of their respective personal complexity comes only through time. In one scene, an older and wiser Spock tries to convey to Kirk his inner experience through a mind-to-mind transference. Kirk reels with the emotional pain. How much might our acceptance of people with AS grow if neurotypical (NT) people were able to understand and empathize with the feelings many people with AS hold inside yet have challenges expressing? Ironically, Spock’s grief stems from losing the Vulcan planet and most of its people. It is the tragic loss of community, something many AS people feel on a daily basis, living in a world that often manifests little understanding of “planet Aspie.”

Lessons about the NT/AS relationship abound in this movie. We see that enemies are made when people get very hurt, sad, and angry

because their people and homeland are destroyed. We watch relationships start, stall or regress based on assumptions and miscommunication. On a micro-scale, their efforts to save the Universe are our own interactions within family, school or community.

*Star Trek* is a mirror for our times, encouraging the best of us – indeed, all of us - to work together, embracing our diverse cultural and neurological backgrounds so that we can all truly “live long and prosper.” 🚀

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