

Employment for individuals with Asperger Syndrome

A national project to increase awareness of Asperger syndrome in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)

Background

Until recently, knowledge about Asperger syndrome (AS) was sparse within the Labour and Welfare Service System (NAV) in Norway.

A large number of individuals with AS are currently outside the formal labour market. Many receive a permanent disability pension despite normal or high intelligence, and may have no organised daily activities.

Current project

A 3-year project was established in 2007 as collaboration between NAV and The National Autism Unit, Oslo University Hospital.

The project includes 3 objectives:

1. Increase professional competency in NAV
2. Vocational support to individuals with AS
3. Identify factors influencing employment

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) administers 1/3 of the national budget through schemes such as unemployment benefits, rehabilitation, pensions, child benefits and cash benefits, and includes the entire population as its users.

NAV have offices in all 430 municipalities in Norway. In addition, there are 19 Employment Counselling Centers in each county.

Among the main tasks are to:

- get more individuals into work and activities, and fewer on welfare benefits
- provide good services tailored to the users' needs and circumstances

Increase professional knowledge in NAV

Nation-wide network



Geographically, Norway is characterised by long distances and wide-spread population.

A national network of specialists and advisors from NAV's 19 County Employment Counselling Centers is established. These Centers play a key role in distributing knowledge of AS to the local NAV offices in the 430 municipalities.

The network is a forum for:

- increasing awareness
- education
- exchanging information
- case discussions

Supervision & guidance

Fostering awareness of AS to local NAV representatives is provided during supervision and work with clients in the project.

Supervision and awareness of AS is also provided to the supported employment system.

The project establishes and ensures co-operation between service providers (psychiatry, habilitation, universities, schools and local service providers) through an Individualised Plan.

Information distribution

A practical guidebook on how to assist individuals with AS in achieving employment was developed and distributed to NAV and collaborators, and is also available on the internet (www.nav.no). The book has a practical focus with suggestions and advice regarding areas of communication, vocational guidance, follow-up, and adaptations in the work place.



Information is also distributed on websites, in articles, at information meetings, and lectures.

The participants

The number of clients with AS who received services from specialists in the NAV system increased markedly during the project.

The 60 participants comprised all individuals with Asperger syndrome referred to The Centers in Oslo and Bergen during approximately 18 months.

- N = 60
- The participants were granted work assessment allowance, or had a disability pension prior to entering the project
- 13 female / 47 male
- Mean age 26 years (SD = 6,9)
- All participants had IQ level within the normal range (IQ>70)
- The average age for AS diagnosis was 20,6 years (SD=8,5)
- 45% were reported to have had psychiatric comorbidity (anxiety, depression)
- 20% had also been given ADHD or ADD diagnosis
- Average length of education was 13.4 years (SD= 2,5) - 58% had completed upper secondary school
- Mean length of work experience was 1,2 years (0 - 15 years)

Work assessment

The assessment was based on background information, interviews, and observational data from neuropsychological assessment and work trials.

Observational data were assessed with a rating scale developed for the project. Social, communicational and organisational skills were the most central factors in work evaluations. Total scores were derived from items measuring various aspects of organisational, social and communicational functioning, sensory sensitivity, degree of realistic self evaluation and overall stress vulnerability.

Examples of positions in ordinary work

- computer work
- software testing
- archive
- office routine / paper work
- caretaker work
- mechanical maintenance
- storehouse work
- supermarket work
- library assistant
- canteen work
- research assistant
- many are still students

Adaptations and support to reduce stress, social problems, and organisational problems

- Mentor at work (social interpreter)
- Individually adjusted tasks
- Clearly defined job specifications
- Written instructions and plans
- Cognitive aids - Smartphone, laptop, etc
- Individually adjusted work hours
- Avoiding time pressure
- Avoiding simultaneous demands
- Physical adaptation to reduce stress
- Information, backup, and support to employer

Stress

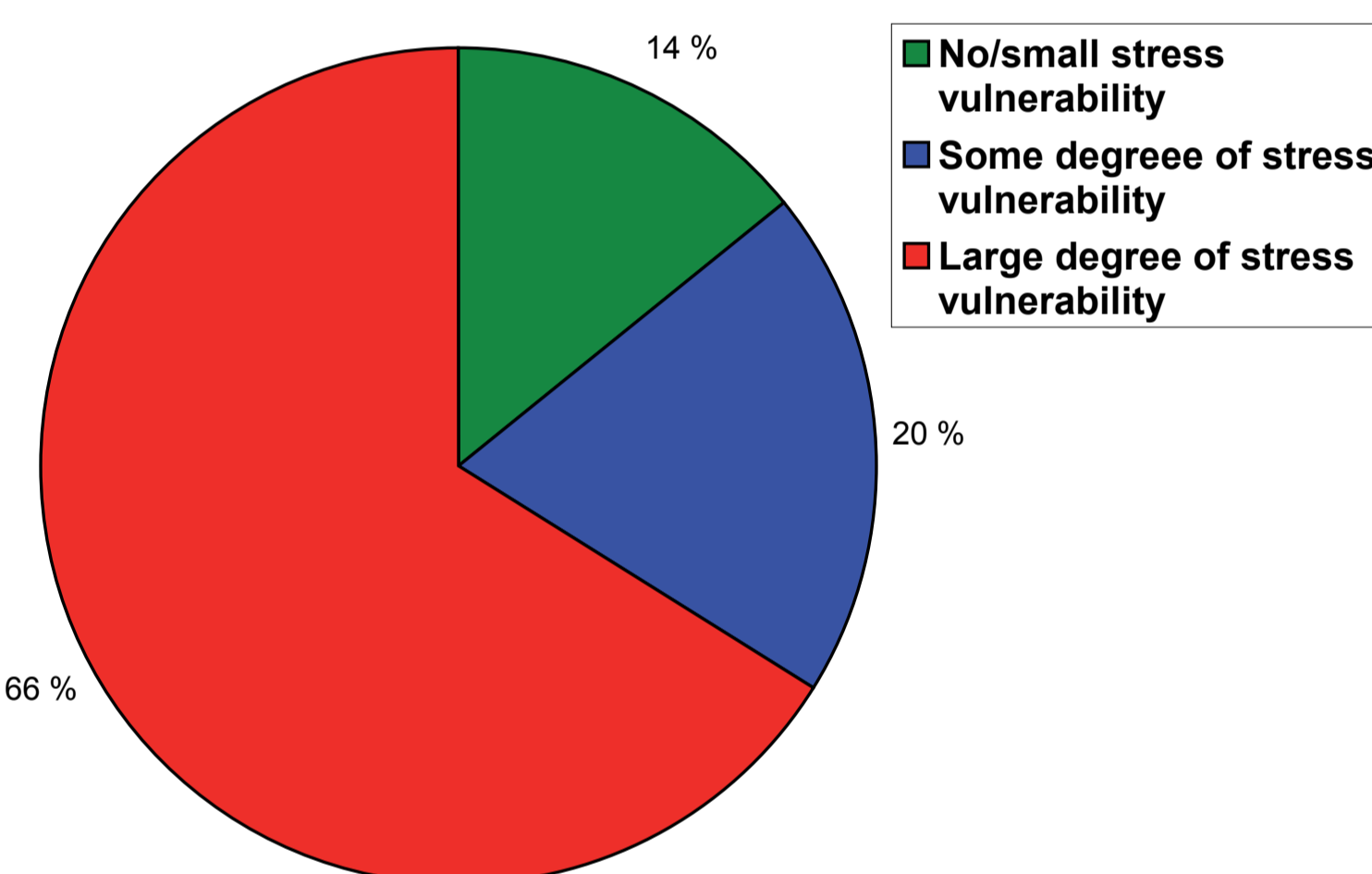


Figure 1 shows overall stress vulnerability. Stress may come from difficulties related to social and communicational demands, organisational demands and from sensory overload. These factors may have a negative interacting effect, with increasing demands resulting in more stress, which in turn can reduce communicational and organisational skills.

Stress Factors

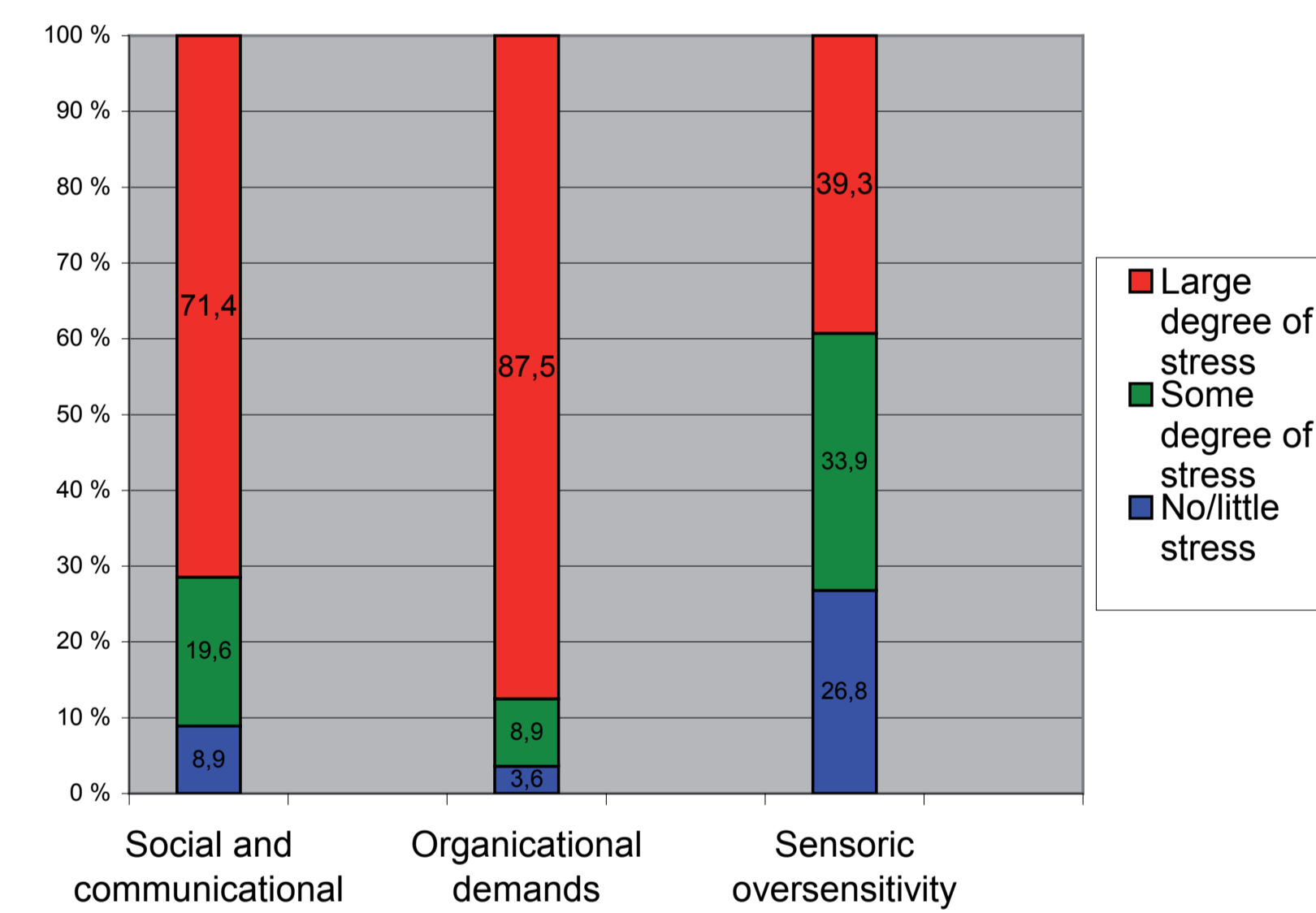


Figure 2 shows degree of difficulties related to social and communicational demands, organisational demands and sensory oversensitivity.

- Social and communicational demands were most problematic in situations involving indirect speech, small talk/social talk, interacting with large groups, and receiving corrections.
- Organisational demands represented a major challenge for most participants. Critical factors were related to lack of structure/predictability, time pressure, simultaneous demands, flexibility, initiative, prioritisation, and planning.
- Sensory oversensitivity may come from difficulties related to sound, light, smell, temperature or touch. It was primarily the combined factor of many stimuli or impressions (sensory overload) that contributes to oversensitivity. This was experienced in around 50%.

Notes to figure 1, 2, and 3

The degree of association between the social and communicational variable, the organisational variable, sensory oversensitivity, overall stress vulnerability, and insight was inspected in a correlation matrix that in general gave values between 0.5 and 0.6. However, difficulties with realistic self-evaluation regarding one's work ability and future job positions, showed little or no association with the other variables. The correlation between stress level and problems with insight was slightly negative (-0.18). A factor analysis using the principal components method with varimax rotation, gave two factors that together accounted for approximately 75% of the variance. Factor 1 gave loadings from 0.79 to 0.86 representing the social and communicational variable, the organisational variable, sensory oversensitivity and stress vulnerability. Degree of realistic self evaluation gave a clear independent second factor, with a loading on 0.98.

Outcome

- 79% showed difficulties with social and communicational functioning.
- 84% showed organisational problems connected with work ability.
- 59% showed signs of reduced psychomotor speed, 11% were considered to have some difficulties with gross motor coordination, and 25% with fine motor coordination.
- 64% were considered to be capable of ordinary work if provided with adaptation, support and follow up. Job placement for this group will in general be a combination of regular wages and a graded pension or wage subsidies.
- 17% were considered eligible for a full disability pension, and were given the opportunity of sheltered work.
- 19% were on vocational rehabilitation schemes and were not given a clear evaluation with regard to future work opportunities at the time of the assessment

A follow-up study will be established in 2013.

Realistic Self Evaluation

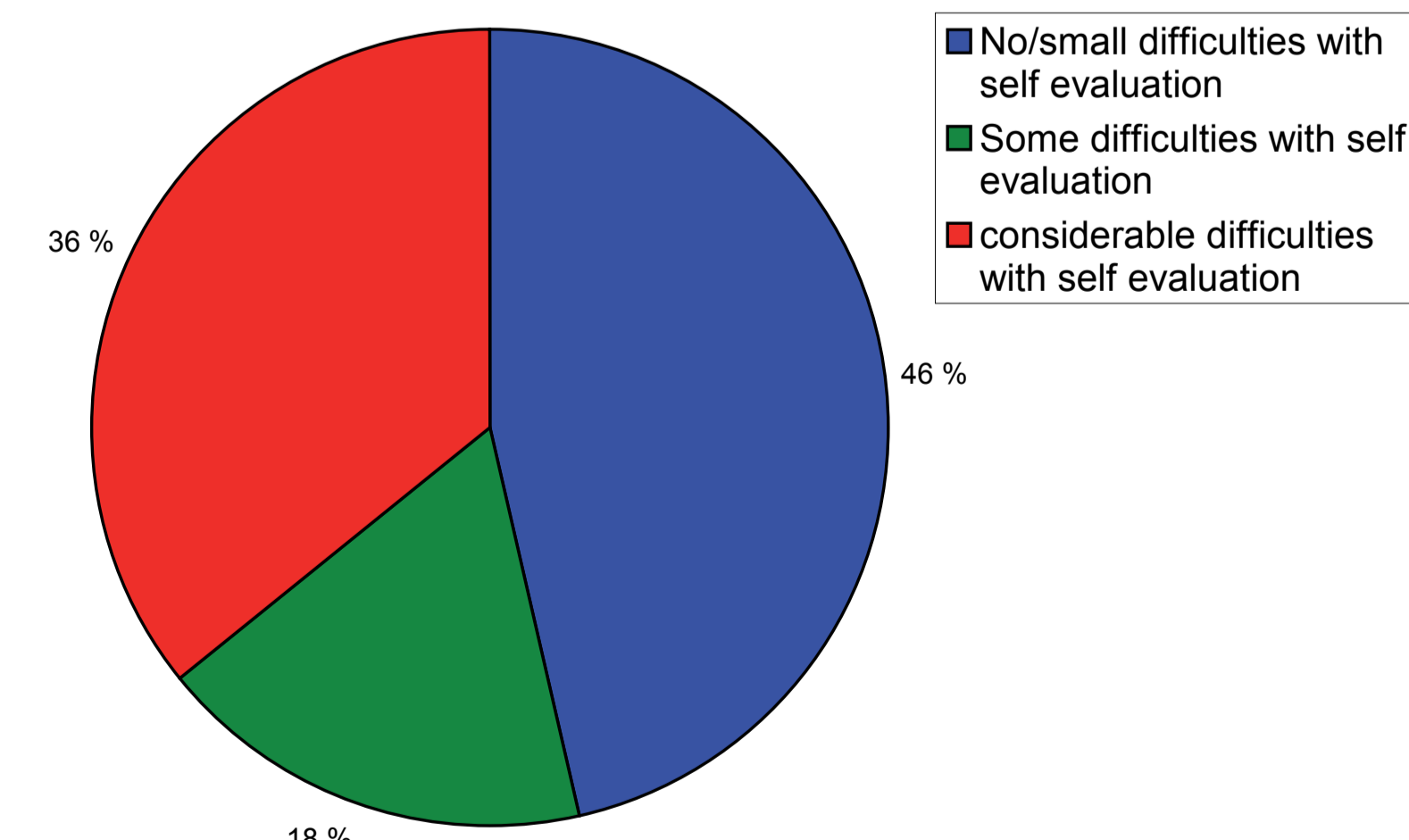


Figure 3 shows the total score for the degree of problems related to realistic self-evaluation with regard to one's own work ability. Insight and realistic self-evaluation are considered a prerequisite for making realistic work plans.

Over a third (36%) was considered to have extensive insight problems. These individuals represented the largest challenge regarding a successful work placement. Early vocational guidance is therefore vital for individuals with Asperger syndrome in helping them achieve realistic work opportunities.

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