

ATTWOOD & AUTISM

Trailblazer Prof. Tony Attwood & his 50 year relationship legacy with Autism

An official biography as told to Josie Montano
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INTRODUCTION

In the world of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Asperger Syndrome, Professor Tony Attwood needs no introduction. His books have sold in the excess of half a million copies and Tony conducts workshops and clinics all over the world. He holds an honours degree in psychology, an M.Sc. in clinical psychology, and a Ph.D. from University College, London. There, he worked alongside another well known name in the industry, Prof. Simon Baron-Cohen, and both were supervised by one of the world's pioneers into the study of Autism, Dame Uta Frith. Tony is currently an adjunct Professor at Griffith University in Queensland and was featured in an *ABC Australian Story* documentary that focused not only on his expertise, but also on his adult son, William's late diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome.

However, what is not so well known, is how Tony came to be interested in Autism Spectrum Disorders in the first place and how the intricacies and dramas of his childhood and teen years shaped him into the man and professional he is today. His story is integrally interlinked with the unfolding history of the worldwide understanding and social acceptance of the Autistic mind over the last fifty years. His writings, insights, examples and enthusiasm have helped create the best clinical practices of ASD today. Tony is a much loved household name worldwide and a fierce advocate for those on the spectrum, seeing Asperger's syndrome as a gift and not as something to be "fixed".

Even though we all know Professor Tony Attwood as the 'World Guru' of Asperger Syndrome, little is known of his private life or how he came to become so immersed in Autism, or plainly what he was like as a little boy. I, as maybe you, was in the dark

about his background. I met Tony over twenty years ago and have touched base with him many times yet I knew nothing about his life outside of Autism. From our first interview, it all started to make sense. Each interview began to colour in the blank canvas, I became more and more fascinated about how Autism seemed to follow Tony around the world, from his very early days in England, and how it attracted him or he attracted 'it'. How, somehow, his life seemed to have been mapped out from a young age, a map that would take him on a journey, an expedition that wound its way through the landscape of Autism.

Tony's life has been fascinating ... incredible ... poignant, he truly *is* and has always been a crusader for those on the spectrum. He has fought for them, advocated, been a whistle-blower, protected and defended those who were unable to defend themselves. He has mediated, but always in highly respectful and convincing ways. I found him to be very humbling, never has he claimed to be the expert, we, society and neuro-typicals placed him in that category. Nor has he ever claimed to be a hero or saviour of Autistic persons, *but* he does claim to understand their language, and he is a great interpreter who helps those who lack awareness to comprehend the culture of Autism. A unique culture that isn't to be dismembered, ignored or buried, but to be celebrated, tolerated and understood. I also hope that you, the reader, want to know more about the man who has achieved so much in helping understand and admire those with autism – I can guarantee, you will also be surprised and delighted and humbled by his story.

Nicknamed as the 'Chosen Ones', Tony became part of an elite milieu of psychologists hand-picked by Dame Uta Frith. He is now a giant in the professional fields of academia, psychology, psychiatry, counselling, speech therapies etc, mixing widely with some of the greatest names in the industry, writing academic papers, and is highly respected by his peers. His life story and insights will also be of great interest to the wider community.

The book will focus on Autism and Aspergers, as I explore Tony's family members i.e.: cousins, step father, sister-in-law, wife's uncles and his son all on the spectrum. The text will be peppered with anecdotes and insights into the world of autism from within his own family, to what went on behind closed doors in institutions, to changing clinical

practices, to the quirky natures of some of the world's best known Autistics and clinicians.

When I met Tony at a conference back in 1995, little did I know that nearly thirty years later I would be penning his biography. It all started to unfold when over the past ten or so years I approached him several times regarding the idea of a biography. Although always interested, Tony declared that the timing wasn't quite right. A few years back, he finally agreed that he was ready and willing to tell his story, and I am honoured that he has entrusted this project to me. (Coincidentally in this big world we only live 20 kilometres apart.)

The wool that will knit the chapters together will be chapters named after songs written and sung by the Beach Boys, as well as some song lyrics dotted amongst the text. Not only are the Beach Boys Tony's favourite band, but he has a story of his own about when he met Brian Wilson that also touches on the topic of Autism. I hope that by unveiling and bringing to light Tony's past, this biography becomes just one of his lasting legacies.

Comment from Prof. Tony Attwood: *I have always had the privilege of being in the right place at the right time. I started my interest in autism when it was perceived as an expression of schizophrenia or due to 'emotional refrigerator' mothers and have observed and contributed to our changing perception of autism. It is a story worthy of being told and I have many insightful and humorous anecdotes, and have the perception of being both a clinician and a parent.*