Imagine you are a Vietnamese motorcycle rider visiting London. You are used to pedestrians in Hanoi or Saigon crossing the road by walking into the traffic while you swerve around them. In London you would find yourself outside your comfort zone waiting for traffic to cross the road.

Understanding how it may feel to be a person with Asperger syndrome can involve coming out of your comfort zone; being in an environment where you don’t know anyone or where nobody speaks your language so you can ask for directions. This is how it may feel to be a person with Asperger syndrome. In social situations, people with Asperger syndrome are operating outside their comfort zone most of their time.

Coming out of your social comfort zone can help a non-autistic person to understand how it may actually feel to have Asperger syndrome. For a person with Asperger syndrome, coming out of their comfort zone can help them to notice things about their social presentation that can really help with confidence when developing social relationships. It is often assumed that people with Asperger syndrome either prefer their own company or are not interested in making friends. Though some may feel this way, there are also many who desire social relationships, including intimate relationships, but find them hard to come by due to difficulties with non-verbal communication.

Most of our communication as a species is done non-verbally, through eye contact and facial expressions, which a person with Asperger syndrome can appear ‘blind’ to. A person with Asperger syndrome can also be oblivious as to how their own non-verbal presentation both affects and is perceived by others around them.

For example, other people may perceive prolonged eye-contact as staring, or absence of eye-contact may imply that one is not paying attention or listening. While most of us develop non-verbal communication skills through intuition, many people with Asperger syndrome feel that they have to learn non-verbal communication from observation.
As a person with Asperger syndrome, as well as observing how others communicate non-verbally I have also noticed how a lot of body language originates from how you feel within. In 2010, I undertook an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course, which included some simple yoga stretching exercises, meditation and body scans.

From these exercises, I noticed how interconnected the body is and how bodily sensations that occur within one region of the body affect the body as a whole. This includes when the body is moving involuntarily, e.g. practicing meditation when standing we may notice how we perhaps sway very slightly from time to time, to maintain our posture and balance.

With patience, one is eventually able to apply and notice the effects of mindfulness practice in normal life, including how our posture, sitting or standing, affects our body language.

Personally, one of the aspects I began to notice about my own non-verbal presentation was the effect that my breathing had on my facial expression. When doing the exercises, particularly the yoga stretching, I found myself taking up different postures that I wouldn’t normally assume in normal life, including lying flat on my back. As well as a big step outside my physical comfort zone, I felt that changing from one stretch or posture to another helped me with normal life.

Being able to cope with and manage change more effectively is something I have had difficulty with, often needing a routine or timetable to ensure predictability. Many people with Asperger syndrome can experience high-level anxiety when faced with change or coping within unpredictable scenarios e.g. when crisis response is needed.

Difficulties with social skills can lead to social isolation for many people with Asperger syndrome, which can then in turn cause depression. It is well known that many people with Asperger syndrome, especially those diagnosed relatively late in life including myself, have received their diagnosis after a period of depression.

As Asperger syndrome is life-long, the condition will likely affect a person in situations over the course of their life that they either don’t feel prepared for, or are yet to experience. This increases the chances of relapsing into depression at a later stage. Though people not on the autism spectrum also experience depression and are also as likely to relapse, overcoming depression can be especially difficult for a person with Asperger syndrome. This is because they can become very obsessed with the thoughts and feelings that bring about relapse, with the obsessive compulsive tendencies almost becoming a ‘lock-in’ factor.

Going beyond noticing sensations at the physical level as they occur, within mindfulness practice, a person can eventually notice their thought patterns. Comfortable or pleasant sensations experienced during mindfulness practice may induce positive thoughts. Awkward sensations may induce negative thoughts and feelings, including frustration.

When experiencing such thoughts during a mindfulness session, one is encouraged to notice the type of attention one may have a tendency to give such thoughts and feelings. This can allow a person experiencing depression to notice the type of attention they may give to certain thoughts, feelings or preconceptions and what can result from that type of attention when acting on it, to
the extent that a person can become what they think they are, rather than be who they actually are.

Mindfulness practice has helped me notice my personal thought patterns, how my mind wanders and the difference in physical sensations as they occur.

Like physical sensations, thoughts and feelings arise and pass. Stepping back from the flow, using the breath as an anchor of awareness of the present moment, allows one to be able to observe thoughts and physical sensations as they arise and pass, helping to bring about control over action.

Depression and relapse into depression can often result from becoming constrained by negative thoughts. Over time though, and with the appropriate effort and patience through mindfulness practice, a person with Asperger syndrome can gain control over how they are affected by their condition both in the sensory world and mentally, enabling more freedom to make their Asperger tendencies work for them.