

Man sees life in picasso-vision

**John Barnhart, Bedford Bulletin
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Imagine what it would be like to go through life never being able to trust your senses. Ordinary objects may seem searing hot to your touch, even though they aren't. Certain colors may appear to be blindingly bright and certain sounds, that no one else is reacting to, may hurt your ears. Even when things don't hurt, the information you are getting from the world around you makes no sense.

That's how Thomas McKean has experienced life for 36 years on earth. McKean, who is autistic, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show to promote his book, "Soon Will Come the Light."

The Bedford resident, who works from his house, earns a living traveling about and doing conferences and consulting work on autism. He has also served on the Autism Society of America board of directors.

The Oprah segment, taped last year, has aired twice; once on Oct. 19th and once on Jan. 14. Publicity from the show briefly put his book on the amazon.com's top 100 best seller list for a time. It ranked 73. McKean said that the Oprah people learned about him from an article that appeared in Esquire in May.

According to McKean, autism is a developmental disability that affects a person's cognitive and sensory ability. It appears during the first 36 months of a child's life and nobody knows why. An autistic person's senses are scrambled so that his senses give him a distorted perception of reality. The result is that the world appears chaotic and it is difficult for an autistic person to make sense of it.

McKean calls the visual distortions "picasso-vision." An autistic person may see things shattered into geometric shapes. He may also see clouds and shadows where there are none and his perception of colors may be a bit off.

This is confusing, but pure red, yellow, or blue colors can go beyond confusing. In McKean's case, looking at a bright yellow object creates the sensation of looking at a very bright light.

"It's like looking at the sun," he said.

Unlike looking at the sun, looking at a bright yellow object won't damage his eyes. The pain, however, is real.

An autistic person will have hypersensitive hearing in selected frequencies and will perceive sounds, in these frequencies, to be much louder than they really are. Which sounds frequencies are affected will vary from person to person. McKean said that it appears that the hair cells in the autistic person's inner ear, that pick up the frequencies they're sensitive to, are overdeveloped.

McKean attends a Bedford church, pastored by Travis Witt, that has a contemporary worship service. This can be rather loud and boisterous, but certain sounds are downright painful for him. To compensate, McKean wears earphones that can selectively filter sounds according to their frequency. He sets these earphones to attenuate the sounds that hurt him, and enjoys the music. This led him to give his testimony one Sunday. Some church members saw the earphones, and assumed he was an unspiritual fellow who was listening to the radio in church.

An autistic person's perception of food textures is distorted. They often want of their foods to have a soft texture, or all of them to have a hard texture.

"Kids with autism are very picky eaters," he said.

Touching ordinary objects can be a disconcerting adventure. Some tactile distortions are harmless. An orange, for example, may feel like a fuzzy ball. Other distortions can be dreadful.

An autistic person may get the sensation of searing heat from touching an object that is not hot at all. Even though the heat isn't real, the pain is.

Sometimes an autistic person may refuse to wear certain clothes because fabric textures, or even the touch of clothing at all, is painful. On the other hand, some autistic people may crave the touch of another person.

McKean said that tactile defensiveness, reacting negatively to touch, is one of the first signs of autism. A parent touches the child and the child backs away. This may even make it difficult to feed a nursing infant.

The worst part about this sensitivity to touch, actually a sensitivity to textures, is that the texture that causes an autistic person's nerves to send pain signals can vary over time. McKean never knows when he will touch something and get the same sensation of excruciating pain that he would get if he touched something hot enough to burn him.

A person's sense of smell is affected, too, and an autistic person may have trouble smelling anything, or may have an extraordinarily keen sense of smell. McKean was able to recall an autistic lady at a conference who was able to tell him what brand of shampoo he had used to wash his hair that morning.

Not all autistic people are affected the same way and the intensity of these sensory distortions may be more intense in some than in others. These distortions are why the word "autism" conjures up the image of a child, sitting in isolation and rocking. In some cases, the world just hurts too much for the child to interact with it.

"The confusion combined with the pain is what causes them to withdraw," McKean said. "It's going to have a psychological affect of a detrimental nature. You can just totally retreat into yourself and get lost there. Being outside the shell is too painful and confusing."

The world is a confusing, physically painful place, and the only way to deal with it is to pull into a shell, like a turtle, and hide.