

Supporting Students with Asperger Syndrome in Higher Education

Introduction

This information sheet is for staff in higher education establishments and universities who currently, or who may in the future, support students with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism (HFA). This information is adapted from literature provided by the **National Autistic Society**.

What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). It is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. People with Asperger syndrome are usually of average or above average intelligence. Social interaction can be difficult for people with Asperger syndrome and they can experience high levels of stress and anxiety. The condition affects people in different ways, but everyone with a diagnosis of ASD (including Asperger syndrome) shares a difficulty in making sense of the world. A number of traits are common to people with Asperger syndrome including:

- **Difficulty in communicating** - people with Asperger syndrome can often be very fluent in their speech, but find it difficult to make conversation and small talk, and may seem to lack interest in what someone else is saying. They may be quite literal in their understanding of spoken language, but struggle with metaphors and sarcasm.
- **Difficulty in social relationships** - many people with Asperger syndrome do want to be sociable, but find it hard to understand the social rules that other people take for granted. This includes difficulties in knowing what to do when with other people. Group environments can be particularly difficult and they can find it hard to make friends. People with Asperger syndrome may also find it difficult to understand non-verbal signals and facial expressions.
- **Difficulties with imaginative thought and flexible thinking** - people with Asperger syndrome often find it hard to think in abstract ways and may find it hard to cope with change. Changes to timetables, and when things don't go to plan can cause stress and anxiety. They can also find it hard to know what someone else is thinking.

People with Asperger syndrome can also develop a particular interest in something. This can be useful in the higher education environment as the individual may be able to spend their time studying their particular interest. They also often have a love of routines.

Many people with Asperger syndrome can have difficulties with sensory processing and get overwhelmed by too much sensory information, for example, they may feel uncomfortable in a large lecture room, filled with chatting students. Sometimes strip lighting can be a particular issue. Too much sensory information can prevent the student from processing what they are being taught.

These are the main features of the condition, but the characteristics will vary greatly. Obviously, every person is an individual and should be treated as such each person with Asperger syndrome will have their own individual needs.

Positive aspects of Asperger syndrome

People with Asperger syndrome may struggle with aspects of university life and may need more support than other students in order to be able to achieve their academic potential. However, people with Asperger syndrome, can - and do - also bring many skills and strengths to the university campus which should not be overlooked. The unique qualities and different way of thinking and experiencing the world brings diversity to establishments and enriches the student population. Enthusiasm, punctuality, determination and reliability are among the many qualities that students with Asperger syndrome might bring to courses.

For many students with Asperger syndrome, coming to university can be, for the first time in their lives, an environment where they are not ostracised. There may be other students that share their love of maths or history, for example, and people who finally accept them for who they are.

It is important that students with Asperger syndrome are respected and valued for what they bring to the life of the university as well as being supported in the areas they struggle with.

How might Asperger syndrome affect someone at university?

Students with Asperger syndrome may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety than other students.

Moreover, the things which cause them stress and anxiety may be different than for the average student population. For example, a student with Asperger syndrome may seem unconcerned about a particular assignment, but may experience high levels of anxiety if changes are made to the timetable.

But it may also be that the style of learning many higher education establishments adopt can be challenging for people with Asperger syndrome, for example, self-directed learning and group discussions. This means that they may need particular support with some aspects of learning and teaching.

Students with Asperger syndrome may also struggle with processing verbal information and may need lectures supported by printed PowerPoint slides.

Young people with Asperger syndrome may also struggle particularly with the social aspects of university life and managing the demands of living away from home.

If a student seems to be struggling, it may be that he or she needs more support outside lectures. For example, they may find it hard to cater for themselves for the first time or to know how to manage their budget. This may impact on the way they cope in lectures and tutorials. Some students may need high levels of support or may need to live in university accommodation throughout their time studying.

Asperger syndrome may affect the way the person:

- prepares for entry into university and exit from university
- orientates themselves around the campus
- manages lectures
- organizes their workload
- knows how to make sense of the academic requirements and teaching styles
- prepares for exams
- manages their living skills
- manages the social aspects of university life.

Support to enter higher education

Students with Asperger syndrome will often need more support or preparation than other people before entering university. They may need to be offered the chance to visit the university outside term-time to familiarize themselves before it is filled with people. They may need clear guidance about what to do and when, for example, signing up with the health center, joining the a student club or group, etc.

They may need support with daily living skills or specialist equipment. They will therefore need input from their academic advisor and disability officers to help to ensure this support is in place before the course starts. Also, help identify a 'safe' space on campus for the individual to go to when anxiety levels get too high or for a break from social demands, for example, the Counseling Center.

How to access support

The most useful point of contact for accessing support is usually the disability services coordinator. A person with Asperger syndrome who comes to university ideally should be in contact with the disability support service before they come, to ensure that all the support is in place. If they are already at university and have not yet been in contact with the service, it is worth encouraging the student to make contact with them as soon as possible. There is now also legal protection for students with disabilities.

How can universities support students with Asperger syndrome?

- Ensure all staff know what support is available and how to access it.
- Be flexible and imaginative in working with students to identify how best to meet their learning needs.
- Differentiate teaching materials according to individuals needs, for example, taping, photocopying.
- Ensure that the student is able to access support from the disability support service, welfare office and/or students' union.
- Where appropriate, maintain contact with student's families.
- Promote Asperger syndrome amongst students, for example, through Diversity events and ensure information is available.
- Identify suitable students and set up a student mentoring system.
- Clearly identify someone who the person with Asperger syndrome can go to for support.

- Set up regular support/guidance sessions with tutor and/or identified person.
- Enable contact with other students with Asperger syndrome if requested.
- Find out about and enable student to access specific tutorials or workshops, for example, study skills, career guidance.

Support in lectures and seminars

People with Asperger syndrome may need:

- help to identify the optimum seating position due to their sensory difficulties
- copies of notes/overheads due to verbal processing difficulties and
- visual learning style. Also, difficulties with note taking/hand writing may mean they take longer to take notes or struggle to know which are the pertinent points to note
- to be able to record the lecture or have it recorded for them
- access to electronic equipment to take notes
- guidance about when and how to ask questions
- lecturers and tutors to use clear, unambiguous language
- lecturers and tutors to be clear about and write down the academic requirements with deadlines etc
- advance notice of any changes to lecture theatre venue, lecture content, course requirements.

Support with exams

Using exams as a means of assessing someone's knowledge may not be a fair test for someone with Asperger syndrome. In order to fairly demonstrate their skills and knowledge, they may need more support or guidance than other students. There are no national guidelines available with regards to the arrangements that people with Asperger syndrome may need with exams in higher education, and so the particular needs of the individual will need to be identified.

People with Asperger syndrome may need:

- preparation for the change in routine that the exam will involve
- extra time in the exam
- a specific format, i.e. different colored paper or overlays
- specialist equipment, i.e. lap top
- a separate room due to sensory difficulties
- a note-taker
- questions written in clear language or someone to clarify the questions
- a prompt to remind the individual when to move on to the next question.

(Taken from Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, details below)

Students with Asperger syndrome will not necessarily know that they need to ask for help or support with exams and so consideration to this will need to be given in good time to ensure the arrangements can be put in place.

They may need someone to explain what will happen in the exam and what the rules of the exam will be. They may also need to arrive early in order to get settled before the other students arrive.

Coursework

This may need to be clearly detailed about what is required, when, how and in what format. Students may need longer deadlines or may need help to plan and manage their workloads.

Social aspects of university

Life outside of lectures and tutorials can be particularly challenging for students with Asperger syndrome.

Many students will be away from home for the first time. They may struggle with knowing how to look after themselves and how to make friendships. There are some books and resources which give practical strategies for managing their time away from home and these are listed below. But they may need additional support or encouragement.

Students with Asperger syndrome can feel particularly isolated or lonely at university and they can be vulnerable to exploitation and bullying. They may need guidance to access the student counseling center. Student mentors can be very useful and there may be particular societies to join which focus on their particular interests and so gives the opportunity to meet people with similar interests.

If a student needs particular support with personal care tasks, they may be assessed as being eligible for support from statutory services, i.e. social services. The student can request an assessment for a community care assessment but may need support to do so.

There is a higher incidence of mental health problems, particularly anxiety disorders and depression among people with an ASD which staff should be aware of. If a person's behavior gives real cause for concern, he or she will need support to access expert advice and/or support from local health professionals.

Support to leave university

Times of transition can be particularly distressing for people with Asperger syndrome and so more support may need to be given at the start of the final year at the latest. They may need more help to identify possible careers and the qualifications, etc. which would be needed to pursue that career. Help with job applications and preparing for interviews will be needed and university careers staff may need to identify suitable courses which will help develop these skills and prepare for the work environment.

Despite bringing a great many strengths to the work place, i.e. punctuality, reliability and dedication, people with Asperger syndrome may find it hard to know how to sell themselves in job applications or to know the information that a potential employer is looking for. They may need extra time with careers advisers to start to understand the process and the steps needed. Career Development could be involved if the student needs guidance and support about what to do next.

Points to remember

- The skills and strengths of people with Asperger syndrome need to be valued.
- Asperger syndrome will affect people in different ways - the support needs of each individual will vary.
- People with Asperger syndrome may particularly struggle with the social demands of university life.
- Disability support services can help students to access support.
- Counseling Center services can help support students.
- All university staff should know what support is available and how to access it.
- Staff may need to be flexible and imaginative in working with students to identify how best to meet their learning needs.
- Staff should not assume that students will automatically know or understand what is expected of them.

Recommended reading

Al-Mahmood, R., Mclean, P., Powell, E. and Ryan, J. (1998). *Towards success in tertiary study with Asperger's syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders*. Victorian Co-operative Projects Higher Education Students with a Disability Committee, National Library Australia. Downloadable from: www.services.unimelb.edu.au

*Attwood, T. (1998). *Asperger's syndrome: a guide for parents and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

*Brown, M. and Miller, A. (2004). *Aspects of Aspergers: success in the teens and twenties*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing

*Deudney, C. (2004). *Mental health in people with autism and Asperger syndrome: a guide for health professionals*. London: The National Autistic Society

*Fleisher, M. (2003). *Making sense of the unfeasible: my life journey with Asperger syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

*Harpur, J., Lawlor, M. and Fitzgerald, M. (2004). *Succeeding in college with Asperger syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

*Jamieson, J. and Jamieson, C. (2004). *Managing Asperger syndrome at college and university*. London: David Fulton Publishers

* NAS Prospects Supported Employment Team (2004). *The undiscovered workforce: employing people with Asperger syndrome: a practical guide*. London: The National Autistic Society

*Powell, A. (2002). *Taking responsibility: good practice guidelines for services for adults with Asperger syndrome*. London: The National Autistic Society

Asperger syndrome and mental health. NAS Information sheet downloadable from www.autism.org.uk/a-z

*Available from NAS Publications
www.autism.org.uk/pubs

Information adapted from the **National Autistic Society** website: www.nas.org/uk

SUNY Fredonia Counseling Center
LoGrasso Hall
716.673.3424
www.Fredonia.edu/counseling