



STUDENTS WITH ASD AT THIRD LEVEL



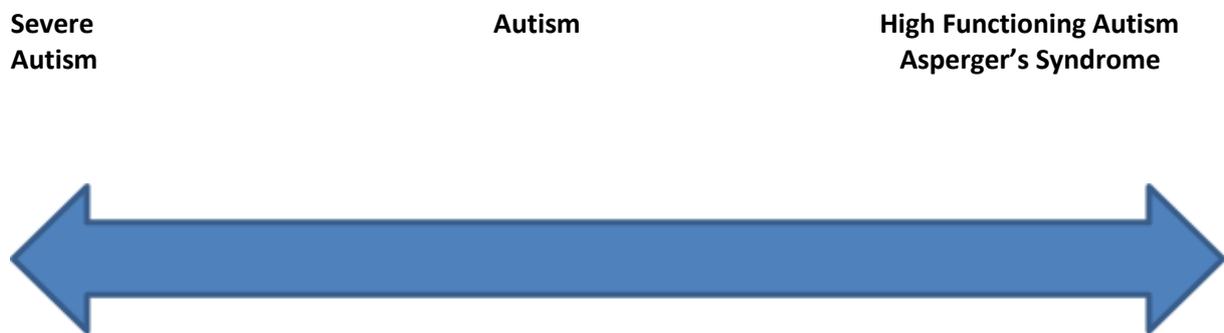
Contents

What is Autism / ASD?	2
Difficulties that may be experienced by individuals with ASD	3
Impact on Learning	4
Strategies for supporting students with ASD.....	5
Further Information	6

What is Autism / ASD?

Autism is a spectrum condition combining Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and other related disorders which were combined into one diagnosis and is now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) describe ASD as a pervasive neurodevelopmental disorder, characterized by impairments in social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities.

Figure 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder



Asperger's Syndrome (AS) can be loosely defined as mild Autism Spectrum Disorder which is recognised as being at the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum. People with Asperger syndrome will often be of average, or above average, intelligence and have a high aptitude for acquiring knowledge. Generally, they will not have a learning disability and usually have fewer problems with language development while experiencing difficulties with social communication (HSE 2011).

Students with Asperger syndrome often do well at academic subjects that involve facts, figures and logic while struggling with subjects that require abstract thought, such as English Literature (HSE 2011). However, they can often have an extreme interest which they focus on and may have quite a talent for. These characteristics can enable students with ASD to flourish in a college environment.

Difficulties that may be experienced by individuals with ASD.

Autistic people tend to see, hear and feel the world differently. They may feel significant anxiety as the world can feel overwhelming for them. In particular, they experience difficulties in understanding and relating to other people. Taking part in everyday family, school, work and social life, can be challenging.

ASD is primarily characterised by a triad of impairments or difficulties, these include:

1. Communication difficulties,
2. Social/interpersonal barriers, and
3. Repetitive and restrictive behaviours and interests.

Communication Difficulties

- challenges interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language.
- may not understand; facial expressions, tone of voice or jokes/sarcasm.
- lack casual conversation skills.
- take a literal understanding of language.
- struggle with vagueness or abstract concepts.

Social / Interpersonal Barriers

- may have difficulty recognising or understanding others' feelings, intentions and social cues.
- challenge in expressing their own emotions or seeking comfort from others.
- find it hard to form friendships.
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people.
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate.

Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviours and Interests

- often prefer to have a daily routine.
- The use of rules can be important.
- can have intense and highly-focused interests, often from a fairly young age.
- can experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain.
- may engage in repetitive body movements, such as rocking back and forth or flapping their hands.

Impact on Learning.

Communication Difficulties

- Student may have difficulty understanding metaphors, sarcasm, unclear directions or ambiguous content. This can impact auditory and reading comprehension.
- May not ask for help as may find it challenging to initiate communication.
- Student may be unable to complete tasks or assignments because of comprehension difficulties or poor organisational skills.
- Organising material, planning, managing their time and deadlines can present a significant challenge.
- Student may have difficulty completing daily tasks.
- May appear aloof, bored or lacking engagement.

Social / Interpersonal Barriers

- Student may be demanding of a lecturer's time or attention. May not be able to understand that lecturers or other students become frustrated with this behavior.
- Other behaviour deemed inappropriate such as interruptions and difficulty with turn-taking can occur in the classroom.
- Student may have difficulty developing peer relationships.
- May not understand social cues and so personal space may be an issue.
- May be quite conscious of their performance in social situations, which can be a source of anxiety.
- Students may find group work situations challenging or stressful.

Repetitive Behaviours

- Student may display repetitive body movements, such as rocking back and forth, flapping their hands or less prominent movements e.g. cracking knuckles, chewing on pencils or pens, perseveration on thoughts or topics, which can be distracting in class.
- Students may find adapting to new routines or changing circumstances challenging. The non-routine nature of college life can often be difficult.
- Orientation to college locations and systems, can be challenging, particularly in their first year.

Restrictive Behaviours and Interests

- Students can be sensitive to sensory aspects within the classroom environment. Sensitivities such as a noisy lecture hall, humming of a computer or the [sound of] turning of a page, the glow of fluorescent lighting or the smell of dry-erase markers, can cause some students to lose focus in lectures.
- Fitting all the pieces of information / learning together into a whole picture may prove a challenge.
- A singular focus on one area can make transitioning between topics difficult in class for students with ASD.
- Perfectionism can be a restrictive issue for students with ASD. For example fear of failure or a desire for the perfect piece of work can cause procrastination and affect their ability to complete course work.

* Additionally, some students with ASD may experience difficulties with gross or fine motor skills, and have difficulty with handwriting or note-taking.

Strategies for supporting students with ASD.

The transition from second to third level can be particularly challenging for students with ASD. Support and understanding during this period will be valuable.

Students with ASD respond well to consistency and predictability.

Students with ASD tend to adopt consistent routines in their everyday life. There are a number of ways in which this can be achieved at third level;

- Provide well-structured, predictable classrooms and timetables.
- A clear timeline of events, assignments, and deadlines will support students in recognising when things are due and allow them to manage their time and plan ahead.
- If possible try not to reschedule or double-book time if meeting a student with ASD as this can cause them significant stress.
- Be cognisant that a student with ASD may not want to sit close to others in or may have a seat / area that they consider “theirs”. As such asking them to change their routine can upset them.

Students with ASD tend to be literal learners.

Generally, students with ASD take a literal understanding of language. As such it is important to ensure that meaning is clear and that no ambiguous language is used. Thus, it is suggested that;

- Language used should be simple and clear and free from metaphors.
- Explicitly state expectations, instructions and feedback. It is beneficial to provide this in both written and verbal form.
- It may be worthwhile when giving instructions / feedback to students with ASD to check they have understood what has been said. A student with ASD may be able to repeat what has been said without understanding its meaning. Asking open-ended questions can ensure that understanding is reached.

- Feedback provided should be constructive as perfectionism can be an issue for students with ASD. As these students may set very high expectations for themselves critical feedback may be perceived in a negative way.

Students with ASD may need additional support strategies.

- If possible make class notes available in advance in written format. Students with ASD may find it difficult to concentrate in lectures, as well as having fine motor skills, attention, and organisation and note taking difficulties, and having written transcripts can assist this.
- Students with ASD may need additional guidance in the way they communicate and present information.
- Encourage students to make a list of questions and raise them individually with their lecturer or tutor after class if they are interrupting or asking a lot of questions in lectures.
- Students with ASD may have difficulty taking part in group work. Be aware of this when organising groups as this may cause a student with ASD to feel excluded or have difficulty adapting if they do not know the other group members.

Further Information:

- [Irish Society for Autism](#)
- [Aspire Ireland](#)
- [Shine Ireland](#)
- [National Autistic Society UK](#)
- [AsIAm.ie](#)

“What would happen if the autism gene was eliminated from the gene pool? You would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done.”

— Temple Grandin