

UNIVERSITY OF CHICHESTER

Teaching, Learning and Assessment: Working with Disabled Students

STUDENTS WITH ASPERGERS SYNDROME OR AUTISM.

N.B. The information given here is of a general type and may not reflect the situation for the individual student with AS.

Aspergers Syndrome forms part of the Autistic Spectrum (also known as AS or ASD), a developmental disability which affects the way a person communicates and interacts with others. Understanding that students with Aspergers Syndrome have restricted patterns of behaviour, interests and activity may help you work more inclusively with them.

A number of cognitive, social & sensory features may impact on students' learning.

Cognition:

- Students with AS are prone to literal interpretation, with impaired ability to understand the figurative and abstract.
- An obsessional, perhaps single, interest, often in their subject, or an aspect of it.
- Seen from the perspective of a student with autism, the ability to focus on a limited number of things of extended periods to a far greater degree than non autistics. This can in appropriate contexts become a strength.
- At the same time, students may be highly distractible.
- Strong factual memory.

Impaired social interactions:

- Inability to read social signs, to pick up cues from others, especially non verbal ones.
- Monotonous speech & limited eye contact can contribute to this, as may ritualistic behaviours.

Need for a predictable work environment:

- Preference for sameness & difficulty in coping with changes in routine.
- Students may wish to sit in the same place for each session.
- Changes may provoke extreme and disabling levels of anxiety.

Environmental stresses may cause distress, including:

- Crowded lecture theatres and exam halls.
- Loud and sudden noises & intense lighting.

Motor skills:

- Impaired coordination.
- Slow writing speeds.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Some students use a personal assistant, funded by their Disabled Students' Allowance, to help mediate interactions, prepare for changes to routine and act as support/reference point.

Steps which can help you meet the learning needs of students with AS or Autism include:

- Recognising that the inability to read others or understand figurative language & irony may lead to difficulties in discussions.
- Explaining etiquettes: the unwritten rules we take for granted may need to be spelled out with regard to lecture and seminar behaviour, and exam etiquette.
- Using explicit and unambiguous rules.
- Avoiding metaphorical language.
- Giving information in advance (if possible) about changes in routine/different & new events/venues.
- Offering or referring to study support in setting work priorities.
- Visual ways of presenting new concepts may be helpful.
- Giving extra time to take notes.
- Minimizing background noise, and alerting students when you can to sudden noise.
- Being understanding in response to a student's requests or needs – such as asking always to sit in a particular place, or to tape record lectures for making notes later.
- Discussing approaches to potentially difficult tasks with the student and/or Disability Service. (This may be especially helpful in managing group teaching situations.)
- Some understanding of the nature of a student's impairment may help peers' responses. This is something for individual negotiation as confidentiality must not be compromised.
- Being prepared to mediate in group settings and ensuring that a student with AS understands what other group members' expectations of them are.
- Reviewing wording of assessments & ensuring that the student does understand just what is required.

Assessment adjustments might include:

- Modifying the language of questions to remove scope for misinterpretation.
- Providing a separate exam room to reduce anxiety/ disruption to others.
- Offering additional time for tasks requiring manual skill/speed.
- Considering offering alternatives to group assessments.

Support from the Disability Service might include:

- Assistance with Disabled Student Allowance application.
- Regular meetings with a Learning Mentor to ensure student is understanding requirements of assignments.
- Assistance preparing for group work.
- Campus Assistant to help student with interactions and new situations.

For further information contact:

Disability and Dyslexia Services

Tel: 01243 812076

e-mail disability@chi.ac.uk

LINKS

information for education professionals, National Autistic Society:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/professionals.aspx>

The stories of undergraduate and postgraduates with AS:

<http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~cns/>

Learning Styles and Autism:

<http://www.autism.org/styles.html>

Disability and Dyslexia Service

University of Chichester

January 2016