

Supporting Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder at Third Level

Asperger's Syndrome/Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Asperger's Syndrome/Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurologically based condition that falls within the autistic spectrum and affects how a person makes sense of the world, processes information and relates to other people. It is described as a spectrum disorder as it affects many people differently and varies greatly from person to person.

ASD is mostly a "hidden disability" and can manifest itself in a range of cognitive and behavioural characteristics. People with ASD usually have an average or above average IQ. ASD may be accompanied by a specific learning difficulty such as Dyslexia, Dyspraxia or Attention Deficit Disorder.

Characteristics

There are a number of characteristics associated with ASD which individuals with ASD may experience to a greater or lesser degree. These characteristics can manifest themselves in a wide variety of traits, challenges and abilities in the areas of:

- **Social Communication**
- **Social Interaction**
- **Social Imagination**
- **Sensory Processing**

It is important to understand that people with ASD are as individual in their character and abilities as anyone else. The condition doesn't define them or their personality and is just one aspect of the unique person.

Key Challenges faced by Individuals with ASD

Communication

Students with ASD will vary in their communication abilities and skills. Many students with ASD often have good language skills, but tend to have a very literal understanding of language. This can result in difficulty understanding jokes, sarcasm or abstract concepts. Students may speak very formally or with an accent. Conversations may be dominated by narrow topics of interest and the sharing of ideas and emotions may be difficult. A student with ASD may have difficulty reading the tone and body language of others which may result in behaviour that is deemed inappropriate occurring in the classroom, such as interruptions, difficulty with turn-taking and asking many questions.

Socialising

Socialising and making new friends can be a challenge for people with ASD who may find social situations very stressful. The condition can affect a person's ability to communicate empathy or understand unwritten social norms and etiquette. Students with ASD may

appear aloof or behave in a way that seems inappropriate by interrupting others or ignoring personal space. Individuals with ASD often compensate and develop social skills strategies by observing and mimicking socially appropriate behaviours.

Organisation

Students with ASD may struggle with organisation skills and managing everyday tasks which can cause them stress. Conversely they may be very organised and get stressed when their systems and routines are interfered with.

Concentration

Students with ASD may find it difficult to stay focused on a task, particularly if it does not interest them. They may focus intensely on tasks that do interest them and get anxious or annoyed if interrupted.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a major factor that affects people with ASD. Anxiety levels can become very heightened when faced with other challenges such as sensory stimuli, communication difficulties and social situations. Anxiety and frustration can cause a person with ASD to react by carrying out repetitive actions, if unable to cope or communicate frustration.

Black and White Thinking

People with ASD can be very creative. Many well-known writers, artists and musicians have the condition. However they may experience difficulty with flexible/abstract thinking. This can result in difficulty interpreting the behaviour of others or predicting what may happen. A lack of flexibility can result in repetitive behaviours or rigid dependence on routine. A highly structured environment is usually beneficial for a person with ASD and unpredictable situations or changes to routine may cause distress.

Sensory Integration

People with ASD may experience hyper-sensitivity to sensory stimuli such as noise, touch, smell or light. This can lead to a sense of being overloaded and result in anxiety or anger when exposed to such stimuli.

Other Challenges:

Leaving home can be a stressful experience for any student. Students with ASD may not have the usual coping strategies (peer support/interaction) to help deal with the stress. Students with ASD may have led a sheltered/reclusive life and when starting college are faced with new routines, new peers and possibly new accommodation. Navigating these changes and the social side of college (friendships, dating, going out etc) can be stressful and bewildering. Students' eating and sleeping patterns (and as a result their health) may be affected.

What can I do to Help?

Academic Support

- When meeting students with ASD avoid rescheduling or double-booking as this can cause them a lot of stress.
- Be mindful of your language. People with ASD tend to be literal minded. They have a sense of humour but may not perceive a joke in a serious academic setting. Students may smile if they are unsure or because they think it is the expected reaction.
- Avoid distractions and noise in one to one meetings as it results in a loss of concentration/disruption of the thought process.
- Feedback should be clear and direct.
- Feedback should be constructive. A student with ASD may have set very high expectations for their work or performance and may perceive critical feedback as a criticism.
- When giving instructions/feedback it is a good idea to check understanding. A student with ASD may be able to repeat what has been said but may not have understood it.
- Be aware that it may take a student with ASD a little longer to process an instruction or question.
- Often students with ASD need to be shown how to communicate their ideas. They can be excellent researchers but may need guidance on presentation.
- Students with ASD may have difficulty concentrating in lectures, it may be useful to provide a copy of lecture notes.
- A student with ASD may not want to sit close to others in lectures or may have a seat/work station that they consider “theirs”. Being asked to move or change may cause upset.
- Where students are interrupting or asking a lot of questions in lectures, they should be encouraged to make a list of questions and raise them privately with their lecturer or tutor after class.
- It can be difficult to ascertain whether a student with ASD has assimilated the meaning of an interaction or a point you are making. A student may say that they understand but may not in reality. Using open (rather than closed) questions to check the student’s understanding can be really effective.
- If a student’s behaviour is inappropriate, they should be given explanatory feedback rather than criticism. Encourage students to explore the rationale behind feedback and seek their co-operation for suggested modifications.
- Students with ASD may have difficulty taking part in groupwork. It is important to be sensitive to this when organising groups as a student may feel excluded if a class is asked to pick their own groups or may have difficulty adapting their way of working to fit in with the group approach.

Academic Support (Post Graduate)

- Supervisors should be aware that a student with ASD who says they are fine, may not be. Students may tell you what they think you want to hear as a coping strategy.
- Structure meetings carefully, provide clear and direct feedback and avoid cancelling/re-scheduling meetings as much as possible.
- The Viva: A student with ASD may avoid eye-contact. The intention is not to be rude but is their style of body-language. Interruptions and light/noise levels should be minimised. Inform students of the structure of the process in advance and be aware that changes at short notice can cause major difficulties for students.

Exam Support

- Alternative venues for exams may be preferable for students with ASD due to concentration difficulties.
- Queueing, noise and distractions will have a negative impact on stress levels and exam performance.
- Encourage students to read exam questions carefully and to take care with understanding what is being asked. Extra time may be required.
- When preparing for exams, students should be encouraged to practice with past exam papers and take part in mock-timed exams for preparation.

Library Supports

- An academic library can sometimes be too noisy for students with ASD. An ideal study space is one that is structured and familiar. The provision of a quiet room or space in the library would suit students with ASD.
- Queueing in the library to use the photocopier or take out/return books can be a negative experience for students with ASD due to proximity with others and noise and distractions.
- Students may benefit from extra library supports such as one to one help with using library systems.

Integration

Isolation and feeling excluded from college recreations may cause a student with ASD to drop out before anyone realises what is wrong.

Taking part in clubs and societies can be really beneficial. Students should be encouraged to join clubs that focus on their special interests (such as chess, gaming, drama etc.). A college-run buddy-system can be a good form of support but depends on the availability of sensitive and willing volunteers to take part.

Academic tutors should be aware of the challenges that students with ASD experience and where this sensitively informs the relationship they build with a student, it can be really beneficial for the student.

There are a range of services available in IADT that can be invaluable to students with ASD. Students with ASD can register with the Access Office and avail of a range of supports. IADT provides a specialist ASD support tutor via the Access Office who works with students during the academic year. Due to the varied manifestations of ASD, the ASD tutor works closely with students, creating and adapting individualised plans which focus on academic well-being and may touch on social skills and personal development as required. The Writing and Research Support Service provides educational support services. The Student Counselling Service provides counselling services.

If you are aware of a student on your programme whom is or may be a person with ASD, they should be encouraged to make contact with the student services team (contact details below).

Institute Support Services

Access Office	Patricia Byrne tel: 01 2394628	email: patricia.byrne@iadt.ie
Disability Support Service	Deirdre Daly tel: 086 0218989	email: deirdre.daly@iadt.ie
Writing and Research Support Service	Gillian Boland tel: 01 2394790	email: wrss@iadt.ie
Specialist Support Tutor	Katie Guinnane	email: katie.guinnane@iadt.ie
Student Counselling Service	Katie Hendrick tel: 01 239 4650	
Student Health Centre	Nurses: Jean Boland/Joan Broderick tel: 01 2394760	
Assistive Technology Tutor	Colm Olwill tel: 01 2394795	email: colm.olwill@iadt.ie
Careers Office	Paul Murphy tel: 01 2394670	email: paul.murphy@iadt.ie

References

Kenny, Z and Treanor, D (2006) *Supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome and other Autistic Spectrum Conditions in the 3rd Level College Environment*. Available at: www.tcd.ie/disability/staff/supporting_students_withaspergers.php

AsiAm (2015) *As You Can – Introduction to Autism*. Available at: <https://www.asiam.ie>