

Understanding & Supporting College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Deficits in communication and social skills is the commonality among individuals with Autism Spectrum disorders. Beyond that, each person is affected in different ways and may experience difficulties with sensory perceptions, motor skills, learning styles, and coping strategies. As a result of these challenges the observable behavior of students on the autism spectrum may make them appear inattentive, bored, rude, defiant, or possibly even on drugs. Ritualistic or repetitive behaviors or unusual communication and social skills (especially under stress) are often not understood by those supporting these students. Students may experience sensory “overload” and/or be easily stressed by the social and communication demands of class

Below are some challenges that may be experienced by students with autism spectrum disorder and suggestions on possible supports.

Communication Difficulties

Receptive: Slow processing of verbal exchanges, misunderstanding sarcasm or jokes, very literal interpretation of words, misunderstanding gestures and body language.

Expressive: Problems initiating communication (even if articulate and talkative), staying on topic, turn taking, following conversational “protocol”, unusual voice tone and/or volume.

Support: In addition to accommodations, try to be as clear, concise and logical as possible. Make no assumptions about what students understand; ask for clarification.

Social Skills

Problems understanding another person’s perspectives, difficulty sharing space, or making eye contact, extreme social anxiety, difficulty negotiating with others. These individuals may have **extreme** difficulty working with groups or pairs.

Sensory Differences

May be over sensitive or under sensitive to input from the five senses. Common visual and auditory difficulties may include the flickering and hum of fluorescent lights. Typical classroom sounds (like the movement of desks, people and other objects) be experienced as painful. Certain smells, odors or even bright colors can cause “overload”. Consider the use of hats, sunglasses and ear plugs to be necessary accommodations for the student

Coping styles:

Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder frequently describe themselves as dealing with a lot of anxiety and stress. Sensory sensitivities, social and communication expectations and unexpected changes often trigger this anxiety and stress. During these times, students’ behavior can seem bewildering, rude, and disrespectful, but most often, a student displaying these behaviors are doing what they know to do to cope.

Stress relieving activities may look odd and may even make people uncomfortable. These activities may include body rocking, pacing, waving or flapping hands or fingers, chewing on their clothing or body, “lecturing” on a topic of interest or displaying the “opposite” emotion for the situation. They may also abruptly leave the situation with no explanation before or afterwards. Remember that a student who is having a hard time coping might not realize s/he is being disruptive and needs to leave.

All information for this handout was taken from “Academic Supports for College Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Overview” by Chantal Sicile-Kira, Sept. 10, 2011. The full article can be viewed at: <http://autismcollege.com/blog/2011/09/10/academic-supports-for-college-students-with-an-autism-spectrum-disorder-an-overview/>