

Autism & Asperger Syndrome



What is Autism?

- Autism is a developmental disorder that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people and the world around them.
- It is a spectrum condition (sometimes referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD) which means it affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees.
- The way it affects people can change over time and though many people with autism are able to lead independent lives others may need a lifetime of support.
- There are over half a million people in the UK with an ASD (around 1 in 100), though many researchers believe this number could be higher. People with autism come from all nationalities, social backgrounds, cultures, and religions and the condition appears to be more common in males than females.
- The causes of ASDs are still being investigated although genes are thought to play a part. However, many experts believe that the pattern of behaviour from which ASDs are diagnosed may not result from a single cause. It is not caused by emotional deprivation or the way a person has been brought up.

What is Asperger Syndrome?

- Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a condition on the autistic spectrum characterised by difficulties with flexibility of thought, social interaction and communication.
- People with AS are usually of average or above average intelligence with good verbal skills and are often capable of leading full and independent lives.
- People with AS may become very focused on an activity that they enjoy. This can lead to significant productivity if the activity is related to their work.
- People with AS may find it difficult to empathise or to know what others are thinking, finding other people unpredictable and confusing. They are likely to experience difficulties functioning in 'our world', which relies heavily on non-verbal communication and the unwritten rules which guide our behaviour.

- Life can be hard for people with AS; it affects every aspect of their lives. Anxiety and depression are common experiences.
- Finally, it is important to remember that every person with AS is a unique individual with their own strengths and weaknesses. This card provides useful insight into some of the issues that you may face, but be prepared to learn more each and every time you meet someone with AS.

How does it affect people?

People with ASDs (including AS) have individual strengths and difficulties which make them the person they are. Common differences for people with an ASD usually include the following:

- **Special Interests:** many people with an ASD have special interests around which they may develop:
 - a broad and deep base of knowledge;
 - a very good memory for related facts;
 - a highly developed talent, and a creative ability.

Special interests may change over time but the ability to focus intensely on an area of interest has been a useful skill for many people with autism.

Some develop careers out of their interests and others have become famous because of them. Stephen Wiltshire has become famous as an architectural artist and he is able to produce incredibly detailed drawings of buildings from memory. Daniel Tammet is famous for his interest in Maths and languages and he was able to learn Icelandic in one week.

- **Social Communication:** people with ASD can find communicating with others difficult and they may need to learn how to:
 - understand gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice;
 - start or end a conversation and choose topics to talk about;
 - understand jokes, metaphor and sarcasm;
 - understand the meaning of what is being said to them.
- **Social Interaction:** many people with an ASD find interacting with other people difficult. They may exhibit inappropriate social or

emotional behaviour or unintentionally appear to be rude, unkind, eccentric, etc. They may need to learn how to:

- make and maintain friendships;
 - understand unwritten 'social rules' like not standing too close to another person or an appropriate level of eye contact;
 - cope in unfamiliar social situations.
- **Social Imagination:** many people find understanding what other people know difficult and they may need to learn how to:
 - understand or interpret other peoples thoughts, feelings or actions.
 - imagine alternative outcomes to situations and predict what will happen next.
 - **Sensory Processing:** the processing of sensory information may be difficult and this can occur in one or all of the senses (touch, taste sight, sound or smell). Individuals may be over or under-sensitive to certain sensory stimulation such as loud noises, bright lights or overpowering smells.

Other common traits and characteristics include:

- A reliance on routines and difficulty planning for or coping with sudden/unexpected changes.
- Difficulty developing a self-imposed structure for daily activities.
- A vulnerability to mental health difficulties such as depression and/or anxiety – may result from social isolation and an acute awareness of their difficulties and social limitations.
- A co-occurrence with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

What study support arrangements are possible?

If you are a student with AS or an ASD, you may benefit from the following types of study support arrangements, although this is not an exhaustive list and you may have other specific individual requirements:

- A note taker for lectures so that you can focus fully on what is being said.

- A specialist AS mentor to help develop a study routine, social skills, and strategies for managing the impact of any AS characteristics on your studies and relationships with peers/tutors.
- A support worker to help you manage study resources, access to library facilities, and develop social activities to prevent isolation.
- Examination adjustments, e.g. extra time, rest breaks, the use of a word processor (motor coordination can be poor), a separate room/room in college.
- Staff and/or peer awareness and training may help others working closely with the student to understand and be sympathetic to their behaviour. However, information about a student's disability should not be divulged to others without their explicit consent.

Contact the Disability Advisory Service for more information about how to access these or any other disability-related study support arrangements (contact details are provided at the end of this document).

Guidance for staff working with a student with AS or an ASD

Some of the follow points may help facilitate the teaching of a student with AS or an ASD:

- Has a student missed your tutorial after it was rescheduled? People with AS can find it hard to cope with change and unexpected events. Routines should be kept as consistent as possible and when changes are envisaged (e.g. hand-in dates, meeting arrangements, room changes, etc) they should be announced as far in advance as possible and communicated directly to the student (in writing if necessary).
- Has a student's answer to your assignment been off-topic? AS students may misinterpret your questions or instructions. Be clear in any verbal or written instructions and be prepared to rephrase a question if necessary.
- Are AS students finding working in your tutorial group difficult? You may notice that AS students behave 'differently' to others in the group. They may come across as abrupt or even rude and have difficulties with conversations.
- Group work in which an AS student is involved may need to be facilitated more closely. Be prepared for managing interactions

where the student exhibits behaviours that seem to be naïve, pedantic, or inappropriate.

- Does a student appear distracted in your tutorial? Some people with AS are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. For example, a flickering strip light may be so distracting that the student cannot concentrate.
- Absenteeism, assignment or exam issues? Where guidelines and arrangements are to be followed they should be communicated clearly and followed up in writing. A short email sent early to the right person can dramatically improve the chances of the issue being resolved before it is too late, and is likely to reduce your workload in the long term.
- Wherever possible give clear, step by step instructions and prompt and constructive feedback. If you find an AS student is misinterpreting assignment briefs discuss it with the student directly and inform the Disability Advisory Service or the student's AS mentor. AS students often have low self esteem – offer as much realistic encouragement as possible.
- Be reliable, consistent and offer help at a level that you can maintain.
- Try, where possible, to be flexible and adapt to the student's style of thinking and working, and to their patterns of behaviour. Some people with AS have relative strengths in visual (compared with auditory) processing skills and therefore visual teaching materials and methods will enhance learning.
- Try to maintain a thick skin as a defence against the directness of people with AS. You may also need to suppress your own social etiquette and be direct with them. People with AS do not learn manners indirectly and would generally prefer to be told (in private) if they are coming over as ill mannered or odd.
- It is important to avoid stereotyping AS students. They will be very different from each other and their range of experiences will vary considerably. Some students with AS will have developed good social skills which may mask the extent of their underlying difficulties.
- Be alert to the potential vulnerability for anxiety and depression and refer the student for support as necessary (e.g. via the Disability Advisory Service, the University Counselling Service, the College Nurse, Chaplain or Welfare Officer).

- Contact the Disability Advisory Service or the student's mentor as soon as you observe any issues of concern arising with regards to a student with AS/ASD.

Useful Resources

- National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk
- Oxfordshire Autistic Society for Information & Support (OASIS): www.oasisonline.org.uk
- Autism Family Support: www.autism-fs.org.uk
- Oxford Aspies – twice monthly support group meeting for adults with Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism: <https://sites.google.com/site/oxfordaspiessite/>

Disability Advisory Service

E-mail: disability@admin.ox.ac.uk

Website: www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das

Telephone: +44 (0)1865 280 459

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Acknowledgements

Produced in collaboration with Ryan Bradley, Specialist Autism Advisor