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WHAT IS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that falls under the category of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). What causes AS is currently not known, through there are suspected genetic links.

AS presents as a cluster of characteristics, and persons with AS are normally on the high-functioning end of ASD.

Asperger's Syndrome myths and facts

Myth	Fact
People with Asperger's Syndrome:	
are socially withdrawn and avoid interacting with people	often seek contact and show preferences when they get to know people
have a mental health disability	may appear socially awkward and have difficulty expressing themselves

IMPACTS ON EDUCATION

Students with AS struggle with tasks that some people may assume are easy. Public speaking, neatness, organization, and group work are all included in university-level educational curriculum and can be challenging for students with AS.

"I wish people would just say what they are thinking."

"I'm worried about saying something dumb in my group."

"If the professor asks a question, why can't I answer it?"

A person with AS can have functional social and communication deficits. For students with AS, these deficits can lead to difficulties reading social cues such as body language and misunderstandings of classroom expectations.

However, people with AS may also have average to above average cognitive skills, allowing them to progress through the education system and attend university. For example, people with AS who attend university can excel in an area of interest and establish careers as researchers or content-area experts.

Students with AS may behave in an extremely literal way, favouring unchanging routines, clear-cut instruction and external structure. Sometimes they are - to be blunt - obnoxious. They may blurt sarcastic comments in class, ask annoying questions or make observations best

kept to themselves, an unfortunate factor contributing to possible social isolation. Their quick wits and academic talents, on the other hand, may win them praise and endearment, or at least tolerance, from classmates and faculty.

Farr, M. (2012)

COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

Challenges with understanding classroom norms and expectations

- Students with AS can experience difficulty with the "hidden curriculum," referring to implied expectations from university faculty members.

Pragmatic language problems related to social concepts

- Students with AS can appear to dominate a classroom discussion by continually interjecting points or asking for clarification. Although this may seem rude to a casual observer, it is actually an indication that the student with AS is interested and fully engaged in the topic of discussion.

Reduced awareness of social cues

- A student with AS may not pick up on an intended message. For example, a person without AS often indicates they want to end a conversation by putting on their coat and moving towards the door. A person with AS may not understand the intention and continue with the conversation.

CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY GROUP WORK

How is group work a problem?

Group work is a popular method to encourage student collaboration on coursework. As collaborative work is routinely encountered within most career paths, group work assignments in university benefit students as they provide practice to build skills that translate into professional settings after graduation.

Students with AS have problems with group work relating to unspoken social norms and expectations within a group. When expected to participate equally or take turns speaking, students with AS often experience heightened stress and feel pressure to stop themselves from saying something "dumb" in front of others.

When stress levels for students with AS increase, they can appear disengaged. This can make it especially difficult for the student with AS to contribute to the group. These functional limitations can impact academic performance when marks or credits in a course are linked to group work activities.



Examples of behaviour in the classroom

A student with AS seems to lack a filter during class/lab discussions. Unspoken rules regarding classroom etiquette appear to be ignored as the student constantly asks questions, seemingly unaware that there are others in the class wishing to participate. He does not stop even when the faculty member appears annoyed and gives short and terse responses to the questions from the student with AS.

Another example related to stressors of academics is when assignments are due. The student with AS notices other students' work is significantly different than their own. This may have resulted from a misunderstanding of what they were asked to do and can lead to the student with AS becoming agitated.

These two examples relate to the specific functional deficits that a person with AS can have in reading social cues and expressing themselves appropriately. Understanding why these behaviours are manifesting in a classroom environment is important.

We encourage faculty working with students with AS to:

- Speak privately to the student about group work
- Provide independent study options
- Collaborate with the student to determine best methods to demonstrate their knowledge of the coursework

Additional tips for faculty working with students with AS

- Speak privately to the student
- Discuss the functional limitations or challenges for the student in the classroom
- Pre-arrange regular time after class or during office hours for further questions from the student with AS.
- Collaborate with the DRC Coordinator

Disclosure of disability

Students who appear to have traits related to AS may not be diagnosed or may choose not to disclose their disability. The student is not obligated to provide the specific diagnosis or label to faculty members or staff.

If the student requests, the DRC will author a letter of introduction that the student provides to their faculty members. This letter specifies an approved list of appropriate disability-related supports and services, but does not provide the diagnosis, primarily in our effort to avoid connecting a student with negative assumptions or stigmas associated with a particular diagnosis.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Getting to know the student with AS

The transition to university is difficult for all adults seeking a post-secondary education. Support from staff can be a resource that a student with AS can use when they have questions or concerns.

Faculty members and university staff at UBC's Okanagan campus can positively influence the lives and academic careers of students with AS. Getting to know the student can assist in understanding their unique challenges in and out of the classroom.

Setting clear classroom expectations

Clear and explicit instructions from faculty members may assist in correcting behaviour and reducing stress for all involved. Faculty working with students with AS are encouraged to:

- Build a rapport with the student
- Determine a set number of questions that the student is able to ask during class
- Arrange a private signal to remind the student not to dominate a discussion

Approaching group work

Faculty members can build on their rapport with the student to uncover the student's unique strengths and needs. By getting to know the student, the faculty member will be able to understand if and how group work impacts the student and possibly provide alternative assignments for credit.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Why are academic accommodations provided?

Tests and exams can be extremely stressful for students with AS. Accommodations are designed to lower that stress and provide an opportunity for the student to demonstrate their learning.

The goal is to reduce the stress that can limit performance, not lower academic expectations.

Potential accommodations

- Extra time for tests and exams
- An alternate space to write tests or exams
- Access to tutoring supports such as those offered by the Academic Resource Centre (ubc.ca/okanagan/students/arc)
- Use of a private social coach for understanding social cues in class (separate from the DRC)

How do students with AS receive accommodations?

A student must provide the Disability Resource Centre (DRC)



with current medical documentation that provides confirmation of disability. If the student does not have documentation, they can be referred to clinical services to attain appropriate documentation.

Once documentation is received and reviewed by the DRC, an individual accommodation plan is developed based on the medical documentation specifying an approved list of appropriate disability-related supports and services.

Who delivers the accommodations?

The DRC usually delivers the academic accommodations. It is best to contact the DRC for clarification on procedures for booking tests and exams.

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

Secondary source for this publication

Farr, M. 2012. Confronting Asperger's in the classroom. *University Affairs*. Retrieved March 1, 2012 from universityaffairs.ca/confronting-aspergers-in-the-classroom.aspx

UBC services and supports

Faculty, staff, and students at UBC's Okanagan campus should contact the Disability Resource Centre for further details on academic accommodations, supports, and services.

Disability Resource Centre
University Centre, Room 227
3333 University Way
Kelowna, BC
Canada V1V 1V7

DRC Coordinator 250.807.9263
DRC Clerk 250.807.9203
Fax 250.807.9365
Email drc.questions@ubc.ca
ubc.ca/okanagan/drc

Local and national resources

Autism Society of BC: autismbc.ca
Autism Society Canada: autismsocietycanada.ca
Autism Canada Foundation: autismcanada.org

Further reading

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