



AccessAbility Services Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Fact Sheet

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) includes a range of neurodevelopmental disorders that impairs the individual's ability to communicate and interact with others. It also includes restricted repetitive behaviors, interests and activities. These difficulties cause significant impairments in social development and communication. (American Psychological Association, 1994, World Health Organization, 1994, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Strokes-NIH, 2012).

The term "spectrum" in autism spectrum disorder refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, levels of impairment and challenges. No two individuals with ASD are exactly alike. Although the term "Asperger's syndrome" is no longer in the DSM, some people still use the term, which is generally thought to be at the mild end of the autism spectrum disorder. These students have normal to superior intelligence, language and may have other conditions such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, or other conditions.

Challenges Associated with ASD:

General

- Miss humor
- Poor communication skills
- Rigid, systematized thinking
- Difficulty in thinking "outside of the box"
- Tangential or repetitive questions/conversations
- Sensory integration difficulties (lights, sounds, visual)
- Difficulty knowing what others want from them
- Concrete thinking (black or white)
- Need to complete a task the same way every time
- Motor Challenges (physically awkward)
- Unusual speech, intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate.
- Self-soothing strategies *e.g.* rocking, talking to oneself, waving objects, *etc*

Writing

- Producing text and narrative (instead of creating lists of facts or outlines)
- Analyzing or understanding plot and motivation when writing
- Understanding implicit as well as explicit directions
- Essay Questions (understanding what the question is asking, directing the flow of ideas, writing enough)
- Term papers (planning, time management, focusing on reducing topic)

Exam

- Following/understanding instructions
- Processing incoming information
- Maintaining energy & motivation
- Reading between the lines
- Interpreting and synthesizing abstract information
- Managing distractions
- Sensory issues in the room (lights, sounds, visual, proximity to others)

Presentations

- Social anxiety
- Rigid, stereotyped behavior and/or mannerisms
- Lack of social awareness, naïve, and/or indifferent
- Approach may be awkward & effortful
- Language deficits (organizing thoughts, modulation of voice)
- Speed of processing
- Narrow or literal interest in topic

Executive Functioning

- Translating a syllabus to an academic plan for the semester
- Breaking assignments down into small, manageable tasks
- Organizing and regulating the flow of ideas
- Multi-tasking determined by the timing of exams and papers
- Knowing how and when to begin semester-long projects and papers and maintaining organization

Social

- Public speaking – participation in class
- Speaking to the professor and asking for help
- Difficulty with eye contact
- Trouble working in groups, choosing lab partners or study groups
- Difficulty interpreting other's body language, intentions and/or facial expressions
- Misunderstanding of social cues and rules (inability to understand others feelings/views, personal space)

Instructional Strategies:

- Meet with the student privately about accommodations or behavioral concerns to ensure confidentiality
- Provide clear academic expectations, including deadlines, grading policies and expected classroom behavior
- Sharpen the clarity of directions and questions
- Make the course expectations as clear and predictable as possible
- Give progress reports midway through the semester
- Use the student's preoccupying interests to help focus/motivate the student
- Supplement oral instruction with written directions when revising assignments, and/or dates
- Allow the option to work independently, when appropriate
- Avoid idioms, double meanings, and sarcasm, unless you explain your usage
- Notice behaviors of heightened anxiety, and when possible reduce the triggers for stress
- Allow or encourage breaks when stress arises
- Develop behavior strategies with the student to redirect inappropriate behavior (e.g. certain phrase or hand signals so the student knows to stop)
- Use clear directives and establish rules if:
 - a student invades your space or imposes on your time
 - the student's classroom comments or conversational volume become inappropriate

Phrases to Help Redirect a Student:

- That is an interesting (question, point, idea) but we don't have time to get to that today.
- Since we have a lot to cover today, please keep your question/comment to 30 seconds.
- Would you be willing to write your question down and send it to me through email?
- We are not covering that topic at this time but we will address it later.
- Feel free to speak with me during office hours.

Additional Resources:

- [Autism Speaks](http://www.autismspeaks.org): www.autismspeaks.org
- [National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Strokes-NIH](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm):
http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm