

Students on the Autism Spectrum

Autism and related developmental disabilities such as Asperger Syndrome are lifelong neurodevelopmental disorders that are characterized by impairments in verbal and/or nonverbal communication. Asperger Syndrome is a condition that is considered to be on the high end of the autism spectrum. Increasing numbers of students with Aspergers Syndrome are entering college. Many have strong academic skills and may have just a few characteristics of the condition. Some of the symptoms of Asperger Syndrome might make it appear as if a student is being rude or is uninterested in your class. The student may in fact be highly engaged, but due to difficulties in social communication, his or her behavior might come across as unusual.

Not all students are comfortable sharing that they have been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum disorder. If the student has registered with the Student Disability Service and has given us permission to share details, we will contact you so that you and the student can work together to explore accommodations that will be helpful without altering fundamental course requirements. We are happy to consult at any time if you have any questions.

Common Characteristics of Asperger Syndrome

- Above average to superior intellect.
- May have a strong narrow interest in a particular subject area.
- Difficulty making and maintaining eye contact.
- Difficulties interpreting others' body language, intentions and facial expressions.
- Difficulties understanding the motives and perceptions of others. May not understand social rules.
- Literal and concrete thinking. May have difficulties with abstraction and understanding nuance, metaphors and sarcasm.
- Lacks voice intonation. May appear to be talking "at you" rather than "with you."
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule. Some students have difficulty regulating their emotions, especially when surprised by sudden changes in routine or unexpected news.
- Some students may be unaware if they are monopolizing a group discussion. Some may be tangential in answering questions.
- Difficulty with seeing the big picture. May perseverate on details.
- Motor clumsiness, unusual body movements and/or repetitive, self-soothing behavior.
- May be sensitive to light, noise and touch.
- May have problems with organization, e.g., planning, executing and completing tasks.

Adapted from *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*. By Lorraine E. Wolf, Ph.D., Jane Thierfeld Brown, Ed.D., and G. Ruth Kukiela Bork, M.Ed. Shawnee Mission: Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2009.

Common Types of Accommodations

- Breaks during class, especially for movement.
- Extended time testing; distraction reduced testing room. May need to type in-class assignments rather than handwrite.

- Use clear, concrete directives if a student inadvertently invades your space or begins to monopolize a group discussion with questions or comments. Don't be afraid of offending a student. The more clear and concrete you can be about class rules, the better.
- List all course requirements in writing, including assignment due dates and test dates. Avoid vague instructions. Provide advance written notice of any changes.
- If you use idioms, double meaning or sarcasm, review what you mean in concrete terms.
- Should a student become upset by an unexpected change, provide the student with a simple directive (e.g., "Please take a five minute break and go have a seat quietly in the hallway.") Sometimes the emotional reactions of students with Asperger Syndrome might appear to be overly reactive to a given situation. Some students have difficulty regulating and filtering their responses to unforeseen situations. Try not to become alarmed and overreact. A student may be ashamed if he or she has been unable to control his or her reactions. You can help to neutralize the situation by maintaining an attitude of acceptance and nonjudgment while giving the student a calm, clear directive to help him or her regroup (e.g., "Take a minute and go get a drink of water").

Student Disclosure

If a student identifies to you as having a disability and expresses a need for accommodations, please ask whether the student has also registered with the Student Disability Service so that we can draft formal accommodations letters. We recommend that you schedule an individual meeting with the student so that the two of you can identify accommodations that will enable the student to access the course material without altering fundamental course requirements. We have found that even when multiple students have the same disability, each student often benefits from different strategies for accessing the material.

Confidentiality Note

Protection of a student's privacy is very important. Disability status and accommodations are highly confidential. Please do not discuss a student's situation and accommodations without the student's permission.

Additional Resources

[College Autism Spectrum website](#)

[Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support Center](#)