

Residence Life and Students with Autism/Asperger's Syndrome



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College Autism Spectrum

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(In Absentia)

Who are the students?



- ✓ They score 35 on the ACT's
- ✓ They can't wait until the weekend is over so they can get back to class
- ✓ They make poor choices: can't get off the internet long enough to complete an assignment
- ✓ They would rather spend Saturday night working on physics problems than go to a frat party
- ✓ They eat only white food
- ✓ They think that showering is an inefficient use of time
- ✓ They might have a meltdown if their roommate moves a piece of furniture in the room.
- ✓ They find the cure for the common cold
- ✓ They may wear the same clothing for more than a week
- ✓ They can't remember to refill or take their meds
- ✓ They have 150 IQ's
- ✓ They may talk to themselves, no eye contact

What's it like to Think like me?



- Distractible
- Unable to “know” what other’s want from me
- Highly knowledgeable about certain topics
- Concrete – black and white
- Excellent memory from a long time ago
- Remember (pros and cons)
- Show little to no care in interest areas of my friends and family
- Problems generalizing across settings
- Rule-bound

What's it like to Learn like me?



- Disorganized
- Concept of time
- Singular learning style
- Sequencing
- Executive functioning problems
- Poor judgment and decision making
- Inflexible thinking

The Autism Spectrum



- **Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)**
 - High functioning Autism (HFA)**
 - Asperger Syndrome**
 - Pervasive Developmental Disorder**
- **Distinctions between categories not clear**
- **Continuum from mild to severe**



Increase in Incidence

- Reasons for increased incidence/diagnosis
 - DSM IV
 - Popular press (Wired, Time magazines)
 - Nationwide numbers
 - In college

Autism Spectrum Disorders



- Increasing numbers on campus
- Not like other college students with disabilities
- Accommodations typically address social and executive areas vs academic
- Support needed in the extra-academic campus experience
- Environment presents barriers



Intrinsic Variables:

what the student brings

- **Social/interpersonal**
 - Use of eye contact, gestures, body language
 - Reciprocal social interaction
- **Cognitive/Language**
 - Executive functioning
 - Communication cues
 - Linguistic and pragmatic skills
- **Behavior**
 - Follow social norms
 - Acceptable vs. unacceptable

Extrinsic variables:



what the environment presents

- Size and Culture
- Navigating campus
- Unfamiliar terms: “Registrar’s Office and Bursar’s Office
- Campus expectations: students managing their own business as adults
- Schedules different from what the students are accustomed to having
- Syllabus: importance and use of to manage one’s time

The interaction of the two:



- **Academic**
- **Social**
- **Residential**
- **Supervision**
- **Discipline issues (judicial affairs, conduct codes)**
- **Career decisions and issues**

Why Can't He Get it Together?



- Imagine if you processed pieces of the environment in the order they came in and could not organize these bits?
- Imagine if you screened out many of the bits because they confused or overwhelmed you?
- What if you could not rely on consistency in your sensory environment?
- Imagine if you could not fathom how other people do it any differently?
- What if everyone is expecting or demanding that you comply with things you don't understand?

A Word about Stress



- Stressful situations
- What precipitates crises
- How stress manifests itself
- Behaviors
- Interactions with others
- Calming methods
- Medications

Extra Academic



- Housing and residential life
- Social and interpersonal
- Navigating the environment
- Extra-curricular

Housing/ Res Life:



Issues for Students

- A. Communal Living
- B. Roommates
- C. Space
- D. Overstimulation
- E. Policies/Procedures
- F. Schedules





A. Communal Living

- Change!
- Imposed interaction for students who do not interact
- Social!
- Success dependent on executive functioning
- Bathroom Etiquette

B. Roommates



- Single or Double
- Assigned or chosen
- Social integration or isolation
- Hygiene
- Rituals
- Study Time

C. Space



- Important to be aware of how room is organized
- Involve family in side of room/bed placement, etc.
- Ask family to set the structure for the student's room

D. Overstimulation



- Sensory Integration Dysfunction
- Lights
- Music
- Beds and furniture
- General residence hall noise
- Fire alarms/lock downs

Navigating social interactions



- Reading facial expressions
- Understanding tone of voice
- Teasing versus sarcasm
- Understanding casual chit-chat
- Ending conversations
- Round peg in a square hole

E. Policies and Procedures



- Know and use the student conduct code
- Create rules sheet
- Create social/ res life reminders
- BE SPECIFIC and concrete
- Scripts: Fire Drills, lock downs

F. Schedules



- Keep to familiar schedule
- Late nights or early mornings may not work for some students
- Eating routines/ Dining Halls
- Food rituals
- Change to college scheduling may be a huge adjustment

Housing/Res Life:



Issues for Staff

- Training
- RAs, CAs
- Resources
- Security
- Emergency Plans
- Conduct Code/Discipline
- Parents and families

Educate Housing Staff



- **ASD Fact Sheet:**
 - Definition
 - Typical Symptoms
 - Possible Dorm Behaviors
 - Strategies
- **Train C.A.s, orientation leaders**
- **Support early move-in, private rooms**

Issues for Staff



- Training
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Orient Student to Res Life:

- Introductions to Res Life Staff (CA, RD)
- Understanding procedures
- Point people / buddy
- Explanations of social programming
- Explanations of social behavior
- Tour of residence hall
- Safe spaces
- Early move in
- Emergency plan

Clear Behavioral Requirements



- Student and family need to understand because different from high school
- Make sure student knows and understands rules and consequences for breaking them
- Behavioral standards must be explicit

Conduct Code



- Conduct codes are strictly applied
 - Academic
 - Residential
 - Community
- Standards are not subject to accommodation
- Disability does not exempt student with AS from sanctions for conduct code violations

When working with students with AS, Remember:



- If you have met one person with AS, you have met one person with AS.
- Be clear and direct in communication: say what you mean; mean what you say.
- Provide big picture and details: why are we doing what we are doing.
- Don't assume your thinking and the student's are the same.

When working with students with AS, Remember:



- Honor who the student is; prioritize challenges based on impact on life/job
- Use special interests or fascinations whenever possible; find their “hook”
- Visuals remain constant, words do not
- What’s obvious to you is not to the student, explain.

Conclusions



- AS poses unique challenges
- Areas of need cross multiple domains of impairment & student life
- Accommodations & interventions reflect nature of impairment and area of difficulty
- Needs change over time given:
 - Skills training
 - Development
 - Environment

Students on the Autism Spectrum: A Guide for College Personnel

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Questions and Comments

Thank you for attending.

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