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## **Supporting the Student in the Learning Environment**

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## Sensory differences

- Autistic students often process sensory information differently – they may be hypo sensitive or hyper sensitive. If hypo sensitive they may display sensory seeking behaviours, or they may not feel pain. If an autistic person is hyper-sensitive, they can be overwhelmed by too much sensory input. This can cause increased anxiety and impaired ability to focus. Sensory input can include noise, visuals, smells, taste, touch, texture and people.

## Visual

- For autistic students who are hypersensitive to light, try to keep the surroundings plain, with pastel coloured display boards and keeping distracting displays to a minimum. This may be difficult when sharing rooms with a lot of teachers but it would be good practice if your campus could adopt this as a policy
- Avoid fluorescent lighting. Aim for dimmed or natural lighting with no flickering lights.
- Dim lights where possible, especially when displaying information on screen to ensure there is limited glare on the board.

## Sound

- Be aware that students may be over sensitive to noise; allow students to wear headphones/noise reducers as needed.
- Reduce and eliminate background noise.
- Provide quiet spaces to work, any noises can appear amplified. Autistic students can sometimes concentrate more effectively when working alone.

## Stimming

- Do not try and prevent students from engaging in 'stimming' behaviours such as hand flapping and pacing as they rely on these behaviours to self-regulate and avoid going into 'shut down' or 'meltdown' when they are feeling overwhelmed.

## Communication

Effective communication is essential in supporting autistic students. Many of the difficulties and problems experienced by autistic students are underpinned by poor communication. Increased anxiety may reduce the ability to communicate verbally.

- Ensure you have the student's attention, say their name before beginning.
- Use a clear, calm voice.
- Ensure that instructional language is explicit and unambiguous. Avoid idioms, metaphors, similes, long questions and explanations.
- Break down instructions and support with visual information or lists.
- Break down tasks to make them easier to understand, even provide a writing framework if necessary.
- Ask specific questions.
- Do not overload the person with lots of verbal information.
- Use facts to explain things, avoid analogies and never use sarcasm.
- Don't rely on body language, gestures and tone of voice.
- A student's vocabulary is sometimes more advanced than their understanding of words; check that the student understands what you have asked of them.
- Autistic students often have auditory processing difficulties so you may need to give them time to process your question, rather than expecting an answer immediately.

## Space

- It is useful to have a conversation with the autistic student regarding where they would like to be seated e.g. where they can easily see the tutor and the board without having to frequently turn around.
- Ensure that students have enough space around them. Physical proximity can be overwhelming and uncomfortable for some.
- When talking to an autistic student try not to stand too close or lean over their shoulder.
- Try to sit left and right handed students so that their writing arms are not adjacent and bumping as they write.
- Try to maintain a tidy and clutter free learning area. Resources should be kept in a set place and clearly labelled.
- Monitor displays. 'Busy' visuals of many colours can be overwhelming and cause distraction to autistic students.
- Allow movement breaks and opportunities to get up and stretch, sitting in one position can become uncomfortable.
- Think about the physical structure of a learning environment to create a non-distracting area for learning.

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- Be aware of students' anxiety levels. Have an agreed safe and quiet place for pupils to go to when they feel anxiety building or are overloaded by sensory stimuli. Pre-arrange that students can leave the classroom area if they are feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- Allow students to leave the lesson five minutes earlier so that they can move to their next location before all other students start moving around the centre. They may find this less distressing.

### **Supporting the student with their work**

- If meeting a student to discuss work, give a brief beforehand so that they can prepare for the meeting. Explain what your role is and the purpose of the meeting beforehand.
- Encourage the student to sit in a place avoiding visual and sensory distractions, such as noise, bright lights and busy rooms.
- Provide regular mentoring and ask very specific questions rather than rely on the student to tell you what they are struggling with.
- Autistic students may rarely offer more information than they have been asked and there could be something essential that you are missing.
- Email students rather than face to face if it works better.
- Use a variety of teaching styles and use one that suits.
- Make information visual, use pictures to help explain things.
- It will be helpful to provide printed notes/handouts for autistic students as note taking can be challenging due to auditory processing difficulties and sometimes difficulties with fine motor skills involved in handwriting. They may struggle to keep up with dictation in class.
- Support the student in advance of controlled assessments - providing details of the room, its layout.
- Encourage students to develop visual aids to help understand their timetable. Ensure that students know which days to bring specialist equipment.
- Reinforce teaching with a podcast, a multi-sensory game.
- Use visual timetables, students will know what they are doing so that there are no unexpected surprises.
- Use task boards and other visual instructions - this can reduce the anxiety around forgetting what needs to be done.
- Explain the rules and expectations. Tell students exactly why certain rules are in place and the benefits of following them.
- Ensure that written information on the board is clearly displayed.
- Encourage students to access Learning Support for help with developing visual strategies. Autistic students are usually visual learners and can use visual information to their advantage when being able to schedule information and learn effectively.

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- Provide structure for your students; try to avoid sudden changes to routine. If possible, give advance warning to any changes of structure or routine.
- Help students deal with any unstructured time (lunch/study hours).
- Be mindful that autistic students are often the target of bullying, as they are often perceived as being 'different'. This can have devastating effects on their confidence and self-esteem and can lead to mental health problems. Be observant to how others are treating the autistic student.
- A buddy system can sometimes be successful. Often autistic students will have special interests, such as gaming or chess. Encourage these students to join groups with like-minded individuals where they can form friendship bonds over a common interest.
- Be flexible about rules: chewing gum may prevent a student from muttering in class.
- Autistic people may also give the appearance of being compliant and willing to do any task they are asked and not may not give a verbal indication they have not understood your request.
- They may sometimes mask that they have problems by deflection or not being able to stick to tasks. This may manifest itself by the student not being able to complete tasks, varying the task given and/or just concentrating on the elements they find interesting or drawn to.

### **When producing worksheets:**

- Use a clear font.
- Use font size 12 or 14.
- Use line spacing of at least 1.5.
- Have clear spaces between paragraphs.
- Use bullet points or numbered lists for tasks.
- Avoid narrow columns.
- Remove any unhelpful pictures and distractions, any visuals should be relevant and aid understanding.

### **Planning time and workload**

- Autistic students may find it hard to ask for help or to say that they have finished a task.
- Poor executive functioning is a key feature of autism, so autistic students may find it hard to plan and problem solve. As a result they may struggle with organisation, time management and meeting deadlines.
- General questions are especially difficult for autistic students to cope with – they may become engrossed in one aspect of an assignment or task and fail to answer the question. How can you help?

## Organising their work

- Provide a clear timetable. This may be a visual/pictorial one if more suited to the student's needs.
- Give the student advanced warning of any timetable or venue changes.
- Develop a clear work schedule showing what work needs completing and by when. The student may find it useful to use planner, diaries, virtual timetable, phones, iPads to plan ahead and put deadlines and events in diaries in advance. It is helpful for staff to support students to do this on a weekly basis.
- Ensure assignment hand in dates are clear and written in their diary, set reminders on their phone at intervals.
- Help students to prioritise their workload – planning is really difficult for them. Make to do lists. Use apps such as evernote / google keep to make lists and reminders.
- Students may also find it helpful to have a colour file for each subject at home but take a cardboard file to college in the same colour to put loose paper in. They can then sort the papers out when they get home and things don't get lost
- It is also useful for the student to print on the same colour paper (e.g homework always on green paper).
- Students should also be taught how to organise their time to plan and meet deadlines – this should form part of their individual learning plan. It may be useful to use visual timers for this.
- Provide a tick sheet to support work that needs to be completed either in a workshop or between reviews in the work place.
- Help provide structure for work to be done independently in-between reviews/workshops/assessments.
- Help students to develop a clear structure at home as well.
- Students can get upset if they are told that they have made a mistake  
- Teach them how to self-correct.

## Understanding the task

- Break long tasks/questions into manageable sections – using flow charts may be particularly useful.
- Teach how to deconstruct a written question.
- Use writing frames to support the completion of tasks.
- Give written instructions rather than a verbal list.
- Give a clear idea of how much time a student is expected to spend on a task/study
- Put clear time limits when asking for written work, support students to stay on topic e.g rather than ask 'write everything you know about the beginning of the 1st world war' ask the student to 'give 10 reasons why the war started' etc.
- Give a clear assignment plan with key questions.
- When asking for a goal or a preference for something, provide options as autistic students have difficulties making a free choice.
- Link the questions/work to student special interest if possible.
- Give extra time for a physical task if fine or gross motor skills are an issue.
- Allow the use of pictures /diagrams in assignments to show understanding if possible.
- Students may find it hard to move from topic to topic so allow plenty of time to finish one and introduce a new topic.
- Ensure one task is finished before introducing a new one.
- Explain how they will know when they have completed the task.
- Use visual cues to show change of task.
- Autistic people may also give the appearance of being compliant and willing to do any task they are asked and not may not give a verbal indication they have not understood your request.
- They may sometimes mask they have problems by deflection or not being able to stick to tasks. This may manifest itself by the student not being able to complete tasks, varying the task given and/or just concentrating on the elements they find interesting or drawn to.

## **Appendix 2 - Case Studies**

### **Case Study 1**

A student was becoming increasingly anxious about their course examinations. Whilst they were happy with the revision timetable and preparing academically for their examinations, they were worried about the logistics of the examination day. They knew the start time for the exam but was worried that their bus would be late and they were uncertain of the process, where would the exam be held, where would they sit etc.

### **Feedback**

Learning support staff were able to work with the student to develop a plan for the exam day. They were reassured that the exams would not start until all of the buses had arrived. This might mean that the exam could start late but all of the allocated time would be allowed. The student visited the exam hall and was shown where they would put their belongings and where they would be sitting. The student was also prepared for the process of the exam, end time and duration of the exam and what they should do when the exam had been completed.

### **Lesson Learned**

Staff need to be aware that unfamiliar situations make the student anxious; therefore, it is important to make situation feel familiar by preparing the student for the event, showing them where they need to go. Communication, planning and strategies can help reduce the threat of unpredictability and anxiety.



## **Case Study 2**

A student was becoming very stressed about completing her course; in particular, the practical element of a work placement. The College had provided some additional hours on a weekly basis but the Level 3 student had calculated that she would not gain enough hours with the current provision.

She felt unable to ask her tutor again for more hours feeling that the lecturer 'must' have calculated that it would not have been enough and was worried as to why they did not 'see the problem'. She was beginning to worry that there was a reason why they had not spoken to her about the hours.

I was able to speak to her tutor and the assistant in charge of the animal care centre to organise more hours. They then liaised and provided a visual timetable which allowed the hours to be signed off weekly and submitted by the student.

The student needed reassurance that the issue wasn't personal and her need to fulfil the criteria of the course to the 'letter' was absolutely fine.

## **Feedback**

The student has now completed the course and did not feel that she needed further support since a strategy was put in place.

## **Lesson Learned**

Staff to be aware of:

- A student's need to fulfil a piece of work or a project to the exact criteria set
- The need to fulfil criteria, a piece of work, a project before starting the next task- they may refuse/be unable to start the next task

### **Case Study 3**

Tom was the centre of much attention since he was the only male in his class. Initially, Tom had enjoyed the attention and was pleased to have made so many friends. Unfortunately, within a few weeks he seemed to be caught up with friendship fallouts and struggled to focus in class. Tom felt much anxiety about not understanding the 'ins and outs' of the new relationships.

By half-term, Tom was making excuses to leave the classroom and on occasions did not return. The LSA attached to the class would find him in the library or outside.

Tom's pastoral tutor had a good relationship with him and discussed a number of solutions- three of which were written onto cards. The possible pros and cons were also written down. The strategy Tom chose was to use was a 'one-liner' that he could use to avoid being distracted in class- 'Sorry, I've got to finish this, I've got work tonight'.

Tom also decided who he wanted to spend most of his time with and was able to see that he did not have to be friends with everyone.

It was also agreed that if he needed time-out then he would ask his lecturers if he could go to see the ALN specialist lecturer and work in their base. That lecturer would email the tutor to say he had arrived.

### **Feedback**

Since a strategy was put in place, Tom has been able to avoid being drawn into arguments. And has only occasionally sought to work in the quiet ALN area

### **Lesson Learned**

Staff to be aware of:

- That students may need the reassurance that they have access to a safe base to prevent/ manage anxious feelings.
- The student is then able to be more independent in managing the impact of social communication difficulties.

## Case Study 4

A level 1 student was failing to complete work in class or at home. He was easily distracted in class and the tutor felt that he was not focussed on 'achieving' on the course.

In discussion with the student, he said he was falling behind because instructions were only 'written' on the assignment sheet and it was not always easy to find on google classroom. In addition, the student was unable to listen to the verbal instructions, make notes, process information from the power point and relate this all to an assignment sheet that did not have enough structure for him to organise his work.

When he asked for help the tutor only reiterated what he had to do verbally and did not check for understanding.

The specialist ALN lecturer delivered a training session for the team, highlighting the challenges faced by ASD learners and providing a number of simple strategies that could be used in the classroom.

## Feedback

Two months later the student felt that the lecturers were excellent at giving him processing time, structuring what was expected from the assignment visually and sometimes modelled the finished task (so that he could see what was expected of him).

Going forward he was also going to book an appointment with the study skills team to learn how to organise his google account but would have liked more checking that he actually understood the task.

## Lesson Learned

Staff need to provide:

- Visual instructions that are chunked into simple well organised tasks.
- Some students may need a scaffolded sheet when they first start the course until they become used to a new style of working.
- This might include more side headings, key words, or sentence starters.
- Students with ASD often benefit from seeing a finished example.
- Check for understanding by asking the student to describe what they have to do and how they were going to achieve the task (noting also how long the assignment/task has to be).