

## ASC (Autistic Spectrum Conditions): Implications for Study in Higher Education

**“Autism isn’t an exotic disorder... Autism is an exaggeration of what lies in us all”**

Eustacia Cutler

### Going Beyond the Label

Our understanding of ASC is often focused on the difficulties associated with social communication and social interaction. However, this can lead us to focus on the *presentation of difficulties* associated with ASC, rather than considering the lived experience which underpins the day to day interactions of many students with ASC.

We all rely on our senses to navigate and make sense of the world. Recent definitions of ASC have been widened in recognition of the fact that many people with ASC experience hyper or hypo (under) sensitivity linked to the five senses of touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing\*. Therefore, many individuals with ASC often have to work harder to channel out or process environmental factors which may remain un-noticeable to others; noise, smells and even lighting can reduce functioning and make it harder to focus on communication, learning and the actions of day to day life at university.



Some students identify that they can also have a heightened awareness of patterns which leads to greater skills in analysis and seeing the fine detail in their subject. Whilst there is growing recognition that this ability can be viewed as a gift, if this hyper sensitivity or hyper focus remains unmanaged it can lead to increased feelings of exhaustion, anxiety and depression.

### Practical Strategies for Supporting Students with ASC

<p><b>Environmental awareness</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whilst it is not always possible to alter the environment, it is useful to <b>be aware of how the environment may impact on the student</b> and check potential difficulties with the student so they can be adjusted if possible (e.g. lighting, noise and seating). Sensitivity can also fluctuate depending on other factors such as time of day or levels of stress.</li> </ul> <p>The short animation by Miguel Jiron provides a useful illustration of the environmental impact of ASC: <a href="http://www.interactingwithautism.com/section/understanding/sensory/1">www.interactingwithautism.com/section/understanding/sensory/1</a></p> <p>Some <b>students may already have an existing strategy</b>, such as holding an object for sensation to help them to concentrate.</p>
<p><b>Managing change</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is not the case that students with ASC can't cope with or manage change, rather, if change is unexpected then it can undermine or remove the very 'survival' strategies students may have worked hard to put in place.</li> </ul> <p>As the National Autistic Society state: "It's like going abroad but not knowing where you are going, how to get there, what you will be doing when you arrive and being unable to speak the new language".</p> <p>Therefore it may be helpful to <b>provide information regarding any changes</b> (e.g. cancelled lectures, room changes, changes to assignment deadlines) early and in writing to allow the student time to plan for and manage these changes.</p> <p>The following short video illustrates the importance of managing change for students with ASC: <a href="http://www.interactingwithautism.com/video/page_0003">www.interactingwithautism.com/video/page_0003</a></p>
<p><b>Being Mindful of Analysis Paralysis</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A heightened ability to analyse can hinder day to day living, as tasks become nuanced and fraught with endless possibilities. Students may struggle to decide which actions to carry out or what order to complete tasks in. Therefore it can be really helpful to encourage the student to <b>map out implied steps in a process and break down tasks</b>.</li> </ul> <p>Lots of asides and examples, (unless you make it clear this is an 'aside' and identify how it fits with the point you are making!) can also detract from the main points you are trying to convey. <b>Being precise and direct</b> can be really helpful.</p>
<p><b>Language as a Limited Tool</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rather than attempting to completely alter your speech, simply being <b>aware of the limitations of language</b> as a communication tool can be helpful; acknowledgment of the nuanced, complex and contradictory nature of language can help the student to feel more understood. In addition, it is also sometimes useful to check with the student that you have been understood.</li> </ul> <p><b>Pausing for thought</b> after asking a question can allow greater time for a student to process information and develop a response.</p>
<p><b>Benefits of Visual Supports</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It often helps to <b>back up verbal instructions with written ones</b>. Visual supports such as flow charts, mind maps, bullet points or tables may be useful, particularly in meetings when passing on information or instructions.</li> </ul> <p>The following short clip illustrates the benefits of using visual supports: <a href="http://www.interactingwithautism.com/video/marcus_0002">www.interactingwithautism.com/video/marcus_0002</a></p> <p>It may also be useful to discuss strategies that may make meetings with students more beneficial e.g. consider providing a <b>checklist of points</b> to be discussed in advance and a <b>summary of discussion points</b> afterwards.</p>
<p><b>Expectations of Perfection versus Mistake Making:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many students with ASC are <b>naturally high achievers</b>, who strive for perfection. Some students may <b>find it difficult</b> to understand that it is natural (and useful!) <b>to make mistakes</b>, so they can have exaggerated reactions in terms of stress if they happen to make one.</li> </ul>