

# **Asperger Syndrome In the Classroom: Symptoms and Instructional Tips for Faculty**

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# Activity

*Imagine if* you processed the pieces of the environment around you in the order in which they came and you could not organize the bits. Imagine if you then screened out some of the details because they confused or overwhelmed you. Imagine that you could not rely on consistency in your sensory environment and that light and sounds could be unpredictably painful. Imagine if you did not recognize people's faces at times or became easily lost in an otherwise familiar place. What if you could not conceive how or even the fact that other people process their environment any differently? Now imagine that you are expected to comply with all of these things you don't understand, while also having to cope with confusion and fear. With all of these limitations, you are expected to adjust to college, meet and make new friends, and succeed academically.

# **Asperger Syndrome (AS) Definition**

A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social relations, communications and repetitive or stereotyped behavior which affects the ability to comprehend and use the thoughts and feelings (Attwood, 2007).

# Context

- Asperger Syndrome (AS) is the high end of the autism spectrum disorder, sometimes referred to (and highly debated) as high-functioning autism.
- “If you’ve met one student with Asperger’s you’ve met one student with Asperger’s (Wolf, 2009)”.
- 1 in 150 individuals has AS (Center for Disease Control); there’s been an increase in the last 5 years of 680%-- most are currently in K-5. Many suspect that the increase in numbers reflects, in part, the inclusion of more individuals at the boundaries of autisms with higher functioning individuals.
- The core issue for an AS student is an inability to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of other people and to use this understanding to regulate his or her own behaviors.
- The good news about AS is it is a condition that can and does change over time.

# Common AS Symptoms

## Social Skills

- Poor eye contact such as gazing or intense eye contact
- Difficulty starting and ending conversations
- Challenges regulating interpersonal distance
- Impairment of two-way interaction (May seem to talk at you rather than with you)
- Difficulty recognizing, interpreting, and responding to verbal and non-verbal social cues—especially in unstructured environments (example: inappropriate sarcasm, jokes, or figures of speech)
- Student will not be able to take social cues or have contextual awareness that a “neurotypical” student would have

# Common AS Symptoms

## Behavioral

- May appear down, depressed, or even admit to being lonely
- Appears lumbering, clumsy, or physically rigid
- Could have preoccupation with specific topics, objects, ideas—at the exclusion of other activities
- Interests are often mechanical in nature, such as maps, weather, trains, and schedules
- Some may have a high sensory need to flap hands, tap fingers, make faces, or constantly fiddle with an object. Such mannerisms increase in times of stress
- Any change in expectations, environment, etc. is very hard to handle for a student with AS—they understand their world by structure!
- Appears bright intellectually but lost socially
- Most of us process information linearly. However, students with Asperger's have a hard time seeing the big picture.

# Common AS Symptoms

## Language

- Vocal characteristics may be “off” or “abnormal”
- Have monotonic speech or not stop talking to check your reaction
- May dominate conversations or, conversely, may be so socially inhibited they can't speak up
- Student will be challenged in adding up all of the sensory and environmental pieces that may signal something bigger
- May struggle to comprehend that there is more than one way to interpret language, etc.

# In the Classroom

## Classroom Behavior

- Attempt to monopolize conversation
- Become tangential in answering questions
- Exhibit distracting behavior in long classes
- Engage in self-stimulating behavior (rocking, tapping, playing with stress balls, etc.)
- Be argumentative
- Literal and concrete thinking patterns
- Impulsive behavior

## Strategies

- Set boundaries with a student who is dominating conversation.
- Have breaks during class, particularly for movement
- Redirect responses to larger class for peers to weigh in on discussion
- Don't use absolute words such as *always* or *never* unless that is exactly what you mean
- Supplement oral with written instructions when revising assignments, dates, etc., give advance notice and ensure your student with AS understands the new expectation

# Instructional Tips for Faculty

- If any significant or insignificant changes occur, take extra precautions and time to explain well in advance the change, the impact, and any new expectation.
- Ask the student to repeat directions in their own words to ensure comprehension
- Don't require student to "read between the lines" to glean your intentions. Don't expect the student to automatically generalize instructions.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning, and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage
- Develop positive rapport with the student to be a "safe" person to vent to or with which to have a melt down
- Role-model kindness and be gentle in the classroom when students' conduct is inappropriate or disruptive: you don't want to escalate or draw attention
- In private, honestly discuss how the student's decision and behavior impacted your instruction, you personally, and the classroom educational environment. Give direct and immediate feedback as soon as possible
- Use clear and detailed directives when referring to revisions that need to be made on papers
- Maintain interpersonal boundaries with student
- Use the student's preoccupying interest to help focus and motivate the student. Suggest ways to integrate specific knowledge or passion area into assignments and papers for your course.
- Refer student struggling to Academic Support Center for tutoring, if necessary

# Accommodations

- Follow the accommodation outlined and partner with the student to make plan work for you and the student.
- Students with AS must be evaluated by the same standard as other students in the class and that accommodations (even unusual ones) do not mean that the course standards should be changed. It simply means that you're "leveling the playing field" for the student.
- Contact me if you want to talk through a situation, strategy, or need any assistance.

The consequence of not creating an educated community prepared to accept students with AS is a society unprepared to support this large population with public assistance. The 1 in 150 number of incidence cited by the CDC will begin to be realized when overeducated and underemployed adults with AS are brought into welfare and social service systems. Individuals without jobs will pose a burden on their families, on insurance companies, and on federal and state social service agencies. This is not only unnecessary but also critically unfair to a large group of (very capable) people in our society. To prevent this scenario, changes in educating the community must begin now (Wolf, 2009).

# References

Thierfeld Brown, Jane. (March 10, 2009). [NASPA Conference Workshop].

Wolf, Lorraine E., Thierfeld Brown, Jane, and Kukiela Bork, G. (2009). Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel. Shawnee Mission, Kan.: Autism Asperger Pub. Co.