

What is autism and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD's)?

Autism is a neurobiological disorder that is characterised by significant deficits in behaviour, communication and social functioning. Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) encompasses a broad definition of autism that includes: Asperger's Syndrome, Rett's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Autism and ASD are labels describing individuals with a variable range of behavioural, communication and social functioning problems, and includes individuals with severe intellectual challenges as well as individuals who are intellectually gifted.

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

Asperger's Syndrome is a neurobiological disorder where intelligence and language development are normal to above average, but where there can be a varying degree of autistic-like behaviours and deficits in academic performance, social interaction and communication skills. Asperger's Syndrome is often described as either "High Functioning Autism" or as a "Nonverbal Learning Disability".

Autism Characteristics

Individuals who fall within the autistic spectrum may exhibit a variety of the following characteristics and the disorder can range from mild to severe:

Insistence on sameness

- rigid, preset routines

Impaired social interaction

- often unable to understand rules of social interaction
- ritualistic/repeating behaviours
- appear naïve
- take things literally
- egocentric
- do not like physical contact
- talk "at" people instead of "to" them
- don't understand jokes/irony/metaphors
- monotone or unnatural tone of voice
- inappropriate gaze and body language
- insensitive and untactful
- judge "social distance" poorly
- cannot initiate and sustain conversation
- have well-developed speech but poor communication skills

Restricted range of interests

- intense fixations
- eccentric or obsessive preoccupation with a subject or object
- asking irrelevant or repetitive questions
- refusal to learn outside field of interest

Poor concentration

- often off-task
- disorganized
- difficulty in staying focused and working out what is important in a task
- often missing deadlines

Poor motor co-ordination

- clumsiness
- awkward gait
- slow writing and notetaking

Academic difficulties

- normal to higher intellect
- memory and language skills
- BUT tends to lack reasoning and comprehension skills
- unable to understand abstract concepts
- repeating information back without showing understanding
- poor problem solving

Emotional variability and deficits

- uncontrolled and inappropriate anger outbursts when stressed
- highly critical of self and others
- lack of respect for rules
- often violate others' rights and personal space
- inflexible
- demanding

Sensitivity to environmental stimuli

- sensitive to light, taste, smell, touch and sound

Academic difficulties

- Communication and interaction with peers and teaching staff
- Deadlines and workload
- Organisation
- Motivation
- Self-direction
- Understanding abstract concepts
- Sensory overloads (light, noises, textures and smells)

Strategies to assist the student

Lectures

- Behavioural support person in-class with the student (they will attempt to teach appropriate behaviour, responses to others, mediate between student and peers, etc)
- Vary teaching methods (use mix of overheads, videos, handouts, study sheets, group participation, etc)
- Provide copies of lecture notes at the beginning of class
- Repeat and rephrase important points
- Stay on topic. Redirect the student if they go off on tangents.
- When new information is introduced, or if directions are given, ensure that stages or sequences are made clear and are explained verbally as well as in written format
- Check frequently for understanding
- Have regular breaks during long lectures - this will help prevent 'information overload'
- Outline key points to be covered at the start of the lecture
- If behaviour in the class is inappropriate (i.e. interrupting, outburst etc) speak calmly to the student and be "matter-of-fact" when re-directing, e.g. "Can you email that question to me after class please, for now we are discussing..."
- Allows breaks and time-out for overload times

Tutorials, Laboratories and Field Trips

- Be flexible in relation to "participation" in tutorials. High anxiety levels may mean that they avoid participating in discussions during tutorials.
- If the student is taking over the session or displaying a high level of inappropriate behaviours, speak calmly to the student and be "matter-of-fact" when re-directing, e.g. "Thank you for your answer (student name), we would like to have some feedback from the rest of the group now".

Assignments and Assessments

- Be flexible with deadlines and extensions
- Provide clear feed back to the student both verbally and in writing
- Consider negotiating an individual learning programme for students with Asperger's Syndrome. This can include flexible deadlines for assignments to take into account their high levels of anxiety and difficulty in meeting deadlines, and alternative assessment arrangements

Support services available

- In-class notetakers or behavioural support workers (Disability Liaison)
- Peer support (Learning Centre)
- Alternative assessment arrangements