

## **What is meant by 'Asperger Syndrome'?**

People with AS often describe anxieties about things like: organisation and planning, new situations, the social environment, making sense of other people's expectations, sensory sensitivities. AS is a neurological difference which is part of the autism spectrum. A key aspect of this spectrum is an absence of 'theory of mind': awareness of the mental world of beliefs and desires, and in particular that other people can have these. Students with AS range from normal to high IQ. The National Autistic Society estimates that the prevalence of Asperger's Syndrome is 36 people in 10,000.

The three common problem areas for AS people are:

### **Social interaction**

They often seem aloof or odd to other people, and find it hard to understand another person's feelings and thoughts. Their apparent eccentricity may result in bullying and ostracism. They often need to learn appropriate social behaviour as a set of rules, without appreciating emotionally why this is necessary.

### **Communication**

AS often causes a student to be very literal with language. They may seem repetitive and pedantic, or avoid speaking to others through fear of 'getting it wrong'. On the other hand, they will often speak at great length about their interests without realising that this can be boring. They may also be unaware of body language and 'hints' and subtleties of conversation.

### **Flexibility**

The need for routine and insistence on sameness can be very strong. While easily distracted, an AS student may also confuse relevant and irrelevant

information and focus on inappropriate details. Poor motor skills and co-ordination may also be present, and sensitivity to noise, lights and being touched. All these indicators lead to a lack of adaptability and flexibility, especially in new situations.

### **Strengths**

On the other hand, AS often allows a student to show:

- ☐ Intense concentration on studying
- ☐ Independence
- ☐ An affinity with computers and other technology
- ☐ Good formal essay writing
- ☐ Attention to detail and precision
- ☐ Original ideas
- ☐ Reliable meeting of deadlines.

These are features of AS which can help someone be a hard-working student. The stereotype of the 'absent-minded professor' is probably based on AS people. With a strong support system and a powerful interest in a field of study, people with AS often find they have just what it takes to make their University lives very successful.

### **How can staff help?**

- Use student's name to get attention
- Position your body for maximum attention (but do not expect eye contact)
- Use literal language
- Give clear, concise instructions; make expectations explicit
- Set rules – both academic and social
- Set up buddy systems
- Before a one-to-one meeting, prepare a checklist of points you wish to cover and encourage the student to do the same

- Be aware that cancellation or rescheduling of meetings is very difficult for an AS student to cope with
- Try to avoid interruption of meetings by phones etc. While irritating for all of us, this is again particularly unbearable for an AS person
- Beware of jokes. An AS student will not lack a sense of humour, but can easily misinterpret a joke because of taking words literally.

## **Areas for support**

### **Transition and induction**

- Allow a longer period of induction
- Orientation – provide maps and routes between venues
- Timetable – make information extremely clear e.g. tutors and rooms
- A course plan set out like a family tree can be very helpful

### **Lectures and tutorials**

- Reduce potential distractions: e.g. light, sounds
- Help student to have the same seat every time
- Check on potential problems with colour of ink or paper
- Highlight essential and relevant information e.g. in lecture notes, reading lists
- Provide or facilitate written summaries/bulleted lists of main points e.g. in meetings, discussions
- Use a lot of email and other written communication

### **Organisational support**

The student may need a mentor or assistant to help with:

- Schedule or timetable
- 'To do' lists

- Files
- Study time planning
- Dealing with leisure time (often much more of a problem than study time)

## **Flexibility**

- Assignments: these may demonstrate excellent research but lack ability to communicate. Give feedback in very plain language, devoid of imagery or proverbs. Explain conventions re presentation of work.
- Room: try to keep room changes to a minimum
- Student may need more breaks than peers: long streams of verbal information create concentration problems
- Calming techniques: student may need a familiar object with them for reassurance. Hyper-sensitive to noise, s/he may need to retreat to a quiet place in order to recover.

## **Exam arrangements**

'Flexibility in lectures, exams arrangements, orientation training, placements and training of key members of staff can be an essential prerequisite for students successfully completing their academic careers. This does not have to compromise academic requirements.'

Blamires & Gee:

<http://education.cant.ac.uk/xplanatory/assets/documents/aspihereportv041.doc>

- Make sure the student has seen past papers
- Give a timed essay under exam conditions, or even a full mock exam
- Allow a separate exam room which is familiar to the student and as quiet as possible

- Allow extra time, so that the student can take great care in reading and understanding the questions.

### **Technical support**

- ICT support may be similar to that which helps dyslexic students: voice recognition software, sound recording machine, speech engine, concept-mapping package
- Allow sound recording of lectures and meetings.

### **Peer support and awareness raising**

- Raise awareness of autism spectrum diversity: model sensitivity to individual rights and needs
- Disclosure can be an issue; AS students are usually unable to judge when to explain about themselves to others. Public identification of the student should be avoided
- Collaborative work is a challenge to the student, since social interaction has to be laboriously mastered.

### **Mentors**

- An AS student may need an academic mentor to mediate between him and other staff; also to explain academic etiquette
- Similarly, a peer mentor can provide social support

### **Social skills development**

- Some students will need additional support to develop social skills in context: e.g. money, shopping, hairstyles, clothes, hygiene.
- Sources of help need to be identified in order to ensure that students receive effective social support.

- Students with AS need to be shown how to communicate ideas to someone who does not share their mind-set.