

# **Autism Awareness, Guide for Staff**

Basic Autism Awareness guide for members of staff of  
the University of Sussex

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Both when talking about autism and other disabilities (eg. ADHD), this document will use identity-first language over person-first language (i.e autistic student instead of student with autism) as this is the language generally preferred by those communities

Although personal preferences on this might differ, and must be respected at all times, the communities are now focusing on recognising how neurotypes are part of us and nothing to be ashamed of and therefore be separated in order to be considered "a person first"

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# What is Autism?

Autism is a condition that entails struggles such as social communication, rigid thinking and sensory processing which impact day to day life.

According to Bristol University, in 2020, 2.4% of UK students are diagnosed with autism but only 40% of those graduate.

According to the Student Support Unit, 1.47% of students who receive support in University of Sussex are registered as autistic.

Those statistics do not include those who have not been able to obtain a formal diagnosis yet or have chosen not to disclose it.



# Autistic struggles and possible accommodations on campus



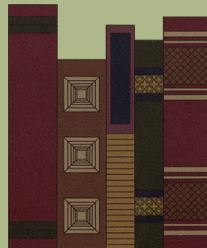
Social communication struggles  
and social awkwardness



Sensory Issues



Need for routine and predictability



Other Academic struggles



# Social communication struggles and social awkwardness

Working in groups (eg. in labs and presentations)

Non-verbal communication by peers and tutors such as relying on facial expressions rather than explicit communication

Social Anxiety in activities such as group discussions and ice-breakers

According to *Autistica*, 8 in 10 autistic adults experience a mental health problem (Harper et al, 2019) leading to social isolation

When assigning group tasks consider helping the group making the division of the work clear and precise

Avoid unclear communication (eg. non verbal, sarcasm or ambiguity) both in lectures and in tasks such as tests

Avoid ice-breakers and small group activities if an alternative such as brainstorming is possible. If it can't be avoided prepare the student with as much advance as possible



# Sensory Issues

Difficulty focusing in class due to sensory overload caused by people talking, typing on laptops, poorly-cleaned projectors, harsh lights, too high or low heating

Loud common spaces such as Eat Central, cafes, the library...

**Auditory Processing Disorder:** disorder that makes understanding noises and spoken words more difficult especially when people talk too fast and there's too much background noise (NHS, 2020)

Make sure the study environments are as sensory-friendly as possible avoiding loud noises, making sure projector maintenance is taken care of and if certain issues can not be avoided (eg. the lighting) make sure the students are aware

Provide quiet hours and/or low sensory spaces in common spaces

Make sure there are sufficient written materials for students with APD. This could be information on the slide for EVERY part of the lecture, detailed lecture notes or a recorded script of the lecture



## Need for routine and predictability

Anxiety caused by not knowing how the structure of a lesson or event in advance or sudden change in said lesson or event

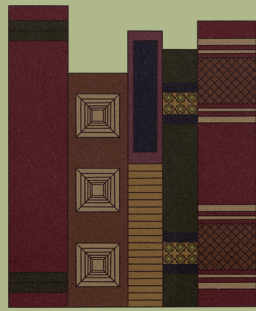
Anxiety caused by sudden changes in room or time of lessons or events

Sudden changes on campus such as paths, availability of facilities, opening times of facilities, menus of food venues....

Send slides and lesson structure in advance and inform students if there will be any modification to the class, including time and venue, as much in advance as possible

Inform students in advance of changes on campus that might affect them such as change in paths and services and provide alternatives such as what path to take instead or where to find a similar service to the old one





## Other Academic struggles

Prioritising of most important knowledge over background info and details for assessment

### **Struggles with:**

Time management

Cognitive overload due to the excessive amount of information

Switching between tasks

Finding motivation

Consider providing study guides or tips for your subject to help organise studying in a way that prioritises the correct knowledge and helps time management

Avoid excessively content-heavy lessons and offer adequate breaks throughout class in order to avoid cognitive overload in all students, particularly autistic students

# Assume Competence!

Autistic students are flagged to any tutor. The autism notes are generic. But each autistic person can have different needs

Autistic students are the **experts on their own struggles** and accessibility needs.

The best way to find out how to support them is to contact them via e-mail and ask if there are any accommodations they need in the classroom.

It is also important to remember that accommodations can easily be conflicting. An autistic student with APD might need writing on the slides while students with ADHD or dyslexia might find that overwhelming.

The same student might have more than one disability which makes assuming competence and **asking the students** for their accessibility needs even more crucial

If conflicting needs do happen, propose a meeting between those students. Disabled students are used to conflicting needs and might already have a solution.

# Autistic Shutdowns and Meltdowns

## Meltdown

A meltdown is a crisis that an autistic person experiences when overloaded (eg. for a sensory overload, cognitive overload...)

It presents itself with intense outbursts that can include shouting, running away, pushing away people or objects, breaking objects, self harming behaviour such as head hitting and sometimes violent behaviours against others

## Shutdown

A shutdown is also a crisis but less noticeable from an outside perspective

It presents itself with being extremely or completely quiet, freezing on the spot and not responding

Although it is less explicit and violent, therefore presents less of a safety concern, it is still an autistic moment of crisis in which the student might benefit from help

# How to avoid and intervene during a crisis

- Before the crisis begins the student might show signs of distress, offering help at that point is better than when the crisis has already began;
- Step away, give the student space and tell others to do so as well. Let the student calm themselves, autistic meltdowns and shutdowns need to extinguish themselves
- Guide the student out of the room (with no physical contact) and away from what might be causing the overload (eg. loud crowds). There are a couple places on campus that can be suggested such as the Disabled Students Room in Falmer House, the Quiet Room in the Meeting House or quiet rooms in Arts A (A177) and (buildings to be confirmed)
- Avoid asking too many questions, trying to interact with the student too much or further overload the student. When offering help gestures such as pointing to the door or offering a cup of water quietly are better than trying to communicate with the student as they might have gone non-verbal or struggle to communicate effectively

**Avoid** physical contact at all costs. If you believe it is necessary as the student might be putting themselves or others at risk, the contact should be minimal and only last for the time of the immediate danger

Restrain of any kind should **never** be used by someone who is not specifically trained in safe holds as this could lead to serious harm and potential death of the autistic person.

If you see another student or member of staff attempting to restrain someone in crisis **interrupt them immediately** and contact **trained staff** which usually an appointed crisis team.

If there is no appointed team or you do not know how to contact them, call 999.

# For further information

The National Autistic Society has courses that include "Autism and SPELL in higher education"

The Autism & Uni Project offers free materials for all staff at university as well as a free kit universities can adopt to help their students

# Reference List

'Autism at University – being an autistic student' (2020), University of Bristol

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Gurbuz E., Hanley M., Riby D.M., (2019) 'University Students with Autism: The Social and Academic Experiences of University in the UK', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49 pp.617–631 doi: 10.1007/s10803-018-3741-4

Harper G, et al, (2019) 'Autistica Action Briefing: Adult Mental Health' *Autistica* available at: [www.autistica.org.uk/AutismStrategy](http://www.autistica.org.uk/AutismStrategy)



Further questions or feedback?

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