



Asperger's syndrome
F O U N D A T I O N

INFORMATION SHEET

Age Group: Adolescents and Young Adults

Sheet Title: University

WHAT IS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?

- * A developmental disorder affecting social relationships and communication
- * Major source of stress is social contact
- * Main difficulty is understanding the thoughts of others
- * Identified by Hans Asperger in 1944

- * Main characteristics:
 - failure to communicate
 - poor social interaction
 - lack of empathy
 - intense absorption in a special interest

- * Named by Lorna Wing in 1981

- * Related to autism:
 - at the mild end
 - high ability
 - diagnosed cases – about 1 in 300
 - males to females – 10:1



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CHARACTERISTICS OF ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

SOCIAL SKILLS DIFFICULTIES

- * Communicating with others
- * Code of social conduct
- * Friendship
- * Persistent difficulty in initiating and sustaining relationships with people
- * Preference for own thoughts over human interactions
- * Eye contact
- * Showing emotions
- * Body language
- * High anxiety in response to stress

COGNITION DIFFICULTIES

- * Inability to mind read
- * Cannot conceptualise and appreciate the thoughts and feelings of others
- * Lack of concept of meaning – “the theory of mind”
- * Little or no skill in abstract thought
- * Difficulty interpreting and imposing priority on the external stimuli or thoughts that bombard them
- * Deficient/absent “common sense”
- * Absent or primitive sense of humour
- * Often excel with facts and figures

CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY

- * Which course?
- * Entrance requirements?
- * Near home or far away?



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- * Live at home or in Halls?
- * Transport?
- * Facilities?
- * Campus or Town?
- * Support facilities?
- * Assessment methods?
- * Work experience?
- * Work prospects?

ADVICE FOR UCAS FORM COMPLETION

- * Advantages of marking "Disability" box:

- Can claim disabled students' allowance – whatever is necessary to help student.
- Alerts University there may be special circumstances.
- The way can be smoothed to assist entry.
- Will probably mean an interview.

- * Personal Statement

- Positive, but honest.
- Use plus points of student (intense interests, photographic memory, depth of knowledge – rather than breadth).
- Highlight other side of "problem areas" – e.g. independence, working well on own.

ISSUES WITH ACADEMIC WORK

- * Lack of organisation
- * Difficulties with time pressures
- * Poor concentration



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- * Rigidity of thought
- * Slow and deliberate writer
- * Difficulties with complex/abstract ideas, creative thinking, problem solving
- * Team or group work
- * Poor listening skills
- * Problems in learning by observation
- * Ambiguous instructions

PROBLEMS WITH STUDY SKILLS

- * Refer to individual problem areas already identified
- * Planning/organisation
- * Diary
- * Clear, concise instructions
- * Structure with flexibility
- * Mentor/Personal Tutor
- * One to One
- * Parental input?

ADVICE ON STUDY SKILLS

Advantage 1 – many students have busy social lives which interfere with their studies – one problem that AS do not have.

Advantage 2 – the formal style required for formal essay writing is a lot easier for AS to master than “casual” social conversation.

- * *Tape record lectures*
- * *Books on tape/transcripts* of lectures - Resources for blind, deaf or learning disabled students can often be used. Otherwise, is there someone the AS student can borrow from?



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- * *Specialist computer software* - Inspiration Software, for example
- * *Strategies for crowded lecture halls* - Turn up early to get an aisle seat, or sit at the front
- * *Filtering out of background noise* - Noise-buster – filters out background noise electronically while leaving voices and other foreground noise clear
- * *Structuring your own time* - If you find it hard to judge if you are doing the correct amount of work, it is important to get adequate feedback from teachers
- * *Meeting deadlines* - Problematic because of obsession, perfectionism and disorganisation
- * *Functioning in a group*

Always a problem – maybe ask if you can go in the same group all the time, and make sure others in the group know about your condition

INTERVIEW ISSUES

- * Poor eye contact
- * Mono-syllabic answers
- * Lack of concentration
- * Inappropriate answers
- * Poor intonation of speech
- * Poor comprehension of listener's non-verbal communication
- * Pedantic or over-formal speech
- * Misunderstanding of questions
- * Unfunny or inappropriate jokes or comments



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DIFFICULTIES WITH LITERAL INTERPRETATION

- * Has the cat got your tongue?
- * Keep your eye on the ball
- * You'll have to pull your socks up
- * Looks can kill
- * Let's toast the bride
- * You're pulling my leg
- * I caught his eye
- * His voice is breaking
- * Pull yourself together

DIFFICULTIES IN LIVING AT UNIVERSITY

- * *Impaired social relationships - history*
 - Legacy of bullying, distrust, shyness, lack of self-esteem – finding it impossible to relate to others with trust.
 - Particularly difficult with students of the opposite sex – a broken romance will be taken extremely seriously.
 - May lead to anger.
- * *May be immature/inappropriate behaviour*
 - Who will be there to point it out? – may not understand that they are behaving oddly in a social situation.
 - What is funny to a group behaving stupidly whilst drunk, appears different if it is one (sober) person, possibly being totally inappropriate.
 - AS tend to be immature and naive – inexperienced at being out alone.
 - May stand too close to others.
- * *Impaired non-verbal communication*
 - No-one to point it out – students expected to understand.



- * *Difficulty in communicating feelings to others or reading others' feelings*
 - May lead to desperate loneliness, especially if living away from a close and sheltered family.
 - Misunderstandings may lead to trouble.
 - May sound curt and abrupt – put others off.
 - May be problems with students of the opposite sex – advances may be misunderstood by either side.

- * *Difficulties in instigating social activities*
 - Part of the fun and growing up of University.
 - May long to be part of social activities, but be too shy to ask.

- * *Anxiety or depression – social isolation*
 - Anxiety = stress.
 - Stress = desperation.
 - May withdraw altogether. Suicide is a constant worry.
 - May make it difficult to concentrate, respond properly, or be motivated.
 - Can lead to drink, drugs or dropping out.

- * *Erratic patterns of sleeping, eating, drinking*
 - Resistance to sedatives.
 - Can lead to problems with diet or alcohol.
 - Particularly bad at stressful times, such as exams.

- * *Rigid structure needed*
 - As in school or college, but more so, as there is less structure at University.
 - May panic when anything changes – not just the timetable.
 - Particular problems with deadlines.
 - Constant worry about the amount of work to be done. Too little – too much?
 - Great stress if work builds up because of disorganisation.



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- Will find it difficult to ask for help, or may not know where to go or how to ask.

* *Problem solving*

- Difficulties in identifying problems, never mind solving them.
- Helpful to write everything down.

* *May be sheltered or naive*

- As well as having to cope with leaving home and the workload at university, may also need help with washing, cooking, cleaning, etc.
- Social isolation again.
- May come over as a figure of fun to others.
- Easy for them to be a target for others who are insincere or have other motives.

* *Need constant checking and reassurance*

- From whom?

PLUS POINTS!

- * Extraordinarily good memory
- * Often punctual, reliable and dedicated
- * Original and creative thought patterns
- * Good attention to detail - precision
- * Often high intelligence
- * Great ability with language
- * Loyal and honest – no guile
- * Independent
- * Usually try very hard



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ASSISTANCE WITH PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS

- * Background information
- * Check for diagnosis
- * Request special support if needed
- * Practice exam strategies
- * Identify individual concerns
- * Plan exam environment
- * Remove stress

STRATEGIES FOR PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS

- * *Inform the student as early as possible of the date, time and duration of the exam*
 - Do this in writing as well as verbally and keep reinforcing it
 - Also tell the student about equipment needed for the exam
- * *Give as much information as possible about location, invigilator and peer group*
 - Try to get an invigilator the student knows. If not, introduce her/him to the student first.
 - Make sure the student arrives in the exam room early, so she/he can familiarise her/himself on the day
- * *Provision structured revision guides and revision timetable*
 - Timetable may have to be worked out several months in advance – done with SLDD co-ordinator or tutor?
- * *Possible worries about seating arrangements – show in advance or draw a plan if possible*



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- If not possible, give a general idea of where it is. In this situation, make sure they arrive early.
- This may not be a worry, but be prepared if it is.

- * *Familiarise the student with the exam room in advance*
- Make sure this is done if the original room is changed.

- * *Strategies for distracting behaviour – a separate room?*
- Either in the case of the AS being distracting (like muttering) or others being distracting to the AS
- Many AS are disturbed by large groups of people.

- * *Displacement/distraction technique strategies*
- Chewing gum or something to hold or fiddle with – string or elastic bands.
- Noise-buster if necessary.

- * *Help with interpreting questions*
- 1-1 in ensuring they have interpreted the question correctly or have understood exactly what they should do.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORT

- * Get background information
- * Identify coping strategies
- * Identify triggers for stress
- * Support worker/mentor
- * Student's permission to instigate support
- * Review support regularly
- * Appropriate materials - language
- * Exam concessions
- * Help student to understand differences and how to manage them



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- * Monitor social interaction
- * Monitor/review progress

PROBLEMS WITH THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

- * Close proximity in lectures
- * Halls of residence
- * Sharing a flat/house/lodgings
- * Living skills (laundry, buying and cooking food, etc)
- * Health issues – a healthy diet, new medical staff
- * Socialising
- * Sexuality
- * Safety
- * Stress and anxiety
- * Substance abuse

The Special Needs Coordinator X University

Dear

Application for 200? entry – UCAS Number ????????

This is a covering letter, explaining my son's special needs in more detail.

J..... suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, which often occurs in people who have above average intelligence. It has implications for his University entrance in three respects. The first: in any interview he may undergo as part of the selection process; the second, in his "A" levels, which he sits this year; and the third, in his experience at University.



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Although he communicates easily and effectively with people he knows well and works with closely, he has some difficulties in two-way social interaction, in that he finds problems in communicating his feelings and reactions to others. This has led to his becoming socially reserved and, therefore, he was a target for teasing and bullying in his earlier school years. One of the results of this is that he has displayed a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem in the past. He is keen to socialise, however, even though he sometimes finds it difficult with people he does not know well.

He has a great ability with language and an extensive vocabulary, but impaired verbal and non-verbal communication. This means that whilst he has the ability to formulate ideas, his expression can be stilted and pedantic, especially in situations of great stress, such as interviews or examinations, when he may have problems expressing what is in his head. Following instructions can be problematic, unless they are written in clear and unambiguous language, and he has poor comprehension of information given by gesture, miming, facial expression, vocal intonations, etc, as well as jokes, sarcasm, dropped hints and idiomatic expression, which he may take literally. Again, he has tried hard to recognise this, but he may panic in situations of stress or when surrounded by strangers.

His difficulties in interaction with others have been compensated for by the substitution of a narrow range of deep interests and activities. This means he may have difficulties with activities that do not interest him and seem irrelevant to him, but will work endlessly and with great precision and attention to detail at things that do interest him – such as Geography. His knowledge base, therefore, tends to be deep rather than broad – he performs better as a specialist than as a generalist.

Associated learning difficulties include organisational problems and high anxiety levels (brought on in part by his conscientiousness and perfectionism) leading to concentration difficulties. He has a tendency to re-evaluate



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familiar thoughts instead of straying onto different but related thoughts – he becomes very focussed on specifics, rather than a broader range of information. He has difficulties, therefore, with symbolic creativity, context awareness, lateral thinking, detective work and adaptive reasoning. Typically, his tendency would be to spend all his exam time on perfecting the answer to one question, although he is now succeeding in breaking this pattern – as can be evidenced by his GCSE results. He thinks and writes slowly and deliberately, both because it takes him time to satisfy himself that he knows what is expected of him when interpreting questions, and because his handwriting speed tends to be slow.

Asperger's Syndrome has compensated him in other areas, however. He has the advantage of an extraordinarily good memory and can remember many things in great detail. He has original and often creative thought patterns and an ability to draw conclusions that may not be apparent to others. His attention to precise details is often very good. His difficulties in social situations have made him extremely independent and self-reliant, although his sporting activities have helped enormously with his ability to work with others and become one of a group.

He is well-motivated, enthusiastic and determined to succeed. He is also reliable and able to work in an adult and social environment, as evidenced by his part-time job in a local night-club – it is noticeable how his confidence has improved in the four months he has been working there.

He is relieved that the recent diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome has given him an explanation for his problems, and it was his choice to drop Chemistry "A" level, his weakest subject, to concentrate on the adaptive strategies necessary to cope with his difficulties. This appears to be succeeding, as both his predicted grades and academic self-confidence have since risen.



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He is working very hard for his "A" levels and is very focussed on Geography as his chosen University course. If his "A" levels do not turn out as predicted, it will almost certainly be due to his difficulties mentioned above, rather than a lack of application or academic ability, because the concessions open to him do not allow for his difficulties in interpretation, expression or organisation.

I can provide further information if you need it.

Yours faithfully,