

DISABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION TOPICS: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Identifying & Communicating with College Students on The Spectrum



Hope Fisher

Director, Student Access Services

Rowley Hall, G105

Marymount University

2807 North Glebe Road

Arlington, VA 22207

Ph: [\(703\) 526-6925](tel:(703)526-6925)


Fx: [\(703\) 284-6485](tel:(703)284-6485)

hfisher@marymount.edu



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TOPICS

- Definition and Prevalence of ASD
 - Real and fictional examples of ASD
 - Characteristics of college students with ASD
 - Appropriate accommodations for college students with ASD
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ASD BASICS

In 2013, autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and other related disorders were combined into one diagnosis, ASD.

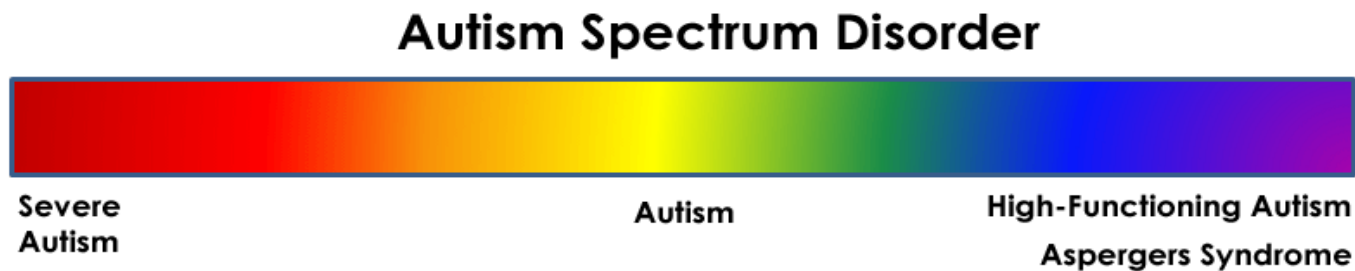
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is primarily characterized by:

1. **communication difficulties,**
2. **social/interpersonal barriers,** and
3. **repetitive and restrictive behaviors and interests.**

*CDC, 2014 (http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6302a1.htm?s_cid=ss6302a1_w)

DIFFERENTIATING WITHIN ASD

- Asperger's can be loosely defined as mild autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and accounts for ~14% of ASD cases.



- Unlike “classic” autism, people with Asperger’s develop language skills on time and have few (if any) learning deficits.

PREVALENCE OF ASD

General population*: 1 in 68 U.S. children
5x more common in males than females

Higher Ed settings: 10-14% of U.S. college students have ASD
~11% of MU students have ASD

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE...

Temple Grandin

- Professor, best-selling author, and autism activist
- “Time” magazine named her as one of the 100 most influential people in 2010
- Credited with breaking down many barriers to understanding autism, through her innovations in the livestock industry



Interview clip: *Grandin describes some of the challenges associated with ASD, from the perspective of someone lives with the diagnosis:*

: <http://www.foxnews.com/topics/temple-grandin.htm>

FAMOUS PEOPLE WITH ASD



Daryl Hannah, actress



James Durbin, singer
(*American Idol* contestant)

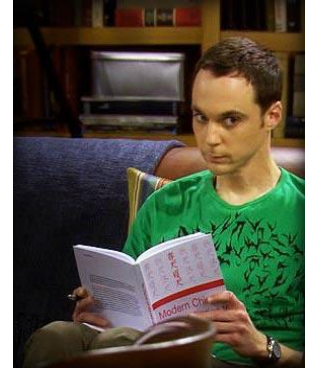


Susan Boyle, singer
(*Britain's Got Talent* finalist)

ACTIVITY: DOES SHELDON HAVE ASD?

Sheldon Cooper (34), MSc, PhD, ScD

- physicist, from popular TV sit-com “Big Bang Theory”
- works at Caltech, as a quantum mechanics researcher
- IQ=187; fluent in French, Arabic, Klingon, & 6 other languages
- spends most of his time at home; regularly seeks advice on interpersonal skills, from his neighbor & physicist roommate
- friends describe him as “rigid”, “lacking in apparent empathy”, and “irony-challenged”



ACTIVITY: DO YOU THINK SHELDON HAS ASD?

What people think:

"The writers say no, he doesn't... [but] I can say that he couldn't display *more* facets of it." –Jim Parsons, actor who plays Sheldon

"I had him tested as a child. Although I still feel I should have taken him to that expert in Houston." –Sheldon's fictional mom

"Our feeling is that Sheldon's mother never got a diagnosis, so we don't have one." -Bill Prady, producer of "The Big Bang Theory"

ACTIVITY: DO YOU THINK SHELDON HAS ASD?

Check off the behaviors that you observe in the video clips:

- Excessive adherence to personal routines without explanation or divergence
- Performing repetitive tasks or abnormal fixation on specific topics
- Difficulty understanding unspoken social “rules” and expectations
- Literal, linear thinking patterns
- Has a hard time using and deciphering metaphors, vocal tone modulation, and communication nuances (like, irony & sarcasm)
- Misreads facial expressions, body language, and other nonverbal exchanges (like, eye contact)
- Displays a flat or excessively friendly affect

Videos for activity: Clip 1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMIxHaZzzJI> [1m11s]
Clip 2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2hllvF5gJI> [2m19s]

COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ASD

- Within the entire ASD population, ~40% have average or higher IQ*; a significant portion are capable of handling college-level academics.
- Some have exceptional visual, academic, and musical abilities.
- Repetitive behaviors and routines are often used to cope with academic and social anxieties

**AutismSpeaks.org, 2014 (<http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>)*

THE YIN: STRENGTHS & ADVANTAGES

Generally speaking, college students with ASD...

- +can hyper-focus on one area of study, leading to subject mastery
- +are rarely distracted by or mixed-up in social or office “politics”
- +are almost twice as likely to major in a STEM-related field (e.g., Chemistry, Engineering)*
- +can be relied upon to follow-through and follow-up
- +when social relationships are formed, they can be some of the most dependable friends that one could want

**<http://www.sri.com/newsroom/press-release/autistic-students-choose-science-majors>*



THE YANG: PRIMARY WEAKNESS

Despite their many and varied abilities, college students with ASD still experience major communication and interpersonal barriers.

They need help putting together the “puzzle pieces” of the social world.



SPECIFIC ACADEMIC CONCERNS

In higher education settings, there are certain skills & traits that prove to be especially challenging for students with ASD to develop:

- Flexible Problem-Solving/Generating Alternate Solutions
- Abstract Thinking/Postulating on the “What Ifs” /Theorizing
- Generalizing when there is a lack of concrete info

Although Philosophy majors with ASD are few and far between, courses/topics that are more concrete tend to be very accessible for these students.



TIPS FOR FACULTY

- Provide a specific schedule and prepare the student in advance for any changes in the class routine.
- Acknowledge and reinforce acceptable classroom behaviors.
- Provide concrete examples for abstract or complex topics.
- Allow students to communicate through multiple modes (i.e., e-mail, face-to-face).
- Give specific and detailed feedback on assignments and exams
- Assist student in assigning priority to assignments
- Allow time for verbal responses
- Try not to take seemingly rude behavior personally
- Provide outlines for studying and exam preparation

ACCOMMODATIONS & SUPPORT SERVICES

Possible Accommodations

- Opting out of spontaneous questions in the classroom
- Priority seating
- Extended Time for Testing
- Alternative public speaking assignments
- Help with note-taking

Support Services (if available)

- Peer mentor
- Academic Coach



GENERAL TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by difficulties with communication skills and social interactions, as well as, repetitious behavior patterns
 - People with ASD have a wide range of cognitive abilities; some have learning disabilities.
 - Many of those who are higher functioning go on to succeed in college; some have exceptional talents and skills
 - **Our goal is to empower these students to become advocates for their equitable education.**
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