

WHAT I WISH YOU KNEW

a guide for staff from
autistic students

**about
autism**

**teaching
and assessment**

**myths and
stereotypes**

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WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a lifelong condition/disability that impacts on how we see the world and interact with others. According to the National Autistic Society, one in a hundred people in the UK are on the autism spectrum.

Sensory issues

Sometimes echoey lecture halls, machinery noises in labs, even typing in computer rooms can be overwhelming for those of us with sensory issues. Please be patient with us, we may need to take breaks from the noises, wear headphones/ear defenders/earplugs, or do anything else that helps us cope. We're not trying to be disruptive, we're trying to cope in a world that isn't designed for us and our needs!

Autistic women?

Autistic women exist (hello!), and we don't always present our symptoms in the same way as AMAB (Assigned Male At Birth) people, but that doesn't make us any less autistic. It would be helpful to all of us for neurotypical folk to understand the different ways our autism can manifest.

Social rules

A lot of the time, I'm awkward because I don't know/understand the unspoken "rules" of social interactions. Don't judge us for acting different from how "normal" people do, we're doing what we're most comfortable with.

Masking

Masking means concealing our autistic behaviours to appear more neurotypical. It is exhausting and extremely stressful! But we often feel we have to do it because otherwise we'll be judged for our "weird" behaviours like stimming. University should be a safe space where we don't have to mask.

What's it like to be autistic?

Being autistic is like everyone has a book on all the rules of how to act except you, but nobody will give you a copy or show you it, you're expected to have a copy and have read it already. None of the libraries or bookshops have this book, you can't find it anywhere, but you know it exists because how else would everyone know these rules? You know they're not telepathic, otherwise they'd understand how you struggle.

Being autistic sometimes feels like you're an alien, but you don't know how you're an alien because you were born here to 2 humans, you look like everyone else, the only thing that's different between you and the other people on Earth is how your brain works.

Stimming

I may not look like I'm not focusing because I'm fiddling with my hands, making strange noises, playing with my hair etc. but I am focusing. This is how I focus, it's called stimming. If I try to focus like a "normal person" (that is a harmful term, implies that not being normal is a bad thing), I end up focusing on how to focus "correctly" rather than what I'm meant to be focusing on!

There is no 'right way' to concentrate.

Just because I'm not looking at you, doesn't mean I'm not listening to you. Don't worry that I'm not paying attention, or judge me for fidgeting/staring out the window - that means I'm more likely to be listening!

Every autistic person is different

If you've met one autistic student, you've met one autistic student - we are all individuals and have our own strengths and our own areas we might need more support with. If in doubt - ASK!

This is what a spectrum really looks like (it's not 'less autistic' --> 'more autistic'):

Autism can impact:

- **Social communication**
- **Sensitivity to light, sound and touch**
- **Anxiety**
- **Focused interests and hobbies**
- **Repetitive behaviour**
- **Meltdowns and shutdowns**

(National Autistic Society, 2021)



PLEASE DON'T DO THIS...

Please think about the language and terminology you use to refer to us. Call us autistic people, not people with autism! Being autistic isn't a bad thing, it's not something we can stop being or separate from who we are, it's a part of us. Our brains are just wired differently to yours, and the world is designed for how your brain is wired.

Superpowers

Please don't say "special abilities" or "superpowers" - we're not "superheroes", we're people too, just think a bit differently.

We are not all savants or STEM geniuses the way you might see on TV. Stop assuming we are. Stop assuming that just because we're at a Russell group university we are so smart that our autism doesn't affect us - that really isn't the case for everyone

Functioning labels

These are extremely harmful. I'm not a "high functioning autistic", I just happen to cope better in certain situations than other autistic people do because I have developed coping strategies that work well for me. In other situations, I struggle a lot because I haven't refined those coping strategies.

How well we "function" in certain situations is only relevant to us, and anyone involved in figuring out any adjustments we need. To everyone else, I'm just autistic, you don't need to know how "high functioning" I am.

r***** is a slur

I don't "struggle with autism"

I'm not 'high-functioning'
(even if you think I am)

I am not a child.

I don't need mothering,
or your patronising empathy,
even if you mean well.

Give me a break

I mask. I hold back from stimming. I do not complain about the sound of the microwave, the fridge, the way the door shuts or the way you type. But the ONE time I ask for something to change, I am annoying or I am too much. I adjust my behaviour every day so I can come across as neurotypical (because of my own insecurities, no one on the spectrum should have to do this at all) so could you give me a break at least once? When I ask for the music to be turned down could you just do it? Could you not point out my stimming?

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Reasonable adjustments

Adjustments aren't "giving you an advantage" or "making it easier for you than it is for us" (these are verbatim quotes I've heard, they made me reluctant to seek the adjustments I needed because I didn't want to be viewed negatively), they make sure that we have the opportunity to do as well as a neurotypical person would in the same situation without adjustments. It's like giving a shorter person a box to see over a fence a taller person can see over without that box, rather than them having to climb the fence to see over it.

Clarity of expectations

- If you give us a giant list of suggested readings, please in some way order them, so not just overloaded with "these 10 books may be useful", please say which will be most useful or order them in some way.
- If a supervisor asks me to do something that is an insane amount of work there is often the unspoken knowledge that you don't actually have to complete all of that work before the next week. I can't tell, and will stress and overwork until everything is done. Be specific with what actionable tasks you need the person to do and by when.
- I think some lecturers can be too reluctant to provide model answers/ guidance, as they don't want to 'lead us' too much. But they are very helpful so that I know exactly what you want me produce, much more so than just assessment guidelines, however detailed. Similarly, mock papers for exams are essential, especially when the format has changed.
- I often find it difficult to understand assignment briefs set and can often end up doing the wrong thing or getting confused. This means certain assignments will take me much longer than others as I spend a lot of my time trying to work out what I'm being asked to do. I'm not sure if it would be possible for lecturers to make clearer instructions but maybe it would be good to have slots available for one-to-one sessions where certain courseworks are described to us if needed?

Teams meetings

Group meetings

These meetings can often be overwhelming due to all of the noises and needing to mask when in the call and can often last much longer than the typical one-hour restricted sessions. For me personally, after a longer call I am often unable to do any work for the rest of the day, if not longer, causing me to stress and get behind on work. Often more than one call is scheduled in a day and this can cause a piling-on effect making it worse.

Cameras

Please don't make me turn my camera on - it makes seminars far more exhausting and stressful because I feel like I have to constantly be performing the appropriate facial expressions.

Structure

Before this pandemic university provided much needed structure to my life. Now with conditions constantly in flux I have none. Having my lectures no longer at set times has caused an incredible amount of stress and anxiety. The uncertain nature of this situation is incredibly difficult for autistic people to cope with.

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Questions? Reach out and ask!
We will be more than
happy to help where we
can.

Teaching about autism

I have encountered this a couple of times and it's very alienating: the autistic experience (treated as a monolith) is presented almost as an insight into an alien world and some lecturers forget that we may be sitting right there!

Engage with autism-led/co-produced research and acknowledge the worth of such an approach specifically. Don't use autistic people as a kind of 'thought experiment' for discussions about empathy (particularly if you make the assumption that we don't experience it!).