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Top 5 autism tips for professionals: autistic students at university

Many students experience challenges when making the transition to university. But, while most adapt reasonably quickly, autistic students can have much higher levels of anxiety combined with a limited capacity to deal with these challenges. Without appropriate support and awareness, autistic students may quickly disengage and drop out of their course.

Academics with good awareness of autistic strengths and weaknesses can support these students very effectively. Some small changes to one's daily practice can make a big difference, so here are our top 5 tips for academics who teach and support autistic students:

1. Avoid ambiguity

Check that information you give to students is clear, concise and unambiguous, especially in assignments and exams. Autistic students are prone to spotting phrases that allow for multiple interpretations and unexpected choices can stop them in their tracks completely. This does not mean to avoid ambiguity completely – sometimes there's a good pedagogical reason to be vague. But avoid 'accidental' ambiguities, and all students will thank you for that!

2. Prepare and share

We've all done it – finalised the lecture slides half an hour before the lecture starts. Printed handouts on the way to the tutorial. Autistic students like to know what's coming, so it is really useful for them to receive lecture slides and handouts in advance. And if room allocations change, give students as much notice as possible so that they have a chance to familiarise themselves with the new location and how to get there. Knowing what's coming reduces anxiety and helps with organising work. And if I'm honest, it helps my own anxiety levels too if I have everything prepared a few days in advance.

3. Manage group work well

Pro-actively provide support around students working in groups: Intervene when communication appears to fail, when the division of work is unfair, or any member of the group is excluded by others. Encourage the group to set "ground rules" right from the start. Fellow students can take advantage of an autistic peer, especially if they are unaware of the condition. Speak to the autistic student about whether they are comfortable to tell others about their autism. Generally this is a good idea but fellow students need to have enough knowledge about autism, and not just based on misleading media representations.

4. Be accommodating

Show a positive attitude towards arrangements and devices that allow the student to manage their anxiety, such as minimising sensory distractions, always sitting in the same seat, wearing a hat, hoodie or tinted glasses indoors, or handling stress toys. When scheduling classes or meetings, try to ensure that the room is free of visual and auditory distractions that may prevent an autistic student from focusing. Make it clear that any student can leave a teaching session if they feel anxious or overwhelmed – and that they will not be criticised or penalised for doing so. More generally, do not just make such arrangements specifically for autistic students, but for all your students.

5. Find out as much as you can about autism

Learn about the autism spectrum and about your students' specific challenges and requirements. Request training (e.g. from the [National Autistic Society](#)) and if you're lucky enough to have had training already, share your knowledge with colleagues. Invite successful autistic role models, e.g. alumni or final year students, to share their experiences with staff. Get in touch with the experts from your university's disability support team and discuss what further changes you can make to your teaching practice. It's worth exploring this in depth because they may be very personal to you and your subject area.