

## Information for new students with autism

Studying at university can be incredibly rewarding and exciting and many autistic students have strengths which can lead to them achieving well academically.

However, it can be a daunting experience and students can feel unsettled by the change of environment and different approach to learning. Each person is affected by autism in different ways so the particular issues and difficulties that students experience in university vary from person to person.

This booklet looks at some of the common challenges that autistic students may face during their transition to university and suggests strategies and solutions which may help in preparing for university so that these can be minimised or overcome.

## Preparing for change

Any change in routine can be stressful and unsettling for autistic people. Starting at university brings a change in environment, often independent living and in style of teaching and learning. It often results in a change in routine and new and unfamiliar people. Preparation is important to help in dealing with these changes and to ensure that coming to university is less overwhelming and scary for autistic students.



### Ways that you may want to prepare;

- Attend open days and welcome events to get used to the university environment. In particular, familiarise yourself with the library/learning centre, restaurants and your faculty. Get to know where to go if you need any advice and support such as the mental health and counselling services
- Visit accommodation if you are living away from home. Some universities offer overnight stays prior to starting university which can be a great way to get used to the environment and potentially make new friends
- Explore the societies and social events offered by your Students Union
- Disclosing your autism as early as possible to both your university and to DSA, can be important so that support is in place for when you start university
- Apply for DSA support as soon as possible, you may be eligible for support such as a Specialist mentor or Tutor and/or equipment during your time at university which students often find invaluable. Studies have found that Specialist Mentoring support can help in reducing stress and anxiety, develop social skills and relationships and a positive self identity, increasing self confidence, help students in developing time

management strategies, develop academic skills and ultimately achieve better grades. Any information that you give to DSA or to your disability advisor will remain confidential unless you give permission to share

- Get in contact with your Disability Advisors and arrange to meet them if possible. They will be able to advise you of the support that may be available and if there are any autism specific groups or activities on offer. These can be a great way to make new friends, find out information and increase confidence
- Start building independence skills as soon as you can i.e. cooking, washing if you are living away from home. Some people find it useful to plan meals, at least for the first few weeks, so that it is one less thing to think about
- If you are new to the area, familiarise yourself with the town centre and local supermarkets
- Practise your journey into university whether this is by train, bus or on foot. Make sure that you know the fares and when to get on and off. If you plan on driving into university, make sure that you are familiar with routes (practise at different times of day) and that you know the car parks and how much they charge
- Once you have started university, keep a familiar routine if possible. For example, try to maintain regular bedtimes and times to get up and eat at similar times

## Structure

At university, there is less of a structure than you may have been used to at school or college. Many students find that not having a 9-5 routine such as in school or college can be difficult to adjust to. However, with the right strategies and support, anxiety can be minimised.



### **Solution: Get organised!**

- Manage your time with timetables, diaries, timelines etc. Everyone is different, for example some people really like a detailed timetable, other people may find that they cause stress, so you may want to think about what method or strategies of time management you have found useful in the past. Chose a method/approach that works for you
- Routine is good, especially in the early days - try to draw up a routine and stick to it as much as possible
- Some people find that it helps to prepare a meal planner with the same meals each week and to know that they wear a certain outfit on a certain day etc. Timetabling laundry, shopping, for example, can also be helpful

- Be aware of assignment requirements at the start of each semester so you have no surprises.
- If you have a mentor or tutor, ask for their support in finding a method of organisation that suits you

## Academic

Common academic issues reported by autistic students are difficulties with processing speed; time management; group work; presentations; motivation and asking questions, understanding what is expected, perfectionism and processing speed.



Autistic students also report strengths including ability to study for a long time, attention to detail, critical thinking and academic writing and research skills.

You will experience new people and different approaches to learning and teaching at University. Many people worry at first whether they can undertake the academic work that is expected of them but most adapt to this quickly and easily.

### Solution:

- Introduce yourself to your personal tutor - they can be a great source of advice and support in any course related issues
- Be aware of assignment requirements at the start of each semester so you have no surprises. It can be helpful to put hand in dates into a diary, wall planner etc.
- Spend time familiarising yourself with your universities learning platform once you have your log in details
- Perfectionism - does striving for perfectionism affect you? This can be an issue for people with autism, try to find out how perfectionism affects you – for example, does it stop you from starting work for fear that it may not be good enough or does it result in you spending a great deal of time on each piece of work, which causes stress? Discuss this with your Specialist Mentor or Tutor as they can help you in finding ways to manage this. For strategies and resources that may help in overcoming perfectionism, see suggested resources below
- If your lectures are not recorded already, consider recording lectures yourself – use a Dictaphone or a recording app on your phones. This helps if you need extra time to process information or if you find it difficult to concentrate for long periods of time
- Take things one step at a time - rather than focusing on all the work you have to do, focus on one task at a time and break it down into small chunks to prevent feeling overwhelmed

- If you are unsure of what you are being asked to do for a specific piece of work, email or ask to meet with your lecturer - they are there to teach you and help clarify any queries you have and they want you to succeed! You can ask your mentor/tutor for help with this
- Find out what reasonable adjustments that you are entitled to (your disability adviser will be able to advise you on this) and make your lecturers aware, if you feel comfortable to do so
- If you are worried about writing emails to lecturers, ask your mentor/tutor for help in this. The general rule would be to;
  - Always start email with Dear Dr/use first name
  - You may change to a less formal opening if they reply with 'Hi', for example
  - End with 'many thanks' or 'best wishes'
  - Always be polite, state your question clearly and outline what you would like to achieve

## Support

Remember that you are not alone and that there is support available to help you. Don't be afraid to ask for support - we work with a range of students with varying needs. Getting support early on is often a key factor for a successful university education.



### **Solution:**

- Apply for Disabled Students Allowances before starting university. You may be entitled to equipment or 1:1 support to help you in your studies
- Declare your disability as soon as you can to your disability advisor
- Most universities also have a person in each faculty who is responsible for ensuring that academic and teaching staff put any reasonable adjustments into place. They can be useful contacts should you come across any issues during your time at university. Ask your Student Faculty Support Office who the disability tutor is in your faculty
- If you are entitled to DSA funded Specialist Autism Mentor or Specialist Tutor support you will need to contact the agency providing the support to arrange your support. Do this as soon as possible to get your support set up. If you need help with this, contact your disability advisor who may be able to offer support. It helps to meet your mentor and/or tutor in Welcome /Fresher's Week so that you can get to know them before starting lectures. If you prefer routine, ask them if you can meet them at the same time and day each week.

- The Disability and Inclusion Team at your university will (with your permission) look at any reasonable adjustments that you may need during your time at university. These are sometimes outlined in a document. Make sure that you read through this information and contact your disability advisor if you feel that anything should be amended or added

## Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety can be an issue for autistic students but there are often effective ways to help in managing these feelings



### Solution;

- Think about the things that can trigger feelings of stress and anxiety - for example, do you feel anxious when things change, when you don't have a clear idea of what is expected of you in assignments, or when you are in crowds? If you can identify triggers, it can help you in putting a strategy into place that can help you to avoid/minimise the effects of these triggers. For example, if noise is a trigger, you may find that avoiding busy and noisy parts of the university where possible, help you to feel less stressed and anxious. Sometimes, you can't avoid triggers but can make sure that you can be prepared. For example, if you dislike change, you can prepare for these times and request your timetable early or familiarising yourself with a new environment
- Think about strategies that may be effective or that you find useful. Try to build relaxation into your routine. Identify any activities which you find relaxing. For example some students say that playing computer games is a way of escaping the stresses of everyday life and can be a relaxing. Use meditation exercises if they help, exercise can also be a great way to relax
- Don't be afraid to ask for help – if you have a Specialist Mentor, they can help you in identifying the triggers and strategies that help in managing your mental health. The Mental Health and/or counselling service can offer support to students who are feeling overwhelmed and/or are experiencing difficulties with their mental health. You could also talk to your mentor about stress. It may also be useful to chat to your GP to see if they can offer help outside of the university or medication/therapy if you feel this would benefit you
- See useful resources below

## Social interaction

The social side of university is an important and often enjoyable part of the experience. When you first come to uni, you may not know anyone and it is natural to feel scared and worried. However, in the early days at university, everyone is getting to know each other, so you are all in the same situation and it can be easier to make friends initially.

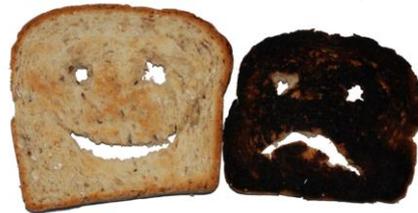


### Solution;

- Join social groups that interest you - it is often easier to talk about things that interest you rather than the focus being on making general conversation. Some universities have a specific autism social group which can be a great way to make friends and share tips and information. There are many societies in Student's Union; many students enjoy the games society or the anime society for example. Speak to your mentor about social difficulties and ask them to help you in accessing new groups. No matter how hard or uncomfortable joining new groups and making new friends may be at first, this will get easier as time goes on.
- Know how to deal with street preachers/sales people/charity chuggers that you may come across when you are in your local town. The best way to deal with them could be, for example, to walk past them and say 'I'm sorry I'm not interested, thank you'
- University is often promoted as a time to have fun and make friends but this isn't the reality for everyone. Don't worry if you find it difficult to connect to your housemates or people on your course, sometimes, no matter how hard you try, this may be down to chance, and you may find yourself living or studying with people that you do not have anything in common with. If you feel lonely or isolated, try to find someone who you can talk to about this. This could be your Specialist mentor or a counsellor who can help you to think of ideas of ways that you could connect to people such as through online games, for example
- Initiate conversation with other students early on - It can be difficult to know how to start a conversation with other students but pushing outside of your comfort zone can help you in developing important friendships in the early days of university. During those first few weeks, these are the questions that you could ask to break the ice;
  - What course are you doing?
  - Where do you come from?
  - Are you living in halls?
  - What did you study for A-Levels?

## Independent living skills

The move to increased independence often comes hand in hand with starting university. Preparation for independent living before starting university is a good idea so that this is one less skill to learn.



### Solution;

- Cooking - Get used to cooking a few meals before you start university. Some students find the added responsibility for cooking and the infinite choices can be overwhelming so it can be helpful to have a meal planner prepared. This can also help ensure that meals are within budget. Some students have a weekly menu so they know that they eat, for example, spaghetti bolognese on a Monday, jacket potato and beans on Tuesday etc.
- Laundry - Find out where the laundry is in halls and how to use it. Find out when the quieter times are if you prefer
- Shopping - Plan shopping at quiet times - supermarkets can get very busy at peak times but may be very quiet at 10pm, for example. You could also take advantage of the click and collect service and order your shopping online, which you can then collect rather than battling the crowds!
- Travel - if you are travelling to university independently for the first time, practice the route with friends and family a few times. Get used to how you pay on the bus, what stop to get off at etc. Download or print transport timetables and fares. Get to know rules for the transport that you are travelling on - for example, National Express buses don't give change but Arriva buses do. You can't get single tickets to use across multiple operators and you can't use a bus pass purchased through National Express on other operators. Identify a marker to look out for on public transport such as a road sign or house which signals that you need to get off at the next stop
- Have a contingency plan if your buses/train/tram is late or doesn't turn up - for example, would it be best to catch an earlier bus than needed to prevent being late due to road works or traffic on the route?
- Managing money - Draw up a budget before starting university so that you know how much you have spare each week. Some people find it useful to draw out their weekly allowance in cash every week. Carrying around a small amount of change (i.e.£10) can be useful in case of emergencies. NAS offer a free online training course on managing money. Can be accessed online at;

## Sensory issues

Many autistic students experience sensory issues.



### Solutions;

- Build up an understanding of any sensory issues that you have. Olga Bogdashina has a really useful tool to enable people to identify the areas of sensory processing that affect them the most in her book (see useful info at end)
- Ear defenders/headphones can be useful in accommodation or on the bus if you have sensory issues. The university can get very busy at certain times but there are often quieter places to go if feeling overwhelmed – ask your disability adviser about this
- Recording lectures can be useful if you need extra time to process information. Some people can switch off in lectures when they are over loaded with information which can then cause them to panic after. If you record lectures, this allows you to go back over it after and take time to process and understand
- Get to know busy times and places to avoid on campus and supermarkets
- If you are affected by light sensitivity, wear a cap and/or sunglasses on bright days
- There are often quieter carriages on the train or quieter parts of the bus if you find busy and noisy transport to be overwhelming

### Finally but importantly;

Don't panic!

Remember that students with autism are very capable of achieving great things at university and many say that it has been a great experience. In the words of Chris Packham;

*"We're different but we are not disabled. In fact, in many ways we are enabled. We have the capacity to do things that perhaps neurotypical people can't do..."*

## Useful Links

### National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

### Chris Packham talks about his university experiences;

<https://thelincolnite.co.uk/2018/05/chris-packham-speaks-autism-university/>

### Sensory issues

Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome (2016), Olga Bogdashina

### Mental Health issues

<https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

<http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/>

Follow this link for immediate help if you are struggling with suicidal thoughts: <http://stayingSAFE.net/>

Students against depression – info and advice by students for students on managing mental health [About Us](#) | [The Students Against Depression](#)

Nightline – confidential telephone support for students by students [Nightline Association](#)

Young minds – info and support for young people and their families [YoungMinds](#) | [Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People](#) | [YoungMinds](#)

### Perfectionism

<http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2013/02/aspergers-children-and-problems-with.html>

*"The good thing is I have learned to cope with my perfectionism to a degree. I've learned that being perfect is pretty much impossible, and that my best effort is all I should be looking for. If I'm wrong, so be it, as long as I tried my hardest to do the right thing. In essence: the best I can do is the best I can do".*

*"You always pass failure on the way to success"* (Mickey Rooney)

Personal account of strategies that have helped with perfectionism from someone with Asperger's;

<http://livingwithaspergerssyndrome.weebly.com/perfectionism.html>

*“During one of my rougher times dealing with Asperger's I saw a Psychologist who asked me to write my name with both my left and right hand. After I'd finished he asked me which was correct, and being right handed I naturally selected the one I'd written with my right hand. He then said both are equally correct as both said my name. It was something as simple as this that helped me realise that things can be correct without having to go to the extremes of perfection”*

Excellent account of why many people with Asperger's struggle with perfectionism written by someone with Asperger's;

<http://musingsofanaspie.com/tag/perfectionism/>

Excellent article on why perfectionism common with Asperger's and strategies that may help;

<http://www.snagglebox.com/article/autism-perfectionism>

**Written by Ellie Horton, Mental Health and Wellbeing Adviser**