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Arriving On A Different Planet: Navigating College and Employment While On The Autism Spectrum

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Brief Bio

I was diagnosed with Aspergers at the age of 14. Aspergers is a disorder that is found on the Autism Spectrum. Little did I know of the impact it would set for the rest of my life. In the journey to better understand myself and how to navigate through the world I've learned a lot of lessons that brought me here today.

Rather than blame my Aspergers for any difficulties that I've encountered, I made it my mission to better understand it and use what I have learned to help others on the spectrum.

I went to college for Psychology so I could gain a better understanding of human behavior. At the time, human behavior felt like rocket science to me. I have gained a vast understanding of social behaviors through my classes and social experiences at college.

Since graduating in 2012, I've worked with people on the Autism Spectrum in both a school setting as well as a crisis center. My experience as a Teachers Assistant at the Y.A.L.E. school (a school geared towards teaching children on the Autism Spectrum), gave me the experience in helping people on the spectrum get ready for the next stages in their lives. My experience as a Mental Health Technician at Foundations Behavioral Health helped sharpen my leadership skills and how to be assertive in difficult situations.

Workshop Objectives

- Parents and The College Age Autistic Child Relationship: Cut that Cord!
- Joining Clubs and The College Social Scene: Take Chances, Make Mistakes!
- Making the Changes for College Classes: Get Out of Bed and Get to Class!
- Looking For Work The First Time: Get a Job, You Bum!
- Meeting an Employer's Expectations: Iron that Shirt and Smile!

Parents and the College-Age Autistic Child Relationship: Cut that Cord!

ASD College Student and Their Parents

- Prior to college most ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) parents are their child's strongest advocate for what he/she needs in terms of: education, living arrangements, and in social situations. However, in college this should transition into the child becoming their own advocate.
- Transitioning the student to become their own advocate empowers them to become independent adults once they graduate college.
- Becoming your own self advocate can be a powerful tool to not only educating yourself, but others on what it truly means to be an autistic person in the adult world.

Transition Planning

- Provides tools for the ASD child to be able to be self sufficient and help advocate for themselves.
- Schools follow the federal mandated child's IEP (Individualized Education Program) to provide the student with the tools necessary for the transition into early adulthood/college level.
- The Transition Planning begins at 14 to 16 years old.

Transition Planning

- The Focus of Transition Planning:
 - Hygiene Training
 - Banking Training
 - Driver's Education
 - College Admissions
 - Participation in the Community
 - Finding Employment
 - Postsecondary Education
 - Independent Living Training (as much as possible)

Biggest Challenges Facing the Autistic College Student

- Self Advocacy
- Accommodations
- Staying Organized
- Social Expectations
- The Struggle to Communicate

Self Advocacy

- What does Self Advocacy look like in the college setting?
 - Your child is able tell his/her college professors and peers what they need in the classroom and social situations.
 - Speaking to the college disability office to get:
 - Test Taking Assistance, Housing, and Classroom Accommodations
 - The ASD student must take responsibility for being in regular contact with his/her college's disabilities office to ensure their accommodations are being met.
 - Utilizing Professor Office Hours
 - Clarification on school work and classroom needs
 - Providing letters of accommodations

Letters of Accommodations

- Letters of Accommodations describe to your child's professors what accommodations your child may need in class, such as:
 - To approve specific sensory and exam accommodations
 - Sending the exams to the Test and Exam Center

ASD Sensory Issues in the Classroom

- ASD sensory issues can affect an ability to learn in the classroom:
 - Communication Skills
 - Social Skills
 - Sensory Differences
 - Motor Skills
 - Learning Style
 - Coping Skills

Communication Skills and ASD

- Most ASD individuals struggle with expressing how they feel (i.e. making the right facial expression for any given emotion and social situation) and they have trouble telling what others feel as well.
- The issue seems to come from an interference "with receptive and expressive forms of communication (Wheeler 2016)."
- It should be noted that just because an ASD person may have a large vocabulary, it does not mean he/she knows how to use it in a given social context. In other words, an ASD person may not know how to use those words in a conversation to convey what he or she is trying to get across or advocate what they need.

Common Areas of Struggle for ASD and Communication

- Verbal Exchanges: jokes, sarcasm, idioms
- Literal interpretation of words
- Misunderstanding of gestures and body language
- Trouble starting a conversation with another person
- Slower at responding to questions and reacting accordingly during the conversation (they may need extra time to process information)
- Struggle with maintaining tone/volume of their own voice as well as interpreting the tone/volume of others during a conversation.

Accommodation for ASD Communication Issues in the Classroom

- Gain a copy of instructor's lecture notes or assign a note taker.
- Study guides for tests.
- "Allow for longer verbal response time to your questions (Wheeler 2016)."
- Receive a written description of the course and expectations for each class from the professors.
- Professors should try to make their lectures have: "clear, concise, concrete and logical statements (Wheeler 2016)."
- Professors should try to make time in each of their lectures to see if any student (especially ASD ones) needs clarification.

Social Skills and ASD

- The Perspective of Others (Example: struggles with walking in another person's shoes)
- Sharing Space (Example: Being unaware of how close they are sitting to their peers)
- Making Eye Contact (Example: Not looking at the person they are talking to in the eye)
- Unwritten Classroom Etiquette: (Example: how many times should they raise their hand)
- Poor Negotiation Skills (Example: dividing group work up evenly in a group)
- Extreme Social Anxiety (Example: the student will be rocking back and forth)

Accommodations for ASD Social Skills

- Professors should give small breaks to the ASD student(s) who are feeling social anxiety.
- "Allowing the student to have a 'social buffering' object which might include a computer, book, or other object that initially might seem distracting or 'out of place' (Wheeler 2016)."
- Professors should ignore an ASD student's level of eye contact; just because an ASD student does not make eye contact with his/her professor it does not mean that he/her is ignoring the information being provided.

Accommodations for ASD Social Skills (cont.)

- Make the groups for class presentations and projects with care to make sure that ASD students take part.
- Type up "written rules for asking questions and other classroom logistics" (Professors should be clear about what he/she is looking for in work and behavior) (Wheeler 2016).
- For example: How many times should a student raise his or her hand per class period? Also, how do professors want to be respected while giving a lecture?
- This will help an ASD student not draw unwanted attention from his or her peers, who do not understand the issues concerning those on the spectrum.

Sensory Differences and ASD

- Usually occurs in an ASD student by being overly sensitive to information about his or her environment that comes through the 5 senses.
- This is often referred to in the DSM 5 as Synesthesia, which is when a person (with ASD) interprets information intended for one of the 5 senses through a different one.
- An example of this could be flickering lights in the classroom. If an ASD person were sit under a light like this their brain will become flooded with information through his or her eyes, which blocks out information coming through the other 4 senses.
- Sensory overload is often perceived as pain by a person on the spectrum because an ASD brain cannot filter the information being received and he or she isn't able to prevent overstimulation from happening.

Accommodations for ASD Sensory Differences

- Items that may help: Hats, Sunglasses, Tinted lens glasses, and Ear Plugs/Ear Phones
- The Professor can help by:
 - Allow your ASD students to pick their own seats because it can help "to assure it [will] always [be] available (Wheeler 2016)."
 - (In my experience as TA this allows the child to establish the first step of their college room routine.)
 - Classroom Accommodations: Have a plan in place for when your ASD student needs to relieve his/her sensory overload, so that the class is not disrupted by him or her abruptly leaving the room.

Motor Skills and ASD

- Issues with fine and gross motor skills:
 - Gross Motor Skills: Poor Body Awareness (Poor sense of balance and how "the awareness [that] the placement of their body affects the way which an individual moves their body (Wheeler 2016).")
 - Fine Motor Skills: Struggle with the use of: writing tools, instruments, and use of other small items that they may need in class.
- This can make it difficult for an ASD student to complete the tasks assigned to him/her.

Accommodations For Motor Skills

- Computer use for: Schoolwork, exams, and other types of assignments.
- Give that student extra time to complete tests and other assignments based on what motor skill handicap they may have.
- "Provide readers and scribes (or technology that reads and takes notes) (Wheeler 2016)."

Learning Style and ASD

- Non-conventional and creative learning styles are common.
- Learn to utilize the way you learn based on your mind's strengths, for example: "Students on the autism spectrum tend to have excellent long term and rote memory abilities (Wheeler 2016)."
- Building a positive rapport with your professors is important.
- Challenges that ASD students face while learning: general organization/planning skills, impulsivity, problem solving, and self monetizing as they complete a given goal all the way through.

Accommodations for ASD Learning Styles

- Personally creating (or through any support your child receives): a "review sheet, work checklists, and 'sub' deadlines and/or intermittent 'check-ins' (Wheeler 2016)."
- Utilize peer mentors for: feedback, proof-reading papers, and provide various forms of structure for your child's learning style.
- Professors should, along with your child's college disability office, work out a plan far in advance for: deadlines, extra test taking time, and other needs of each individual ASD student.
- These advanced notices for accommodations should be addressed in any letters of accommodation that your child's professors receive from the college's disability office and your child.

Other Possible Accommodations for ASD Learning Styles

- ASD students use of physical and electronic reminders of all is key: classes, events, and assignments.
- Extra transition time.
- Maintaining routines in the new environment

Coping Skills and ASD

•Anxiety and Stress for the ASD Student are caused by:

- Sensory Sensitivities
- Social and Communication Expectations
- Transition and Unexpected Changes

•The trigger for most "bewildering," "rude" or "disruptive" behaviors should be made clear in the child's letter of accommodation, that they are manifesting because that child is trying to cope with stress. That the child is trying to calm him/her self down.

Behaviors of Stress Relief for ASD Students

- Rocking
- Pacing
- Waving or Flapping Hands
- Twitchy Fingers
- Chewing on their clothes or body
- Ranting on a topic of interest (example: their favorite TV show)
- Opposite emotion that is appropriate for the given situation (For example: laughing at things that make them anxious)

Accommodations for ASD Coping Skills

- Discretely allow the ASD student to take short breaks from the room or you can help that student with a task.
- Do not ask the ASD student to stop his/her stress-relief behaviors unless they are a true distraction to others. Professors should remember that a student does not wish to disrupt or disrespect their class, but that the student is coping.
- "Allow sensory items and/or other 'comfort' objects (Wheeler 2016)."
- Professors should come up with a nonverbal cue between students and them so that students can take a short break from class or get further explanation about what is being discussed in class.

Strengths of the ASD Student

- Good Visual and Visual-Spatial Skills
- Out of the Box Thinkers
- Vast empirical knowledge of their chosen field.

Making the Changes for College Classes: Get out of Bed and Get to Class!

The Disability Office and Your Child

- Disability Office Services:
 - Notetakers
 - Test Taking
 - Tutors

Separate Space for Testing

- Avoids Distractions (example: scratching of pencils)
- Quiet Place to Think
- Extra Test Time
- Someone to read you the questions
- A computer to type essay questions for those of us who cannot write neatly or in the space given on the actual test.

Staying Organized

Managing Dorm or Apartment

- Keeping the place clean
- Getting along with a roommate and his or her living expectations; this can include the autistic child learning more about the art of compromising. This can involve dividing up chores and respecting social and private boundaries between an Autistic or Neurotypical Roommates.

Scheduling Homework

- "Adding to the challenges of independence is the withdrawal of the educational supports and services some of these kids have been receiving since they were as young as 2 years old; those supports vanish when they age out of the children's services" (C.L.E 2016).
- Choosing what time of the day to do homework and study for exams
- For Example: When to get started on a paper (scheduling to have the paper done and not rushed at the last minute or being overwhelmed by the changes to the previous writing demands placed on him or her in high school that no longer apply)

Joining Clubs and The College Social Scene: Take Chances, Make Mistakes!

Clubs and Their Benefits

- Structure (Ex: set expectations, set discussion topics, and set of social dynamics)
- Reliability (Ex: A time and place to meet each week)
- Regular contact (Ex: You will receive regular emails updating you on the latest plans of the club and keeping you informed if you missed a meeting.)
- What did I personally learn?

Friendship and Cautionary Disclosure of ASD

- "Those who self-disclosed their ASDs to trusted peers felt doing so elicited support and understanding (Altman 2008)."
- "A few had bad experiences when disclosing to peers they didn't know well (Altman 2008)."
- "Many do not disclose to avoid judgment(Altman 2008)."
- "Recommendation: consider self-disclosing to trusted peers (Altman 2008)."
- How do you know who is trustworthy?

Looking For Work First Time: Get a Job, You Bum!

The Working World and ASD

- According to the National Autism Society (NAS): "Only 15% of people with autism are in full time employment, despite the fact that 79% of people with autism on out of work benefits want to work."
- Not to fear, there are services for your child to help him or her not only find employment, but also help him/her hold onto that job (maybe even to the point where they can work independently).
- The most common service your child can receive is a job coach, which often gets started while he or she is going through their transition plan.

Job Coaches

What is a job coach?

- Measurement and personal inventories:
 - Acquiring skills
 - Identifying interests
 - Staying true to one's beliefs and value
 - Recognizing habits
- Adapting to work environment
 - Instruction in hard and soft skills (Things you need to know in order to work: like communication and work place ethic)
 - "Support in building a portfolio, job searching and education in community awareness (NAS 2016)."

Why Is It Hard for ASD People to Find Work?

- According to the National Autism Society (2016) (and from my own experience), it comes from their difficulties interacting with co-workers for the following reasons:
 - Putting themselves in other people's shoes and understanding how others feel about a situation.
 - They like to avoid being in situations where they can't predict what happens next (because of their literal way of thinking).
 - "Understand the concept of danger" a.k.a situations that make them feel uncomfortable like daily work conversations.
 - "Prepare for change and plan for the future."
 - "Cope with change and unfamiliar situations."

Why Are Interviews Hard for People with ASD?

- Difficulties With communication.
- Sensory issues.
- "Meeting someone new in an unfamiliar place (NAS 2016)."

ASD Language: How Would You Like People to Talk to You?

- Avoid idioms and abstract language.
- Avoid hypothetical or abstract questions.
- Open-ended questions are also problematic.
- Clear and concise/ say exactly what you mean!
- Be willing to rephrase questions and duties.

Prep Work

- Applications and cover letters
 - Handwriting: if you have terrible handwriting, I recommend online applications over paper and always double check anything you fill in and have a parent/job coach/teacher look over what you have before you send it in.
 - Write generalized cover letter.
- What job do I actually want?
 - What is my dream job (at that moment and for the future)?
 - Do I meet all the requirements in the job description?
- Mock Interviews
 - Videotape yourself doing a mock interview so you get a visual of the way you present yourself during the interview.

Prep Work Cont.

- Rehearse Q&A
 - Go over common questions that come up in interviews.
 - Come up with answers to these questions that are clear and to the point (most interviewers do not have time and don't want to hear long rambling answers to their questions.)
 - Demonstrate that you know the company you're applying to and be yourself.
- What to wear?
 - Clean cut appearance and proper hygiene, that is the first consideration.
 - Business casual is always a safe bet; kaki pants and a polo shirt (make sure both are wrinkle free!) and dress shoes.

Meeting an Employer's Expectations: Iron That Shirt and Smile!

Getting Ready for Work

- Create a routine.
- Ask yourself, "Am I a morning person?" If not, give yourself extra time in the morning to get ready.
- Prep the night before (keys, wallet/purse, work-related papers by the door, clean clothes ironed and on the hanger.)
- Wake up with plenty of time to shower, dress, and eat breakfast.
- Give yourself plenty of time to get to work.
 - Know public transportation schedules.
 - If you drive, practice your route to work and morning traffic patterns.
 - Try to arrive to work a good 15 to 30 minutes before you need to start working, which will hopefully prevent being late to work.

What Can ASD Person's Employer Do to Help

- Ask an experienced employee to act as mentor for this new employee on any issues they may have with work procedures and work social situations (examples: how to approach the boss vs. fellow employees, conflict resolution, and dealing with consumers).
- Provide a job coach (through an external support system) for "general and specific job assistance (NAS 2016)."
- For other employees (who do not have ASD), the employer could organize a workshop that will teach them "general and specific autism awareness" (for example: the ways to speak to someone on the spectrum and help them meet your expectations).

Managing an ASD Employee

- Use your ASD employee's job coach to help build a bridge between the two of you, in order, to maintain a healthy employment partnership.
- Tips for any given employer with ASD employees (NAS 2016):
 - Do not make assumptions.
 - Use direct and precise explanations.
 - Give detailed instructions for tasks.
 - Be clear about your expectations.

Managing an ASD Employee (Cont.)

- Avoid figurative speech or idioms.
- Show respect for differences (example: that their quirks do not bother you).
- Use written as well as oral instructions.
- Check that you have been understood.
- Make time in the day for feedback.
- Make him or her a member of a team.
- Individual staff training on ASD strengths and difficulties.

Example of ASD Person at Work

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaRqoVDAaQo&feature=youtu.be>

Making Friends at the Workplace

- Tips on interoffice social dynamics (bosses, co-workers, work friends, customers) for the ASD person
 - How can I start a conversation?
 - Appropriate conversation topics vs inappropriate conversation topics.
 - How do I end a conversation?
 - Telling people at work you have ASD.

How Do I Start a Conversation?

- Patience (with other people)
 - Just like in college, you need to find one topic that you and coworkers have in common (example: sports games, popular TV shows, aspects of work) and start building relationships with co-workers that will make getting through any given workday smoother.
- Also it is important to remember that "If the person you would like to talk to is already talking to someone else, especially if it is someone you do not know, it may be better to speak to them later when they are free (NAS 2016)."
- Pay attention during a conversation.
- Remember people's names and say the name when you greet them so they know you are speaking to them.
- Wait for them to greet you before you start talking, which is a signal that you have their attention.

Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Work Conversations

- Appropriate Conversation Topics
 - The weather
 - TV shows
 - How was your weekend?
 - When you start out, questions about work
- Examples of Inappropriate Conversation Topics
 - Critical comments about a person appearance or personality
 - Money
 - Anything that could be taken as: bullying, sexual harassment, or implying that you don't want to work with the person.

How Should I End a Conversation?

- Cues that may suggest the end of a conversation:
 - Not asking questions back.
 - Looking around the room.
 - Excessive yawning.
 - Saying they have something else to do at the moment.
 - Slowly moving away from the other person.

Telling People at Work You Have ASD

- You (as someone who has ASD) do not have to be an expert on ASD if you decide to ever disclose to your co-workers about it. It is more important to know how ASD specifically affects you and any impairments that may come along with your autistic characteristics.
- Tell them:
 - How you communicate and receive information best (ex. in person, written out expectations, via-email).
 - You have difficulty displaying empathy or reading facial expressions even though you care about others.
 - "Social interaction - Do you prefer to be alone? Do you find it difficult to make friends? Do you find it difficult to keep a conversation going (NAS 2016)?"

The Sweet Taste of Success

• Things I never thought I would do (due to being on spectrum):

- ✓ Group of real friends.
- ✓ Holding down a job (I have held down a job for the past 4 years).
- ✓ Getting married (I got married this year).
- ✓ Live without my parent's help (with basic needs, moneywise, and daily living skills). I now live in my own house which I manage (with the help of my wife, of course).
- ✓ Presenting at an autism conference.