Information for students with autism

Studying at university can be incredibly rewarding and exciting and many students with autism have strengths which can lead to them achieving very 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 guide looks at some of the common challenges that students with autism may face 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 people with autism. Starting at university brings a change in environment 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 students with autism.



## Ways that you may want to prepare before you start your degree:

* Attend open days and get used to the university environment. In particular, familiarise yourself with the library, restaurants and your faculty.
* Check the university website for updates on access to the library, what events are on, and arrangements for blended learning during the pandemic [**www.wlv.ac.uk/coronavirus**](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/coronavirus)
* If you are living away from home, visit the accommodation you will be staying in. Make sure that you book an appointment first.
* If you are living away from home, start building independence skills i.e. cooking, washing.
* If you are new to Wolverhampton, familiarise yourself with the town centre and local supermarkets (this is Asda if you are living in University accommodation)
* Attend welcome events organised by the university.
* If you live locally, 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.
* Keep a familiar routine if possible. For example try to maintain regular bedtimes and times to get up and eat at similar times.
* Attend the autism social group – this group runs throughout the year so you can meet other students before starting your degree. The group meets weekly on a Tuesday, 2pm to 3pm and is currently online on Microsoft Teams during the pandemic. For more details email [**ascgroup@wlv.ac.uk**](mailto:ascgroup@wlv.ac.uk)**.**

# 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. (see an example time planner at the end of this guide). 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. This information can be found on CANVAS.
* If you have a Specialist Mentor or Specialist Tutor, ask for their support in finding a method of organisation that suits you.

# 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;

* Declare your need for support as soon as you can to the SSW (Student Support and Wellbeing) department. If you haven’t already done so, register with SSW, complete a [**Self-Declaration form**](https://www.wlv.ac.uk/current-students/student-support/student-support-and-wellbeing-ssw/self-declaration-form/). To speak to one of our Disability and Inclusion team about support options please then email [**ssw@wlv.ac.uk**](https://exchcas.unv.wlv.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=Z5hZfROlNX3E1ZGYBOx8leqp54pzie1QqDBeg4BzLUQl9_3svgnXCA..&URL=mailto%3assw%40wlv.ac.uk)
* Apply for Disabled Students Allowances before starting university.  You may be entitled to specific apps and 1:1 support to help you in your studies.
* Find out who your SSW Disability and Inclusion Advisor is by contacting SSW.
* When you have your letter from Student Finance saying 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. You can find the number to call and email to contact on your letter. SSW can help you make contact if you want.  Do this as soon as possible to get your support set up.
* It helps to meet your Specialist Mentor and/or Specialist Tutor in Welcome 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.
* When you register with SSW, the Disability and Inclusion Team will (with your permission) create a Tutor Awareness Sheet (TAS), which lets your academic team know about any support you may need to access your studies. Your lecturers and academic staff will have access to your TAS but it may be advisable to email them a copy at the start of the year.  They will have varying understanding of autism so you may wish to ask your Disability and Inclusion Advisor if you feel you would like them to help you communicate with your academic team.
* Look through your TAS, which is available on e:Vision, and contact your Disability and Inclusion Advisor if there is anything that you feel is missing or needs to be changed.  A TAS for someone with autism may include the following:
  + Special consideration with group work – you may be able to work with a smaller
  + group; or possibly in a pair/alone.
  + Automatic 7 day extension for the submission of work
  + Advance notification of any timetable changes
  + Extra time in exams (depending on evidence)
  + Separate room in exams (depending on evidence)
* Don't be afraid to ask for help – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Team can offer support to students who are feeling overwhelmed and/or are experiencing difficulties with their mental health. They can be accessed by following this link to register for mental health support: [**Online Registration form**.](https://www.wlv.ac.uk/current-students/student-support/mental-health-and-wellbeing-advice/mental-health-and-wellbeing-registration/)You could also talk to your Specialist Mentor (if you have one) about stress. It may also be useful to chat to your GP to see if they can offer help outside of the university if you feel this would benefit you.

# Academic

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

Students with autism 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. This information can be found on CANVAS. It can be helpful to put hand in dates into a diary, wall planner etc.
* Spend time familiarising yourself with CANVAS once you have your log in details.
* Perfectionism - does striving for perfectionism affect you? This can be an issue for people with autism, see suggested resources below.
* Record lectures – use a Dictaphone or a recording app on your phone to record lectures. 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 they 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.
* Email or give a paper copy of you Tutor Awareness Sheet (TAS) to your lecturers.
* 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 xxx
  + you may change to a less formal opening if they reply with “Hi"
  + end with ‘Kind regards’ or ‘many thanks’
  + always be polite and state your query clearly.

# Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety can be an issue for students with autism. 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 – the Mental Health and Wellbeing Team can offer support to students who are feeling overwhelmed and/or are experiencing difficulties with their mental health. They can be accessed by following this link to register for mental health support: [**Online Registration form**](https://www.wlv.ac.uk/current-students/student-support/mental-health-and-wellbeing-advice/mental-health-and-wellbeing-registration/). You could also talk to your Specialist Mentor (if you have one) about stress. It may also be useful to chat to your GP to see if they can offer help outside of the university if you feel this would benefit you.
* Also see the useful resources we’ve added at the end of this guide.

# 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 chit chat. The AUTISM social group is a university ran weekly social group for students with autism.
* There are many societies in Student’s Union; many students enjoy the games society or the anime society for example. Speak to your Specialist 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. Find a list of societies available at University of Wolverhampton Students’ Union at [**https://www.wolvesunion.org/**](https://www.wolvesunion.org/)**.**
* Know how to deal with street preachers/sales people/charity chuggers that you may come across when you are in Wolverhampton 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'
* Initiate conversation with other students early on - It can be difficult to know how to start a conversation with other students. In the early days, 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?

# decorative 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 key 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 rolling menu so they know that they eat, for example, spaghetti bolognaise 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 - Asda can get very busy at peak times but is very quiet at 10pm, for example. You could also take advantage of the click and collect service and order your shopping online, it is then picked and taken to the lockers in the Asda car park which you just collect and is released with a code which is emailed to you, 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 [**https://www.autism.org.uk/about/adult-life/managing-money.aspx**](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/adult-life/managing-money.aspx)

# deocrative Sensory Issues

Many students with autism 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 of this guide).
* Ear defenders/headphones can be useful in accommodation or on the bus if you have sensory issues. The university (particularly city campus) can get very busy at certain times but there are quieter places to go if feeling overwhelmed such as the Chaplaincy.
* 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.

## 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..."*

# Managing Self-Isolation due to Covid-19

Check the main website for updates regarding the Covid-19 pandemic arrangements at university [**www.wlv.ac.uk/coronavirus**](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/coronavirus)

If you have to isolate because you are displaying symptoms or because you have additional health issues you may consider the following;

* Keep a routine to help reduce anxiety
* Try to always get up and go to bed at the same time to ensure that your sleep is disrupted as little as possible
* Keep in contact with friends and family through social media/internet/gaming
* Keep busy: plan your day using the time planner above.
* View this as an opportunity to do things that you may not had time to do before. Are there any books that you have wanted to read for ages but haven’t had time? Have you wanted to try a new hobby? Are there any films that you would like to watch, or a new language you would like to learn?
* Finish any assignments and course reading that you have outstanding – this is a great time to be free from distractions.
* Think about relaxation techniques – apps such as Headspace, Calm are good.
* If you are feeling ill and can’t meet you uni assessment submission dates, apply for extenuating circumstances via e:Vision and contact your module leader or personal tutor.
* Identify official and well informed sources of information - Gov.uk for information on the government strategy and NHS for information on the symptoms.
* Connect with friends and family via internet/calls/texts/online gaming.
* Eat a healthy diet.
* Follow hand washing guidelines.
* Remind yourself that this situation is temporary and eventually you will return to something like you old routines.

# Useful Links and Resources

**National Autistic Society:** [**https://www.autism.org.uk/**](https://www.autism.org.uk/)

**Chris Packham talks about his university experiences;**

[**https://thelincolnite.co.uk/2018/05/chris-packham-speaks-autism-university/**](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:** [**http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/**](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/)

[**https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/**](https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/)

**Follow this link for immediate help if you are struggling with suicidal thoughts:**[**http://stayingsafe.net/**](https://exchcas.unv.wlv.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=w88dDW8WdbOip-POM_CHjAxfQV7UIQwvPxqSD-P36S_mr96RegTXCA..&URL=http%3a%2f%2fstayingsafe.net%2f)

**Perfectionism**

[**http://www.myaspergerschild.com/2013/02/aspergers-children-and-problems-with.html**](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**](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/**](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**](http://www.snagglebox.com/article/autism-perfectionism)

## Additional things to try to help calm anxiety or sensory calming:

**Visual resources**

Blowing bubbles, kaleidoscopes, reflective/ transparent materials.

**Tactile resources**

PlayDoh, Thera Putty, shaving foam, soft and/or rough fabrics/materials.

**Auditory resources**

Music or other auditory stimuli through headphones.

**Taste and smell resources**

Aromatherapy oils, foods and spices.

**Proprioceptive activities**

Rolling over an exercise ball, jumping on a trampette, carrying heavy books, pushing against walls, weighted blanket

**Vestibular resources**

Climbing equipment that allows hanging upside down or equipment that provide balancing opportunities

**Example Timetable:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
| 8am | Get up and have breakfast |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9am | Lecture for 4xx001 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10am | Break for Skyping mom |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11am | Do uni assessment |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12 | lunch |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1pm | Exercise |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2pm | Watch film |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3pm |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4pm | Do uni assessment |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6pm | Tea |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7pm | Gaming |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9pm | Shower |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10pm | Read book |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11pm | Meditation and sleep |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Anxiety plan**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Level of anxiety | Anxious behaviours | Things that help reduce anxiety |
| 5 |  |  |
| 4 |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |
| 1 |  |  |

\*Anxious behaviours could be rocking, flapping, procrastinating for example

\*\*Things that may help reduce anxiety could be calling mom, exercise, meditation for example

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