

Being on the Autism Spectrum

About [one in 100](#) people are on the autism spectrum, so the chances are that some students have been, or will be, diagnosed as autistic.



The condition can have a considerable effect on how well a student is able to cope at university, which involves decisions about what to study and whether to leave the familiarity of home; navigating a new campus; and relating to teaching staff and other students.

Impacts on Academic Life

Typical academic situations such as group work and taking notes in lectures can present real challenges for those who have difficulty understanding unwritten social rules.



Of course, many students experience these challenges. But while most can adapt reasonably quickly, autistic students can have higher levels of anxiety, and, without support, may disengage, or even drop out, despite being academically competent.

Focus on strengths

The focus of support is too often on deficits and difficulties. For an autistic student, it is more helpful to identify strengths and think about how these can contribute to studies. Attention to detail, for example, can be a great asset when managing time and resources in a group project.



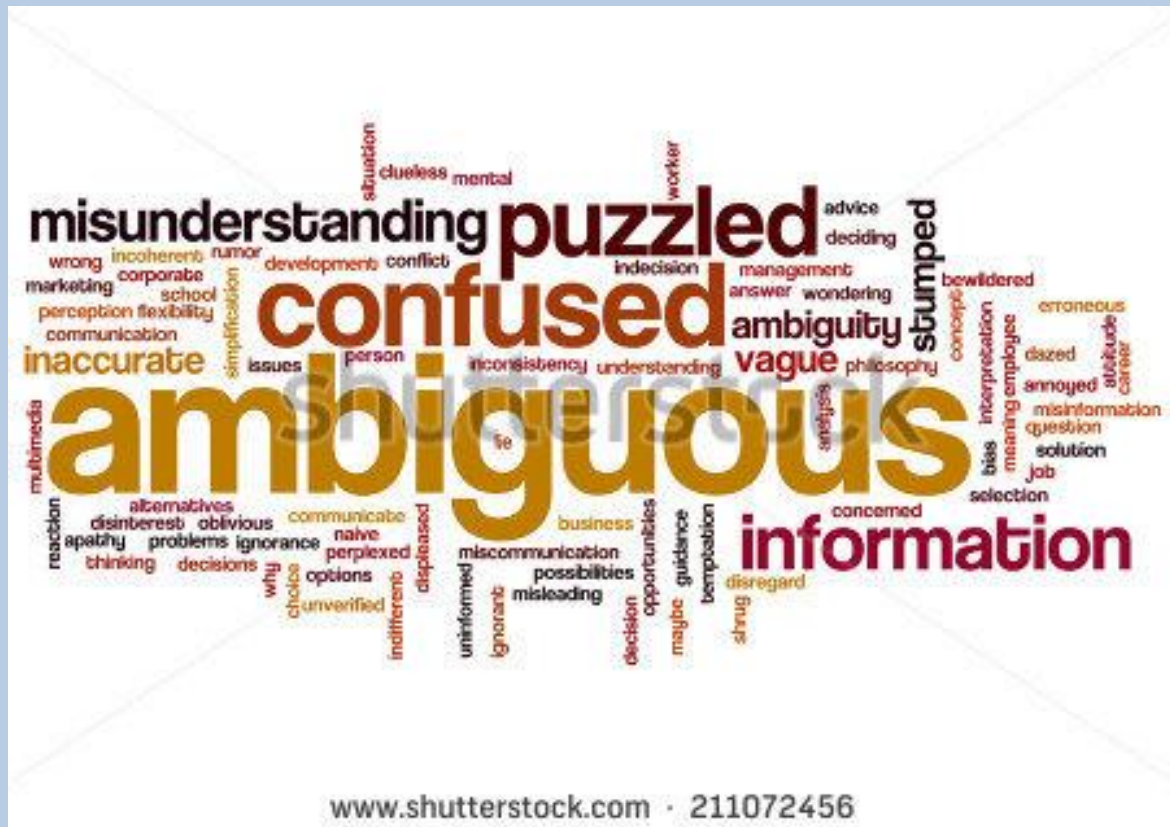
Be aware of the sensory environment

Autistic students can become stressed by busy spaces so it is important to understand individual needs or requirements. Rooms which have visual and auditory distractions may prevent autistic students from focusing; however, this can be managed with coping strategies. If room allocations change, it is helpful to have as much notice as possible to familiarise oneself with the new location and how to get there.



Avoid ambiguity

Information given to students should be clear, concise and unambiguous, especially in assignments and exams. Autistic students are quick to spot phrases that can be interpreted in multiple ways, and unexpected choices can stop them in their tracks completely. This does not mean that it is always possible to avoid ambiguity; sometimes there is a justified pedagogical reason to be vague. Don't be afraid to ask and check that everything is fully understood.



Plan ahead

It is not always possible to provide lecture materials in advance; however, the university's preferred strategy is that they are available 48 hours in advance. Autistic students in particular like to know what's coming so they can prepare themselves mentally. Autistic students can also find themselves focusing on one task at the exclusion of others; therefore, effective time management is important to avoid this happening.



A useful guidance for teaching staff:

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/sites/students/files/guidance_for_staff_working_with_students_with_autistic_spectrum_disorders.pdf

A short video on sensory overload - "Can you make it to the end?"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lr4_dOorquQ

Group Work

Proactive support should be provided for students working in groups and intervention should take place when communication appears to fail, when the division of work is unfair, or any member of the group is excluded by others. It is advisable for a group to set ground rules from the start.

Students with autism should be asked whether they feel comfortable telling others about any possible challenges. Generally, this is a good idea (if their peers have enough knowledge about what this means).



Be positive



Autistic students may prefer habitual actions such as sitting in the same seat, wearing a hat, hoodie or having a stress toy. Students should be reassured that they can leave a teaching session if they feel anxious or overwhelmed, and that they will not be criticised or penalised for doing so.

