

# Autism Spectrum Disorder: Student Concerns & Considerations

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# Autism, Considered

- A lifelong disorder that begins in early childhood
  - Believed to be related to brain functioning (Neurodevelopmental)
  - *How early* depends on the person
- Currently viewed as a “Spectrum”
  - In other words, people vary significantly in the symptoms that they experience and how they progress

# Diagnosis

- The current system in the US is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM5)*.
- However, *International Classification of Diseases, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, Clinical Modification (ICD-10CM)* can also be used.
- The system used can change what is actually diagnosed and the terms used.

# Diagnosis

- For the majority of this presentation, we are going to view the diagnosis as presented in the DSM5
  - Autism Spectrum Disorder
- However, there are a few alternate terms worth mentioning:
  - Asperger's Syndrome
  - High Functioning Autism
  - Pervasive Developmental Delay
  - Nonverbal Learning Disorder
  - Social (Pragmatic) Language Disorder

# Diagnosis

- Note: The use of alternate diagnostic terms or codes is not necessarily wrong:
  - Can be used for continuity
  - Can be a reflection of older documentation
  - Can be a reflection of older measures used
  - Can be used to highlight aspects of a client's presentation

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Diagnosis is related to two categories of impairment:
  - Social Communication/Social Interaction
    - Problems with social or emotional give and take
    - Poor understanding of relationships or certain interactions
    - Difficulty establishing or maintaining relationships
    - Problems with nonverbal aspects of communication
  - Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors/Interests/Activities
    - Repetitive or stereotyped behaviors or speech
    - Inflexibility, need for routine, or rigid patterns of behavior
    - Focus on interests that are intense or atypical in some way
    - Atypical reactivity to some sensory stimuli

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Importantly, students on the spectrum have variable problems in social communication and restrictive/repetitive behaviors
- A current diagnosis *may* indicate what seemed to be the larger issue at the time, but it is a rough estimate
  - DSM includes specifiers that indicate severity and whether or not language and intellectual impairment are present
- Even students with broadly similar symptom severity may have very different needs

# ASD Associated Issues

- The following problems are not central to ASD, but often a part of it:
  - Problems with language
  - Poor intellectual functioning
  - Problems with executive functioning, attention, organization
  - Poor motor control
  - Social anxiety
  - Problems managing overwhelming feelings
- Of course, students with ASD may have other diagnoses as well
  - Most common at college level: ADHD, Anxiety, Depression



# Transitioning to College

- Students on the spectrum tend to have similar challenges in high school as when they transition to college
  - However, support is often different at that level, so awareness can be tricky
    - One study found that parents were typically more aware of needs than the student
  - Three broad areas were identified as problematic across secondary and postsecondary school during transition
    - Social skills, communication, executive functioning

# Transitioning to College

- Positive transition outcomes were associated with:
  - Greater motivation to attend college
  - Greater disability awareness
  - More intentional family support
  - Good transition planning
  - Clear post college goals

# Students on the Spectrum in College

- College age students on the spectrum:
  - Much more likely to be male than female
  - More likely to be LGBT than other students
  - Less likely to be married
  - Less likely to participate in internships, field placements, and other career oriented experiences
  - Less likely to have problems with sleep or substance use
- Graduation rate is approximately 40%, compared to 60% for students without a disability

# Students on the Spectrum in College

- Other students may have misunderstandings and prejudice against students on the spectrum
- Other students are more likely to exclude students on the spectrum from graded tasks
  - Not necessarily social exclusion, however
- Education and training can help lower stigma somewhat.

# Difficulties in College

- Broadly, ASD students do not seem to experience greater impairment in college than to students with other disabilities
  - However, they experienced some issues to a greater extent than did students with other disabilities.
- Similarity of problems include:
  - Worse GPAs
  - More likely to fail a course
  - More likely to need a remedial course
  - Worse physical and mental health
  - Greater anxiety

# Difficulties in College

- Problems specific to students on the spectrum:
  - Self-advocacy
  - Managing emotions
  - Managing personal and adaptive skills
  - Low levels of belonging—greater bullying
  - Unlikely to participate in collaborative learning
- BUT similar academic engagement to students without disabilities
  - Actually students on the spectrum had *better* engagement than other groups at four year schools

# Difficulties in College

- Struggling with new situations and unexpected changes
  - Hard to handle large amount of new information and choices
  - Lack of structure and predictability
- Exhausting but necessary social contacts
  - May know how important social contacts are in college, but have difficulty with them
  - Group projects or in-class discussions
- Processing information and time management
  - May experience sensory overload or have trouble with processing a lot of incoming information
  - Interpreting syllabi or assignments
  - Difficult to structure own time effectively

# Difficulties in College

- Doubts about disclosure
  - Worries about how others will understand their condition and whether or not they should seek services
- Mental health issues
  - Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed at times



# Use of Accommodations

- Generally speaking, students on the spectrum find typical accommodations helpful in college
  - But may struggle with negotiating with professors
- Extended time on tests and assignments: more effective for those with poor cognitive flexibility, academic skills, and attention
- Small group testing: more effective for those with stereotyped or repetitive movements

# Use of Accommodations

- Advance notice of changes to classes or assignments: better for those with an oversensitivity to changes
- Visual time indication: most helpful to those with poor planning and organization
- Academic support/tutoring/training: helpful for those with poor planning and organization
  - A different study writing lab/tutoring were helpful if writing was a specific issue

# Treatment

- Transition program for students on the spectrum
  - Better completion of first year, better GPA as compared to students on the spectrum without such a program
- Problem solving group therapy
  - Focused on navigating specific problems in a semester with a group of students on the spectrum
  - Better at problem solving challenges later and appreciated a group with other ASD individuals
- Social skills training with video modeling
  - Helps with learning specific social behaviors
  - More intensive can be helpful too

# Questions?



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