

Focus on Disability Awareness

An Occasional Bulletin from the Office of Disability Services for LVC Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's Syndrome is a chronic neurodevelopmental disorder that is considered to be part of the spectrum of autistic disorders. It presents most noticeably as a disorder of social cognition and communication. The main clinical features include:

- lack of empathy, ability to take another's perspective
- naïve, inappropriate, one-sided interaction with others
- little or no ability to form friendships
- social anxiety
- pedantic, repetitive speech
- intense absorption in certain subjects, often involving minutia (e.g., train schedules, numbers, maps)
- poor non-verbal communication, including limited use of gestures and facial expressions
- clumsy, ill-coordinated movements, odd postures or mannerisms
- difficulty establishing and maintaining eye-contact

Adolescents with Asperger's Disorder are usually aware of their social isolation and desire friendships, but frequently their attempts to join in social activities are met with ridicule or rejection. Probably due to abnormalities in the functioning of the temporal lobes and limbic system of the brain, these individuals have little ability to perceive and understand emotions, to perceive nuances of facial expression, gestures, posture, and social distance. Thus, they can not readily use these cues as feedback that guides their social interaction. Others quickly notice and react to their idiosyncratic behaviors and failure to conform to social norms.

Impairment in the social use of language is a truly handicapping aspect of the disorder. Common idioms (e.g., "lend me your ear") are often not understood, and sarcasm is frequently misinterpreted because tone of voice is not sufficiently attended to. Individuals with Asperger's usually cannot "get the hint," and need people to speak unambiguously and directly in order to receive the intended message. Humor (other than slapstick) can be especially difficult to understand, as people with Asperger's tend to interpret verbal communication quite literally, failing to understand hidden meaning or obscure reference to other situations. Because they have extraordinary difficulty presupposing the knowledge, expectations, and beliefs of others, and because they fail to adjust the content and style of their speech in accordance with contextual cues, individuals with Asperger's typically demonstrate poor conversational ability. They have little understanding of how much background information others will need in conversation, and of what topics are socially appropriate and likely to be of interest to others. Difficulty in sensing the gist of a conversation and in perceiving how others' current comments relate to what has just been said often causes the person with Asperger's to speak tangentially. Individuals with Asperger's also lack

awareness of when to speak formally or colloquially. Additionally, there are often mild problems with articulation and prosody, or the rhythm and melody of speech.

Students with Asperger's usually have poor gross and fine motor skills.

Recent

neuroimaging studies have shown that the part of the brain known as the cerebellum is smaller in many people with Asperger's. The cerebellum regulates posture, balance, one's limb movements and the timing of those movements. Thus, gait may seem stiff or

peculiar and accompanying arm swing may be lacking. These students seem "clumsy," and tend to avoid sports due to poor perceptual-motor skills (movement in response to what is seen or heard). Handwriting may be nearly illegible, necessitating the use of word processors or other assistive technology.

Although students with Asperger's possess average or above average intelligence as measured by standard intelligence tests, the syndrome usually presents with certain cognitive difficulties that interfere with learning. Executive functions, or those skills that allow one to organize and plan, to initiate or inhibit behavior, to self-monitor performance, and to "switch gears" in midstream when a new pattern of responding is called for, are typically impaired. This is thought to be due to dysfunction of the frontal lobes of the brain. These students are often cognitively inflexible - they have great difficulty considering points of view that differ from their own, or in generating alternative solutions when encountering obstacles. The student with Asperger's may have great difficulty in coping with being wrong. There is frequently impairment in the ability to generalize what one has learned in one situation to other situations, as similarities in situations go unnoticed.

Some students with Asperger's are hyperlexic - that is, they have exceptional word recognition skills but poor comprehension of what is being read. Abstract thinking is often difficult for these students, who tend to be concrete in their concept formations.

Although individuals with Asperger's have many significant deficits, they also have many personal strengths. They are typically hard workers, and perhaps because of the difficulty they have in anticipating other's thoughts, expectations or actions, they are rarely manipulative or dishonest. Rote memory skills tend to be well-developed in these individuals, allowing them to amass impressive stores of factual information on topics of interest to them.

Accommodations for Students with Asperger's Syndrome

There are numerous accommodations and modifications to the learning environment that can help college students with Asperger's:

- taking exams in distraction-reduced rooms (many students with Asperger's have sensory sensitivities and/or attentional deficits).
- extended time on exams (comprehension of test questions is improved when anxiety associated with time constraints is tempered).
- access to word processors whenever written work is required, including essay exams.
- clear and direct oral communication - a non-confrontational, objective, and emotionally detached style of interaction is best received by the student with Asperger's.
- avoidance of use of figurative language.

- where possible, use concrete, "real-life" examples to illustrate abstract concepts.
- where possible, allow individual projects in lieu of group projects
- allow the student to leave the classroom for brief periods, as needed, to calm down or regain composure should he or she become agitated.
- remember not to automatically interpret unusual social behaviors as being intentionally rude or attention-seeking!