

Autism and SPELL in Higher Education

The Autism Spectrum

Autism is a spectrum condition. Autistic people have different skills and support needs that often depends on stress and anxiety, whether the environment meets the person's needs and how autism-aware and friendly other people are.

Defining Autism

According to current diagnostic criteria, a person diagnosed on the autism spectrum must show difficulties in social interaction and communication, rigid or repetitive interests (which may also include sensory processing differences).

Social communication and interaction examples:-

- Language taken literally – may struggle with understanding idioms, metaphors or sarcasm.
- More time taken to process and react to what is happening.
- Struggle to read social cues and follow unwritten social rules.

Restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests examples:-

- Different interests to many of their peers.
- Passionately interested in a particular object or subject.
- Planning and organising their life may be very hard – e.g. meeting deadlines, scheduling, etc.

Challenges Faced by Autistic Students

- The social and physical environment
- Lack of appropriate support
- Unrealistic expectations by the student
- Challenges concerning assessments (even when mastering the subject)
- Transitioning to adult like requiring more effort than it would for the average student.

SPELL Framework

SPELL is about enabling support through adapting the environment and approaches.

- *Structure* – using structure to make the environment and processes more predictable, accessible and safe.
- *Positive* approaches and expectations – recognising potential and strengths.
- *Empathy* – understanding, experiencing and relating to autistic perspective.
- *Low arousal* – adjusting the environment and approaches.
- *Links* – forming partnerships, sharing information and working alongside.

SPELL:

- Is a framework of principles
- Provides structure for shaping support
- Values the individual
- Incorporates respectful interventions
- Complements other evidence-based approaches
- Is flexible

Using structure to reduce uncertainty

Structure makes the world a more predictable, accessible and safer space. Creating structured environments using visual information support autistic people.

<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University campus and buildings • Halls of residence • People and university staff • Town, city, wider area and facilities 	<p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide picture and text information and directions for all university buildings, ideally down to room level • Photos of staff and where they are based • Information about other areas of student life (shops, banks, restaurants)
<p>Sessions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency • Predictability • Clarifying expectations 	<p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punctuality – always be on time • Location • Agreed agenda • Write down actions • Mentor/student contracting
<p>Academic tasks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lectures • Assignments and reading lists • Communicating feedback 	<p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear planning – timetables, diaries, checklists • Provide slides and handouts in advance, consider recording lectures on audio or video • Weekly office hours for meeting with staff • What is expected from an assignment – content, deadline • Clarify what is meant by 'reading list' or 'suggested reading' • Provide direct unambiguous feedback
<p>Time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning time • Using timers • Reminders • Lists 	<p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of day planners • Use of week planners
<p>Living independently</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travelling • Cleaning and tidying • Keeping on time • Health and well-being • Finding accommodation 	<p>Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break down tasks into manageable parts and use reminders • Schedule in household activities and explain rules • Task analysis • Schedules in activities that help keep healthy • Plan and prepare for changes in accommodation

Spending time with other people

- Social areas
- Student union
- Halls of residence rules

Strategies

- Prepare, create rules, set boundaries, make explicit
- Use interests to encourage and extend interactions
- Explain the unwritten rules of University
- Non-verbal communication may be misunderstood
- Support students to plan unstructured time
- Increase education of autism within student community

Links**Start with person-centred principles**

- Autistic people and their family and carers are our partners
- Working in partnership is vital – particularly if a large network of people supports the person.
- Planned transitions
- Listen, reflect and explain
- Proactively strengthen connections

Strategies

- Consistent communication between autistic student and others
- Support student in understanding their autism
- Regularly review support requirements
- Increased awareness of autism across university
- Autistic community

Summary**We all need:**

- Structure
- To be seen positively
- To be valued
- To pursue our interests
- To have empathy for our point of view and for others
- To reduce unhealthy stress and confrontation in our lives
- To be treated fairly and consistently

“One way I think about life is that everyone is dealt a deck of cards when they are born...to provide support to an autistic person you have to understand their unique perspective, thinking about their particular deck of cards.”

Robyn Steward

Information taken from The National Autism Society – Autism and SPELL in Higher Education Handbook. For more information on any of the strategies, please contact studentmentoring@southwales.ac.uk