



Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum

This booklet was created as part of the Faculty Learning Community on Supporting Learning for Students on the Autism Spectrum, 2019 – 2020.

1. How to talk to or about autistic people?

Some people on the autism spectrum prefer identity-first language: “autistic person.” Others like person-first language: “person with autism.” In this booklet and video series, we will be using the terms “autistic person/individual” and/or “person/individual on the autism spectrum.”

It is best to ask how the person on the autism spectrum would like to be addressed. Some of them have a preference and others simply don't, and that's okay.

Autism is only a part of the person. There is so much more to the person beyond autism. While talking about autistic people, we can use respectful language and value their contribution to our society.

2. Why is autism called a spectrum?

That's because children and adults on the autism spectrum have a range of abilities and challenges. Just like everyone else, each autistic individual is different and may need help with different things. For example, one autistic student in your class may need help with taking notes in class and another student may be an excellent note-taker but may have challenges staying on schedule to complete assignments. These challenges may change with time or may stay the same.

3. Common myths on autism

(a) Autistic people do not speak.

All autistic individuals communicate! Some may use words to communicate; some may use signs or gestures; some may communicate through a device such as a mobile phone or electronic tablet, and some may show us how they feel through their actions.

(b) Autistic people are rude.

People on the autism spectrum may have a different style of communicating – a communication style that is different from what one has typically heard or experienced. They may not like or engage in small talk. They may have a different sense of humor. Some autistic individuals may have challenges in understanding sarcasm and/or jokes that other non-autistic people understand. They may take longer to respond to a question or a comment and may not be responsive instantly. Some autistic individuals are more

direct and do not sugarcoat when they speak. Most people on the autism spectrum are “honest.” They do not intend to be rude or hurt anyone’s feelings. Perhaps something a non-autistic person says or does can be perceived as rude by an autistic person. Have you thought of that?

(c) All autistic individuals are savants.

A savant is a label given to someone with extraordinary skills in some area. For example, the ability to remember and define all the words in a dictionary or the ability to identify patterns in a large array of numbers. Very few autistic individuals are considered savants. This means that they have extra-ordinary skills in one or more areas. They may need support in other areas. Think of it this way; you may be really good at solving the New York Times crosswords every morning but cooking a meal may not be easy for you.

(d) All autistic students are in STEM or computer science majors.

This is a common myth. At Metropolitan State University of Denver and other universities, there are students who enjoy and take courses in a wide range of majors including the Arts, Sciences, Business, Engineering, Education, and Health Sciences. Students on the autism spectrum also enroll and complete both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

(e) Autistic individuals like to be alone and not mingle.

People on the autism spectrum socialize differently. They like to have friends and like to have relationships just like non-autistic individuals. Some people on the autism spectrum may not know how to make friends in a way that appeals to most non-autistic people, but they seek acceptance and understanding from everyone. Some autistic individuals may find socializing in a non-autistic way highly overwhelming because socializing requires a lot of energy. Sometimes, socialization also means masking – masking of autistic characteristics and masking of differences. When we try to mask our identity, we experience anxiety. Many autistic individuals try to mask their true nature in an attempt to fit in and be understood by non-autistic individuals.

(f) Autistic individuals do not have friends.

There are autistic individuals who have friends and those who do not. Some may have a deep and meaningful friendship with one or many individuals, and others may not. Some may have friends they hang out with and meet face-to-face and others may have online friends through social media and/or gaming. All autistic individuals like to have friends.

(g) All autistic individuals have disruptive or aggressive behaviors.

This is a highly common myth; something that has even brought about fear among people who do not understand autism or autistic persons. Sometimes, a lot is going on in the mind of an autistic person. Bright lights in the room, noise levels in the class, competing or approaching due dates, or lack of understanding from peers and professors may be

overwhelming and frustrating. This sense of overwhelm can result in an aggressive behavior toward themselves or toward others. Some autistic individuals may cry, and some may be aggressive. Not all individuals on the autism spectrum are aggressive, and they do not want to be. Many autistic adults feel embarrassed and sorry after an episode of meltdown. When we practice more understanding of autistic individuals, we can help reduce difficult experiences for everyone.

(h) Autistic individuals are visual thinkers and have advanced visuo-spatial skills.

Some autistic individuals do. Temple Grandin, an autistic professor and renowned speaker, talks about her ability to see things in pictures. This is an ability that she possesses. Not all autistic individuals are visual thinkers; some are. However, visual supports help everyone, especially when combined with other senses such as hearing and touch.

(i) Autistic individuals cannot work in jobs that involve interpersonal interaction.

Autistic individuals can and do work in any job they choose or enjoy. Some autistic people may enjoy interacting with others at work and some may not; that is very similar to preferences of non-autistic people. There are chefs, professors, engineers, healthcare workers, landscape designers, film makers, fitness trainers, entrepreneurs, etc. who are autistic. Some autistic people may often need specific accommodations in their workplace and may need to advocate for these. With appropriate and relevant supports in place, autistic individuals can work in any job or profession. Workplaces need all kinds of individuals and all kinds of skillsets. As for everybody, when the skillset of the individual matches with what is required in the job, work is successful.

(j) People of diversity cannot be autistic.

There are autistic children and adults in every race, culture, and ethnicity. There are autistic individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds. There are autistic women, men, and those who identify with a transgender or non-binary identity. That said, socio-economic status (SES) seems to be a huge factor that influences age/time of diagnosis in the United States.

(k) Autistic individuals are intellectually disabled.

Intellectual disability is a developmental disability like autism. There are autistic individuals who have intellectual disability and there are those who do not. People with intellectual disability may have different ways of learning when compared to those on the autism spectrum.

(i) Only boys have autism

First, autism is not something a person “has.” A large majority of individuals on the autism spectrum are male. However, many girls and women identify as autistic. Many

women experience autism differently. For example, many women on the autism spectrum tend to hide their social or communication challenges and may try harder to fit in with social norms as imposed by non-autistic peers. As a result, many women do not receive a diagnosis of autism until they are adults.

(j) Autism is a mental health disorder

No! Autism is not a mental health disorder. While it is not common for toddlers and preschoolers on the autism spectrum to experience mental health challenges, anxiety, depression, and elevated stress levels among other mental health conditions are common in adolescents and adults on the autism spectrum. As children grow older, their social demands increase. Being a teenager or being a college student is difficult for everyone.

We have to, as a society, think of and implement ideas to decrease the anxiety that we cause for our neurodiverse peers.

(k) Autism can be “cured” or “fixed” with medications/therapies

After reading this document, you may have figured that autism is not a disease and not something that stays with a person for a few years and then goes away. There are no medications or treatments that can “fix” autism. In fact, autistic self-advocates around the world ask that we do not go about fixing them or finding ways to fix them, and that we do not try to convert them to become “normal.”

Everyone has strengths and everyone has challenges, and our role is to merely accept and acknowledge these differences and make an effort to understand people who are different from us. Autism does not make a person any less valuable or any less lovable. So, autism does not need fixing.

4. What are common issues that face autistic college students?

- There are several adults who may be diagnosed late as an adult or may have never received a diagnosis.
- Students who have had a previous diagnosis may be confused on whether they want to disclose their diagnosis to peers and professors or not. They worry about the consequences of disclosing their diagnosis. Disclosure is an individual choice.
- Some students on the autism spectrum may have challenges with advocating for themselves and making decisions for themselves.
- Many college students on the autism spectrum get bullied college by peers.
- College students on the autism spectrum may also experience a sense of isolation.
- Professors, advisors, and counselors may not understand autism and individuals on the autism spectrum, and this may lead to autistic stigma.

5. How can I interact better with a student on the autism spectrum?

- Listen carefully and pay attention to how the student communicates.
- Show respect and show understanding of the individual. Autism is not a disease and having a diagnosis of autism is not sad. So, do not sympathize with the student.

- Be honest, clear, and direct in your communication. Don't think something and say something else.
- Encourage the autistic student to take responsibility, appreciate initiative and effort, and create opportunities for success.
- Support and encourage self-advocacy and independence.
- Finally, show the student that they can be equal contributors to society.

6. Please provide some tips on how I can best advise a student on the autism spectrum during office hours or other advising appointments?

- Before your first meeting, introduce yourself via email or a phone call and ask the student to come to the meeting with a list of questions (for example, three questions) that they'd like to have answered during the meeting.
- Ask them if they know where to find you and send them directions preferably using visual directions if you plan on meeting with the student in person. If you plan on meeting the student virtually, include directions on how to access the virtual platform.
- During your meeting, have a clear agenda that you share with the student.
- Spend the first few minutes of your time listening to the student and the student's questions and/or concerns.
- Let the student know that you are here to help and advise, but that you may not know the answers to all questions.
- In your advising, use explicit instructions (clear distinct pathways and directions). Do not imply or sugar coat.
- Be highly task oriented.
- Avoid using any non-literal language/figurative language (for example, "*this doesn't hold water*") and if you do use an expression, explain or reiterate what you meant. Many autistic individuals understand non-literal language, but some may find it challenging. This is good practice even for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- If it is possible to have notes, a sequence of directions or a visual map, please do so.
- If there are questions that you do not know the answers to, state in a clear way that you'd be willing to find out additional information for the student.

7. What are three most helpful strategies to support autistic students in the classroom?

There are several strategies that we can use to support students on the autism spectrum. We are going to focus on three of those. **We want to emphasize that these strategies will be applicable to all students.**

1. Increase the structure of your courses while you design the course and while you teach. For example, we can start each class with an agenda of different topics we will be covering that day or the activities we will engage in during class. This helps reduce the anxiety from not knowing what is coming. Another way to increase structure in classes is by providing a sequenced list of things to complete during each class period or as part of the entire course.

2. We process information differently and differ in the amount of time we need to respond to both familiar and novel content. The 15-second thumb rule is ideal for responding to questions or initiating an activity. Allow your students this time. When we ask a question or encourage a student to comment during a discussion, it is always advisable to allow at least 15 seconds before we move on. You will notice that most students raise their hand only at the 15th second. In an online class, this waiting time may be even 60 seconds.
3. Give breaks! We all need a break during a lecture or when we are engaged in learning a large amount of information. Breaks are helpful to increase attention and motivation and help us stay focused. Provide a 3 -5-minute break for every 30-minute of class time.

8. If the student doesn't approach me regarding their accommodations, how can I support the student?

At the Access Center, we typically send out a letter to professors when a student registers with the Access Center. This letter includes documented accommodations that we discussed with the student. We ask that the student set up a time with their professors to discuss these accommodations. However, if students do not approach you to discuss their accommodations, you can reach out to the student. You can email the student or meet with the student individually. Let the student know that you have read their accommodation letter, and that you'd be willing to work with them in supporting their learning. You can say something along the lines of, "*Hi _____, I read your accommodation letter. I noticed that you need additional time during exams. What else can I do as your professor to support your learning in this class?*" By taking the first step, you let the student know that you are committed to their learning, and that you are approachable. It also helps student build a sense of trust with you. Please [contact](#) the Access Center to learn more.

9. If a student has a meltdown in class, what can I do?

A student can have a meltdown if they are overwhelmed. Some stressors can be related to class and some may not be. If the student cries during class, approach the student calmly. Step out to a quiet place, use calm but firm voice and ask the student to calm down. Once the student has calmed down sufficiently, ask the student to describe the situation or how you could help. Provide the student with a piece of paper and pen if needed. It is easier to write or show one feels than speak, especially when we are anxious or worried.

In an online class, let students know that they have the option to turn off their webcam and step outside for a few minutes if they experience any stressors during class time. Students will also benefit from knowing that they can reach out to you after class time to discuss their challenges or stressors.

Seek out supports on campus such as the Access Center, the Counseling Center, or the CARE Team.

10. What might be common reasons that cause anxiety for students on the autism spectrum?

Reasons that cause anxiety for non-autistic students may be similar to those that cause anxiety for students on the autism spectrum. For example, approaching exams or presentations, competing due dates for assignments, the need to multi-task and manage time effectively, the

need to be independent, managing finances, a lot of reading assignments, etc. Additionally, anxiety disorder is common in many adults on the autism spectrum. Some autistic individuals may be anxious due to personal or external reasons, and some of them may be on medications for anxiety. Be aware of this and seek out additional supports for the student such as counseling or being part of a support group on campus.

11. If a student is trying to dominate or monopolize a classroom discussion, what can I do as an instructor?

- Include directions on class engagement in your syllabus at the beginning of the semester. Questions or comments related to class can be addressed during class time. Other comments can be addressed outside of class.
- Emphasize the importance of respecting everyone's time in class. If the student dominates a discussion, let him/her know in a calm but firm voice to clarify your expectation.
- Provide a logical solution. For example, when you ask too many questions or provide comments, we are disrupting the flow of the class and we are not respecting others' time. Let us wait until after class to take this question. Please come see me after class or I will come see you after class.
- You can also provide a post-it note/index card at the beginning of class to all students. Students can ask up to three questions during class time and they can write the remaining questions/comments in the index card.
- In an online class, ask students to raise their hand and wait for their turn to ask a question or comment. You can also use the three questions per class rule and provide few minutes toward the end of class time for additional questions. Students can also write all their additional questions on the chat, and you can address these questions after class time.

12. What if I do not know if the student is autistic or not?

It doesn't matter. You do not have to know. Some individuals prefer to disclose their diagnosis and others do not. However, if you follow these strategies, they will help all students whether or not they are autistic.

If a student discloses that they are autistic, use the following steps.

- i. Is the student connected with the Access Center?
- ii. If no, please connect them to the Access Center with an email/phone call/by walking them to the Access Center.
- iii. If yes, please request to see their accommodation letter.
- iv. Ask how class is going.
- v. Ask what additional help you can provide in class or outside class.
- vi. Encourage student to meet with you during office hours
- vii. Be approachable.
- viii. Share campus resources that the student will benefit from.

It requires strength and courage to disclose a diagnosis. So, acknowledge the student for their openness to share this information with you.

13. Where can I learn more about autistic individuals and how to support autistic college students?

Articles	Books	Websites/Webpages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting Learning in Students with Autism: What do Professors Need to Know? Link “Putting on My Best Normal”: Social Camouflaging in Adults with Autism Spectrum Conditions. Link 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism (Barry Prizant) Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome (Stephen Shore) The Autism Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum (Temple Grandin) Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism (Dawn Prince-Hughes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn from Autistics Don't mourn for us Autistic Self-Advocacy Network College Autism Network

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Please feel free to reach us to provide feedback on this booklet and videos. You can also reach us with any questions regarding support for students on the autism spectrum.

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To learn more about this **Faculty Learning Community**, please visit this [link](#).

The Department of Speech, Language, Hearing Sciences offers a support program for students on the autism spectrum. Information on the **Integrated Supports for Students with Autism in College (ISSAC)** program is available here. You can also reach us at issac@msudenver.edu.