



LEAP Online

Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway Online Tutorial



Autism

LEAP Online

Contents

Introduction	1
Terminology and Autism.....	2
So, what does it mean to be autistic?.....	3
Autism and Sensory Sensitivity	4
Anxiety and Autism.....	5
What This Means For Your Everyday Interactions at University	7
Building a culture of understanding.....	8
Summary	10
Key Takeaways	10
Final Guidelines and Support	11
University of Bolton guidelines and policies.....	11
UoB Wellbeing team	11
Disability Service	12
References.....	13

Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental lifelong condition. Every individual autistic person is unique with a different combination of characteristics, traits, sensitivities, abilities and challenges. Autism can be defined as:

‘a lifelong development disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.’

National Autistic Society (2024)

It is so important to remember that every individual autistic person is unique. They may share some characteristics that other autistic people have, but these will be a combination and on a spectrum, hence the concept of the term autism spectrum condition is often referred to by many autistic people, their families and people who

Terminology and Autism

Words and the use of them can express ideas and be very powerful. They can change attitudes and develop ideas, influence and impact upon people, both in a positive and negative way. Respectful terminology within the autism community is difficult to ascertain with many competing views.

Some people will refer to 'a person with autism' while others refer to an autistic person. Some people will use the term 'autistic spectrum condition,' while others use the term 'autistic spectrum disorder.'

In more recent times some people use the term neurodivergent as part of the neurodiversity community. The term neurodiversity describes a variation in human evolution which can mean some people can use cognitive functions such as thinking, learning, attention, mood etc. which are more diverse than most people. This difference is not necessarily viewed as a deficit. The important message is to be aware to take the time to find out what is comfortable for the individual.

So, what does it mean to be autistic?



[What is Autism](#) – YouTube (National Autistic Society, 2019).

As mentioned in the video, people with autism may experience sensory overload, with sounds, sight, bright lights, etc.

Processing sensory information can be very challenging for autistic people. Autistic people may find that their senses may be **under sensitive (hyposensitivity)**, **over sensitive (hypersensitivity)** or **both**, which can occur at different times. Sensory differences can effect **thoughts, behaviours, and emotions** which can impact upon everyday situations. **Sensory processing or information overloads** can cause some **severe distressing reactions** from **withdrawal** to **meltdowns or shutdowns**.

Autism and Sensory Sensitivity



Below is a short film on autism and sensory sensitivities. The film is intended to simulate sensory overload and so please note this film features loud, repetitive noises. After watching the film think about how this would make you feel; What are you thinking? How do you think this would impact on your behaviour?

[Autism and Sensory Sensitivity](#) – YouTube (National Autistic Society, 2014).

Anxiety and Autism



Anxiety is experienced by everyone at some point in their lifetime; it is very common. Autistic people, however, are much more likely to experience high levels of anxiety more frequently than non-autistic people. This can be because of several reasons, these may include:

- Trying to negotiate social environments resulting in information processing overload
- Trying to negotiate sensory environments resulting in sensory overload
- A perception of not being understood or misunderstood or not accepted
- Changes in routine, especially if this is unexpected
- Difficulty with identification, understanding and management of emotions (this can also be known as alexithymia)

Some autistic people manage by masking their anxiety. This strategy increases anxiety and may impact negatively on general mental health over time.

Watch the video below to gain an understanding of the impact of anxiety on autistic people.

[Anxiety in Autism Explained](#) – YouTube (Autistica, 2021)

Autism

Meltdowns and Shutdowns



Autistic people who experience a meltdown find that this usually happens when a situation is overwhelming, and an intense response develops. There may be a temporary loss of control which may impact upon behaviour and be expressed physically (throwing things, hitting out, biting and kicking), emotionally (isolating self, being silent and crying) verbally (screaming, making noises and shouting). For autistic people, when there is a feeling of being completely overwhelmed, it may be difficult, because of autism to express themselves in another way.

Shutdowns can also be a response by autistic people which can occur when feeling completely overwhelmed. This can present as refusing to interact, withdrawal and avoidance from situations which may be considered challenging. Many autistic people have meltdowns and/or shutdowns.

Watch the video below to gain an understanding of meltdowns and shutdowns.

[Autism: National Autistic Society train film](#) – YouTube (National Autistic Society, 2009)

What This Means For Your Everyday Interactions at University



At the University of Bolton, we aim to create an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive, including students with autism. Autism affects how individuals perceive and interact with the world, particularly in social situations. By understanding and supporting the needs of students with autism, we can help create a more inclusive and empathetic culture at the University of Bolton.

Consideration 1 – Social Interaction and Support

Students with autism may find social interaction challenging, especially in group settings. They might struggle with reading social cues, initiating conversations, or responding in ways that others might expect.

What you can do: Be patient and clear in your communication. Avoid using sarcasm, ambiguous (unclear) phrases, or non-verbal cues that could be confusing. If you're working in a group, encourage open and respectful communication, and give space for fellow students to express themselves in their own time and way.

Consideration 2 – Providing Routine Structure

Many students with autism prefer clear routines and may become anxious with sudden changes. When possible, offer predictability in your interactions.

What you can do: If you're planning a group study session or social event, provide clear details in advance (time, location, what will happen) to help them feel prepared.

Autism

During group projects, break tasks down into manageable steps and provide timelines.

Consideration 3 – Dealing With Anxiety or Overstimulation

Students with autism may experience heightened anxiety in busy or loud environments, such as crowded classrooms or group activities. Sensory overload, due to noise, bright lights, or many people talking at once, can also trigger anxiety.

What you can do: If you notice a student feeling anxious, suggest they find a quiet space to decompress. If this happens during a lecture, let your tutor know. Encourage them to take breaks during group activities or suggest moving to a quieter area if possible. Listening without judgment can also be helpful, allowing them to talk about how they're feeling if they choose to.

Consideration 4 – Support Someone During a Meltdown

A **meltdown** occurs when an individual with autism feels overwhelmed by sensory input or emotions and is no longer able to manage their environment. This can result in crying, shutting down, or intense emotional reactions.

What you can do: If someone is having a meltdown, give them space without drawing attention. Avoid touching or crowding them unless they indicate it's okay. Speak calmly and offer reassurance but allow them to recover in their own time. You can ask if there's anything they need or if they would like to move to a quieter location. It's important not to take any emotional outbursts personally—meltdowns are a response to overwhelming stress, not directed at others. Remember to let your tutor know and always seek support.

Building a culture of understanding

It's important to remember that each person with autism is different. The key is to communicate openly, ask how you can best support them, and respect their boundaries. Encouraging inclusive and supportive environments in classrooms,

Autism

social spaces, and group projects will help students with autism feel more comfortable and engaged in university life.

Summary



Key Takeaways

By understanding and being mindful of the unique challenges faced by students with autism, we can make the University of Bolton a more supportive and inclusive place for everyone. Simple actions - like offering clear communication, being flexible, and offering support during times of anxiety - can make a huge difference in the university experience for students with autism.

Final Guidelines and Support

University of Bolton guidelines and policies

The university has clear guidelines for supporting students from diverse backgrounds, including policies on Dignity at Study. Familiarise yourself with these policies to ensure that you are offering appropriate and sensitive support. For more information, consult the University's Student Policy Zone.

UoB Wellbeing team

The Life Lounge is the University's student mental health and wellbeing service, offering free and confidential specialist support to students experiencing a range of mental health and wellbeing difficulties. The support offer at the Life lounge includes Mental Health Advisor Service, a Counselling Service, a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Service and a Wellbeing Team.

The Life Lounge also offers a range of wellbeing workshops and resources to support you to feel connected with others and develop skills around mindfulness, self-care and compassion, emotional resilience and stress management to name a few.

How can I access support?

Students wishing to access Life Lounge Counselling, Mental Health Advisor and/or CBT services should be directed to the online [registration form](#).

Telephone: 01204 903566

Email: lifelounge@bolton.ac.uk

Call in: The Life Lounge, Chancellors Building, Eagle Tower, T2

Autism

Disability Service

The Disability Service at the University is here to implement and/or recommend study-related support to students who have disclosed and provided evidence of a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010. This includes the following conditions or impairments: Specific Learning Difficulties, such as dyslexia; Mental Health Conditions, such as depression or anxiety; Social and Communication Impairments, such as autism; Long-standing Illnesses, such as diabetes or cancer; and Physical Impairments, such as visual or hearing.

Disability Advisors can also advise students who are not sure if they have a disability, and can provide information on how to arrange to be tested for a Specific Learning Difficulty such as dyslexia. They also offer confidential advice and guidance on disability issues in relation to accessing your chosen course of study, as well as the relevant support funding.

Disabled students can access support such as car parking for blue badge holders, Individual Learning Support Plans, support with Disabled Students Allowance applications, equipment loans with specialist disability-related software and individual exam arrangements.

How can I access support?

Students wishing to access Disability Service support should be directed to the online [registration form](#).

Telephone: 01204 903478

Email: disabilityinfo@bolton.ac.uk

Student Centre, Chancellors Mall

References

Autistica. (2021) *Anxiety in autism explained*. [Online video] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q3qTXUa9Pw>. [Accessed 23 October 2024].

National Autistic Society. (2009) *Autism: National Autistic Society train film*. [Online video] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6G-OpGgo3c>. [Accessed 23 October 2024].

National Autistic Society. (2014) *Autism and sensory sensitivity*. [Online video] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycCN3qTYVyo&t=8s>. [Accessed 23 October 2024].

National Autistic Society. (2019) *What is Autism?* [Online video] Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lk4qs8jGN4U>. [Accessed 23 October 2024].

National Autistic Society. (2024) *What is autism?* [Online] Available from: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism#:~:text=Autism%20is%20a%20lifelong%20developmental,and%20children%20in%20the%20UK>. [Accessed 23 October 2024].