

Freshman Disorientation: Navigating College on the Autism Spectrum

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Center for Adult Autism Services

“A Letter To My Younger Self”

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“Let’s see if she finishes high school. College is not probable. She’ll probably wind up in a sheltered workshop.”

- Director of Special Education

Overview

- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ High School vs. College: Challenges and Differences
- ❖ Firsthand Perspective of Autistic Person
- ❖ Strategies and Resources
- ❖ Questions

What Does A College Student with Autism Look Like?

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About Me

- ❖ Founder and president of A.S.C.O.T Consulting, LLC and Certified Autism Specialist (IBCCES)
- ❖ Relationship Coach at Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Service (RCAAS)
- ❖ International public speaker (“Dr. Ruth of the Autism World”)
- ❖ Featured in film version of *In A Different Key: The Story of Autism* based on the New York Times Bestselling book.
- ❖ Co-author with Dr. Peter Gerhardt and Dr. Jess Cauchi of book chapter, “Sexuality and Sexuality Education with Individuals with Autism: What You Should Know but Probably Don’t” in *Handbook of Quality of Life for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (2022, Springer).
- ❖ Serves on Boards of Yes She Can, Inc., Golden Door International Film Festival of Jersey City, and the Scientific Advisory Board of SPARK.
- ❖ Award-winning author of *The Naughty Autie*

Amy Goes To College

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Challenges: High School vs. College

- ❖ High school
 - ❖ Bullying
 - ❖ Social skills
 - ❖ Feeling isolated
 - ❖ Self-consciousness
 - ❖ Low self-esteem
 - ❖ Body image issues
 - ❖ Social problems affected academics



Challenges: High School vs. College



❖ College

- ❖ Being naïve
- ❖ Being taken advantage of
 - ❖ Financially
 - ❖ Emotionally
- ❖ Organization/time management
- ❖ Doing group work
- ❖ Dating/sexual inexperience
- ❖ Money management
- ❖ Motivation

Differences: High School vs. College

High School	College
High school is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) .	Postsecondary education is governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) .
“Entitlement” law: Students with disabilities (ages 3-21) are guaranteed access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) .	“Non-discrimination” law: Colleges and universities may not discriminate in recruitment, in admission, or after admission based on a disability. However, these are not entitlement laws, meaning they do not guarantee successful learning or mandate the creation of special programs for persons with disabilities.
School attendance is mandatory.	You should attend lectures to maintain grades, but class attendance is not always mandatory.
Schools must provide services designed specifically to meet students’ needs (e.g., instruction, modifications, accommodations) based on their individualized education program (IEP).	Reasonable accommodations may be made to provide equal access and participation for students with disabilities; however, formal special education services comparable to those in high school are not available.
Counties are required to identify students with disabilities through free assessment and the IEP process.	Students are responsible for coordinating with staff and faculty in order to receive accommodations. This does not mean students are required to name a disability when discussing accommodations with their individual professors.
School officials monitor students’ progress towards their IEP goals, and communicate openly with parents and the student.	There are no formal IEPs, so students are responsible for monitoring their own progress and communicating with their professors, academic advisors, and guardians themselves.
Depending on the transition needs laid out in the IEP, schools often help connect students to community support services.	Students are responsible for making their own connections with school-provided or external support services. Services for adults on the spectrum are often limited.

Differences: High School vs. College

High School

- Day is structured. Time always occupied
- Teachers/staff have relationship with parents, share info
- Everyone already knows student's diagnosis (IEP, etc.)

College

- Lots of free time; unstructured
- No info shared with parents unless student gives permission. Legal adult.
- Student has to disclose diagnosis

A Note on Disclosure

❖ *“Creating a hard and fast rule for whom to disclose to is practically impossible.”*

- Dr. Stephen Shore

What Might It Be Like to Have an Autistic Student in Class?

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Skills Needed for College

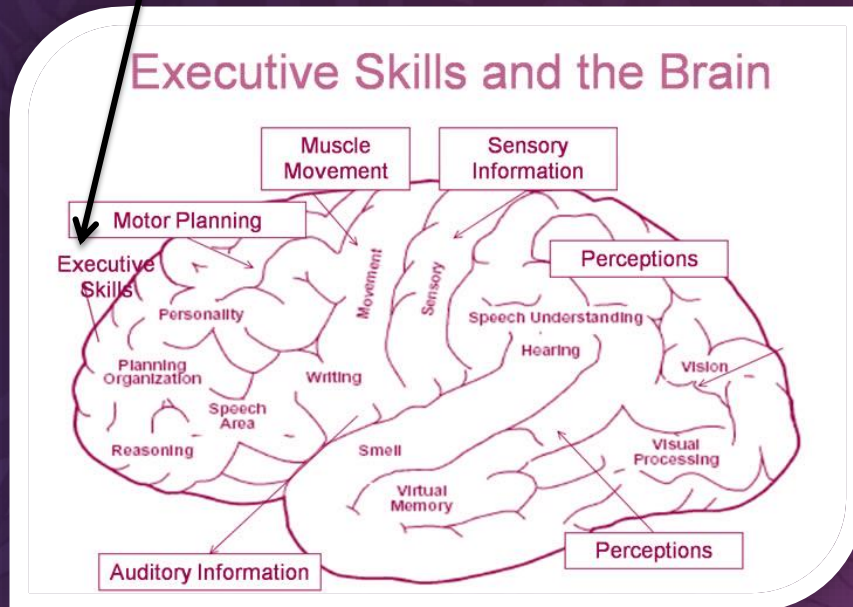
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❖ Self-advocacy

❖ Organization and prioritizing

❖ Time management

❖ Self-directed study habits



College and Academics

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- ❖ Office of Disability Services
- ❖ Core curriculum vs. classes related to major
- ❖ How to study
- ❖ Learning to break down assignments into smaller pieces



College and Life Skills

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- ❖ Showering
- ❖ Doing laundry
- ❖ Money management
- ❖ Cooking/Going to the cafeteria for food

Making Friends in College

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- ❖ A clean slate
- ❖ Meeting new kinds of people
- ❖ Friendship follies
- ❖ Learning how to be a friend



Dating In College

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- ❖ Wanting (and finally getting!) a boyfriend
- ❖ Are You Inexperienced?
- ❖ Balancing studies, friends, and a relationship

Dating In College

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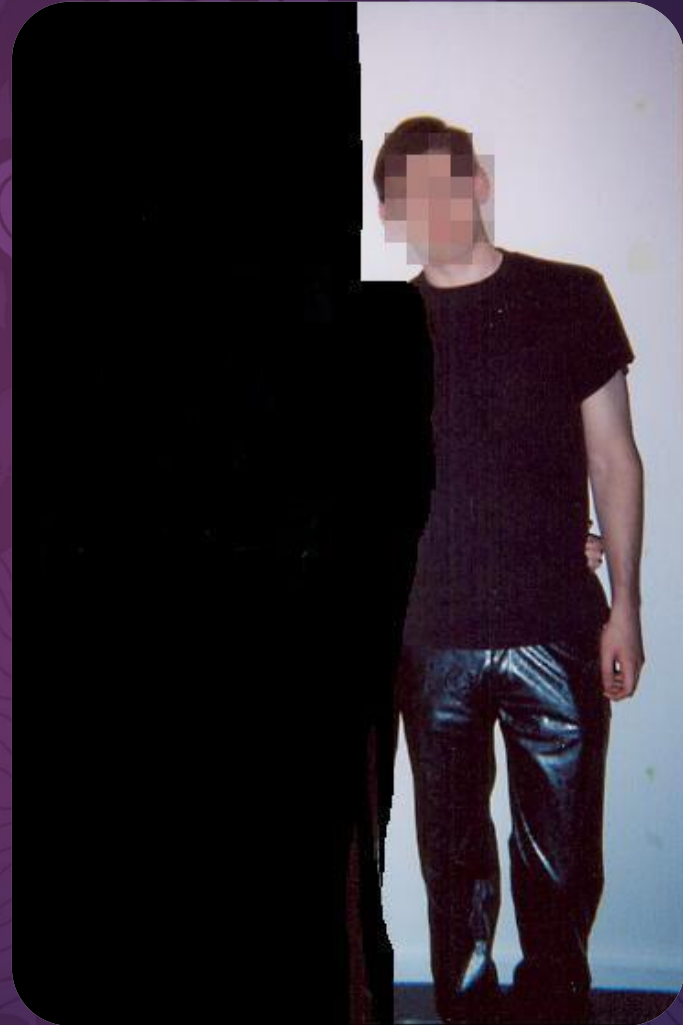
GIRLFRIEND?



Dating In College

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- ❖ Getting dumped (twice)
- ❖ The Day Things Went Way, Way South
- ❖ Fallout (Amy Goes to Court)



Other Challenges Faced by Students with Autism in College

❖ Bullying

- ❖ By fellow students and/or professors, staff

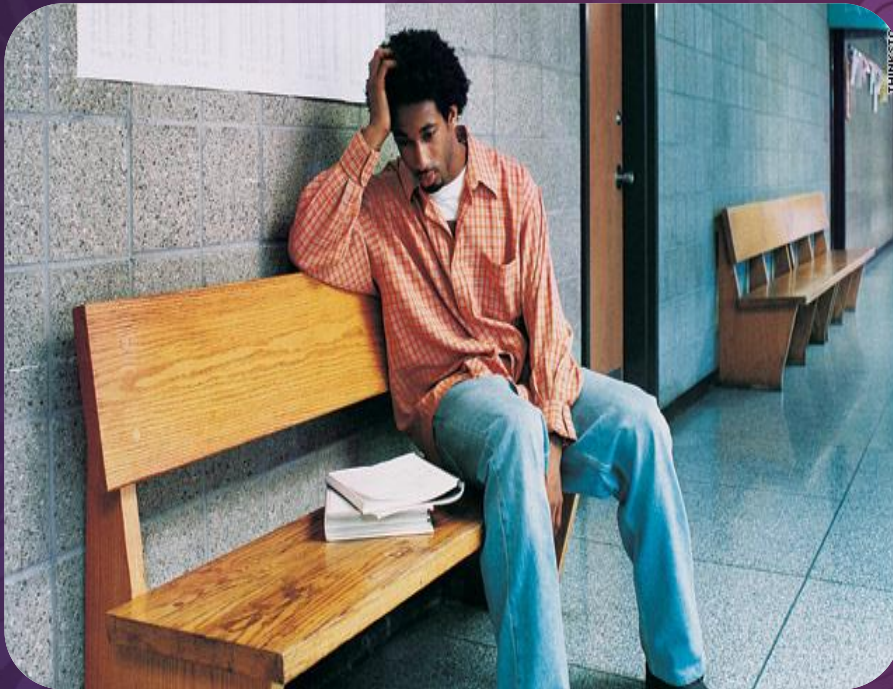
❖ Isolation

- ❖ Afraid to leave dorm room, unsure how to make social connections



Other Challenges Faced by Autistic Students in College

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- ❖ Anxiety/Depression (co-occurring conditions)
- ❖ Being afraid to ask for help

Developing Strategies

❖ *Professors*

❖ Communicate

- ❖ Provide smaller chunks of information in visual format. Check for understanding.

❖ Be specific

- ❖ Supplement oral with written instructions when revising information that has previously been provided.

❖ Feedback on Feedback

- ❖ If you are confused by something the student wrote, say that and say what confuses you. No extraneous comments.



Developing Strategies

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Developing Strategies

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❖ *Support Office Staff*

- ❖ Discuss with the student areas that cause the most difficulty
- ❖ Agree to written expectations of class/job performance and update regularly. Provide reinforcement for being on time.
- ❖ Provide opportunity to debrief about social experiences and situations with a key support person. (Refer to outside therapist or counselor if needed.)



Scenario #1

❖ *Student: Bill*

- ❖ Med student
- ❖ Talkative
- ❖ Punctual



❖ *Problem:*

- ❖ Overwhelmed by classroom demands.

Scenario #1: Potential Solutions

❖ *Professors:*

- ❖ Talk to Bill outside of classroom
 - ❖ Earplugs
 - ❖ Provide written or audio-recorded list summarizing class discussion

❖ *Parents and Support Staff:*

- ❖ Strategize methods for coping with stress
 - ❖ Both during class and outside of it
- ❖ Find ways to make material relevant to Bill's interests

Scenario #2

❖ *Student: Virginia*

- ❖ Art student
- ❖ Shy at first; opens up when comfortable
- ❖ Late due to executive functioning challenges



❖ *Problem:*

- ❖ Has difficulty working with other students on group assignments

Scenario #2: Potential Solutions

❖ *Professors:*

- ❖ Assign roles for group members
 - ❖ Written directions about project expectations and/or allowing options for individual work.

❖ *Parents and Support Staff:*

- ❖ Discuss how to cope with anxiety
 - ❖ What to do if Virginia feels a meltdown coming on
 - ❖ Importance of emotional regulation

What Can You Do to Empower Autistic Students?

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- ❖ Remember that silence \neq lack of engagement.
- ❖ Students with autism have as many similarities to neurotypical students as we do differences.
- ❖ Autistic students are excellent communicators if people are willing to listen.

Remember...

- ❖ Self-advocacy starts long before college
- ❖ Skills develop over time, not all at once
- ❖ Your fear is not our responsibility.

Resources

- ❖ Understanding Asperger's Syndrome (Autism): A Professor's Guide (OAR):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=divmxBBQ5Zw>
- ❖ OAR Education resources:
<https://researchautism.org/resources/>
- ❖ *Students With Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel* (Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2009)
- ❖ *Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy* (Various Authors/ASAN) <https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/NavcollFinal.pdf>

Contact Information



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Social Media



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Questions

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ANY
QUESTIONS
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