

## Understanding Asperger's

All men and women who enter college have succeeded academically. However, there are people on campus who have to work much harder at adjusting and fitting in. Most often a person with Asperger's has average to very superior intellectual skills, but their learning styles can be quite different than those we label "usual". Deficiencies in social and communication skills may be apparent. These individuals have often been misunderstood because what is occurring for them has been unrecognized or misdiagnosed.

There is a range of symptoms so a person who is only affected mildly may appear a little different or eccentric. The result is that the person can go through much or all of their lifetime having to deal with this label of eccentric without any understanding on the part of others. The personal cost, at times, can be high. Many have suffered relentless bullying or isolation from peers.

Trying to figure out what relationship and friendship is about can be a daunting task for anyone. For a person with Asperger's, it can be even more angst producing. What gets labeled as "common sense" social skills may not be for an individual who has High-Functioning Autism or Asperger's Syndrome. Like many aspects of any person, there is not one thing which says the person has this and therefore your response should be this. For all persons, behavioral expressions are varied; the same is true for a person with Asperger's. Some examples that you may see in a college setting are the following:

- Difficulty with nonverbal behaviors in social situations and the classroom such as eye gaze (aversion to eye contact), facial expression, or possibly gestures.
- Difficulty judging personal space, clumsiness.
- Sensitivity to the environment such as loud noises, the texture of clothes, or food (school cafeterias notwithstanding).
- Preoccupation with a particular topic or subject to the exclusion of others. This may manifest itself by the person not wanting to take a required class because it doesn't relate to their area of focus.
- Dialogue may be hard for the person as is being in dialogue with them.
- Difficulty understanding others' feelings and along with this, difficulty reading and/or interpreting social cues.
- Difficulty with implied meanings; therefore, interpret what is said literally.
- Socially and emotionally inappropriate responses to annoyances and experiences such as being accidentally bumped in a hallway or elevator.
- Although the person can be reactive and/or disruptive, rarely is the person dangerous. This is mentioned because throughout society as well as history, individuals who have been labeled odd or quirky have been looked upon with suspicion and often viewed as dangerous.

As with any list, this gives only a suggestion, a hint of what the person's own life and experience is like. A good read that presents the personal stories of twelve college students who have received a diagnosis along the Autistic Spectrum Disorders continuum is *Aquamarine Blue 5*. The editor, Dawn Prince-Hughes, identifies as an autistic person who is an anthropologist and research scientist. In the book you may recognize yourself, a former or present classmate, or a person with whom you've worked. In any case, it can, if you let it, open yourself to an increased level of understanding and appreciation, which is what college is all about.

Often as individuals we do not take the time to understand those around us, thus we respond only to what we perceive or assume. We communicate the same way without checking our perceptions or understanding. We even neglect to ask someone if they've understood us. It really is a great experience to learn to listen, question, understand, dialogue and enjoy the person. Doing this not only expands our capacity to be with a person with Asperger's, it will enable us to be with others who are different from us in any number of ways, be it cultural, racial, gender, or any other way.