



# ASD Common Concerns and Struggles

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) can face a range of challenges in the post-secondary setting. These challenges are often more pronounced in college and university because of the differences between secondary and post-secondary academically, administratively, and socially. In addition, while students with ASD have often found ways of coping in secondary school, they may have difficulty generalizing and changing those coping skills to fit the post-secondary environment.

The following information explains some common concerns and struggles in the post-secondary setting.

## Behaviour and Communication

Students with ASD often struggle to understand 'unwritten rules' in academic and social environments and may not know what constitutes appropriate or expected behaviour in different settings. Sometimes, what is interesting or important to individuals with ASD is different from what is interesting or important to others. This can pose a challenge in post-secondary environments such as classrooms, seminars, labs, and when interacting with professors/instructors or classmates.

### Interpreting assignment expectations

Sometimes, students with ASD may have difficulty interpreting assignment expectations, particularly when they are vague or figurative language is used. Students might struggle to determine what a professor/instructor expects regarding topic selection, how much detail to include, and which information is important.

### Working in a group

Group work is challenging in and of itself. Individuals with ASD may have additional difficulties with reading the social dynamics, turn-taking, dividing tasks, and integrating individual work into the group's project.

### Lab work

Labs are complex and dynamic settings that require processing instructions related to unfamiliar tasks, transitioning between stations, performing fine-motor tasks, and coordinating with other students – often within tight time constraints. This can be challenging for students with ASD because of social, communication, sensory, and information processing differences.



## Engaging with professors/instructors

Post-secondary students with ASD often have difficulty reaching out by email or in person to professors, instructors, administrative staff, or student services. In particular, identifying a need for help and explaining what help is required may be challenging and therefore can limit a student's ability to get their needs met in a timely way.

## Classroom Conduct

There are many 'unwritten rules' of classroom conduct. Sometimes students with ASD struggle to know what constitutes appropriate behaviour. Examples of missteps in classroom conduct include asking too many questions, answering rhetorical questions (questions that are not meant to be answered), answering with too much detail, going 'off-topic,' and speaking too much or too little in tutorials.

## Socializing

Students with ASD frequently enter post-secondary with less experience establishing and maintaining friendships and romantic relationships than their peers and have had fewer opportunities for social engagement. Students with ASD often have unique and intense interests that are different from their peers. In addition, the communication style of these students is often different. As a result, interacting with other students can be challenging since the post-secondary environment includes both explicit and implicit 'unwritten rules' related to social engagement and interactions (i.e., dating, maintaining romantic relationships, establishing/maintaining friendships, cohabitating).

## Executive functioning

Executive functioning refers to a set of cognitive processes that includes skills such as: working memory, impulse control, initiation, self-monitoring, and cognitive flexibility. Students with ASD can have challenges with some or all of these skills.

## Decision-Making

Students with ASD may have difficulty making decisions in relation to their program choice, course load, whether to continue taking (or dropping) a course (in cases when grades are low), whether to ask for help, and what to ask for and when to ask when assistance is required. For students with ASD, challenges imagining possible outcomes, difficulties with executive functioning, communication issues, anxiety, and difficulty understanding time sensitivity can impact on their decision-making abilities.



## **Cognitive flexibility**

For students with ASD, imagining possible outcomes, examining different points of view, understanding the perspectives of others, and generating multiple solutions to a problem can be challenging. This can impact problem solving abilities, adapting to unexpected changes, and dealing with unstructured activities and schedules.

## **Information processing**

For some students with ASD it can be challenging to process large amounts of information from different sources under time constraints. This can pose difficulties while trying to take notes while listening to a professor, or when completing timed activities such as labs or exams. These challenges may be amplified because of social, communication, and sensory differences.