Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a nonverbal learning disorder that has been associated with abnormalities found in the brain, however the exact etiology is yet to be determined. Individuals with ASD struggle to adapt to a neurotypical world often resulting in confusion and frustration. People with ASD generally have communication and/or interaction differences which may appear awkward at times. ASD may affect gross and fine motor skills, visual-spatial skills, social skills and the ability to adjust to novel and new experiences. It is not uncommon for an individual with ASD to be misdiagnosed or dual diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, since they both share common characteristics.

Following are some strengths and challenges for a person with ASD. These strengths and challenges are not exclusive to every individual with ASD and often vary by person. You will also find teaching tips and academic accommodations for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

**SOCIAL CHALLENGES**

- Intuitive skills (lower than expected fluid intelligence "street smarts")
- Talks incessantly
- Challenged when transitioning from one topic to another
- Speech may seem tangential and circumstantial and fail to provide the background for their comments and find it hard to suppress vocal output for internal thoughts
- Limited eye contact
- Focuses on insignificant details e.g. grammar, clothing, etc. and misses the main point
- An egocentric conversational style...often has a topic of intense interest which comes across as being more instructional/educational than interactive
- Actions may be misinterpreted as annoying or attention seeking
- Ineffective at recognizing gestures, deciphering postural clues, reading facial expressions, speech fluctuations
- Conventions governing an individual’s physical space are unclear
- Very concrete cognitive processing—translates literally. Therefore understanding clichés, hints, jokes, sarcasm, metaphors, analogies, and idioms is problematic
- Naïve and trusting
- Likely to withdraw in novel situations and appears out-of-sorts
- Demonstrate “behavioral rigidity” or feels a compulsive need for events to unfold in a particular order and struggle with transition
- Easily frustrated during interaction due to past social and communication nuances which may be expressed by unusual behavior, not to be taken personally. The person is not being manipulative but instead coping with what is most likely a confusing experience.

**MOTORIC CHALLENGES**

- Psycho-motor coordination
- Tactile skills
- Handwriting
- Repetitive self-stimulation behavior (e.g. hand wringing, finger twisting, etc. while in social situations)

**VISUAL-SPATIAL CHALLENGES**

- Spatial perceptions & relations (e.g. recognition, organization, and synthesis of visual-spatial information)
- Forming visual images
- Copying information from a wallboard or overhead presentation
- Detail oriented and often fails to grasp the “big picture”
OTHER CHALLENGES

- Struggles with abstract thought and concepts
- Options/choices often causes stress
- Change, chaos, spontaneity cause distress
- Sensitive senses to noise, light, touch, etc. which can cause distress

INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS

- Quickly memorizes rote material
- Extraordinary speech and vocabulary development
- Attention to details
- Ability to hyper-focus on topics of interest
- Better at written communication than oral communication
- Exceptional memory for concrete materials e.g. facts, definitions, dates, etc.
- Strong crystal intelligence (higher than expected "book smarts")
- Functions well in structured environments
- Strong beliefs and opinions
- Trusting and forgiving

TEACHING TIPS & ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

- Additional travel time
- Written instructions to augment oral instructions
- Note-Services or access to course notes
- Permission to Audio Record lecture, lab, or discussion
- Access to printed copies of Overhead and/or PowerPoint Presentations
- Use of a PC or laptop for essay tests
- Present course information in plain and clear verbal terms (i.e. “spell out” everything)...all directions should be direct and explicit
- Advanced written notice of due dates/deadlines for all out of class assignments or projects
- Provide a clear and precise course semester schedule
- Additional time for tests and quizzes
- Encourage verbal feedback
- Teach verbally/orally and not solely by observation
- For group projects, the instructor should assign group members
- Allow use of sensory object/s in class to help reduce anxiety, e.g. stress ball, pencils or pens, or other small item
- Provide a cue to alert the student of disruptive or otherwise unacceptable behavior. The student and instructor should first meet to agree on an acceptable subtle cue from the instructor.