

A Spectrum of Possibility: Building and Maintaining Relationships as a Neurodivergent Student

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Agenda

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Neurodiversity and Social Relationships
- ▶ Building Relationships – Faculty/Staff
- ▶ Bellini's Five Step Model to Building Social Relationships
- ▶ Case Example
- ▶ LaGuardia Neurodiversity Program (ASSIST) Program Components
- ▶ Building Relationships with Peers through Coaching
- ▶ Interpersonal Behavioral Health for Neurodivergent Students
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Introduction: Neuro-Diversity-Less Stigma More Hope

- People with Autism Spectrum Disorder have brains that are structurally different than Neuro-typical people.
- These differences have been documented by brain imaging studies
- We are not currently able to determine what these brain differences mean nor are the brain images of people with ASD the same as each other's.
- Genetic studies suggest that there are subtle differences in the DNA of people with ASD but these differences are not consistent.
- People with ASD are at times able to excel in specific areas of functioning beyond the abilities of Neuro-typical people.

Donvan & Zucker, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Grandin & Panek, 2013

The Interpersonal Challenges of College

- When individuals with AS arrive at college they tend to isolate themselves due to sensory overload-initiation issues
- They may initially make some attempt to talk and socialize with others but may be excluded due to their social awkwardness or odd repetitive sensory-motor behaviors.
- Romantic and sexual relationships are confusing, overstimulating and often misinterpreted by others
- Small group assignments cause anxiety and obstructive behaviors
- Experiential learning causes emotional outbursts and anger
- Social avoidance becomes a reinforced behavior
- Student may leave class to end aversive social interactions.

Gallo-Silver & Varin-Mignano, 2016

ASD and Social Relationships

- Adults with disabilities are increasingly attending college, but their social participation and integration in the university is still below the level of students without disabilities (Dillon, 2007).
- Previous research indicates that adults with ASD report that they desire social relationships and to contribute to their community, but they often experience loneliness due to a lack of involvement and social skill deficits (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Howlin, 2000; Muller, Schuler, Yates, 2008).
- Leisure activities are frequently isolated activities such as playing video games and watching television (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009).
- Adults on the spectrum indicate that initiating social interactions is a significant challenge (Muller et al., 2008, p. 179).

ASD and Social Relationships - Research

- ▶ Structured social planning is an effective method for increasing social activities for college students with ASD (Koegel, Ashbaugh, Koegel, Detar & Regester, 2013).
 - ▶ (a) Incorporating motivational interests to determine social activities;
 - ▶ (b) Engagement in chosen social activities;
 - ▶ (c) Training in organizational skills; and
 - ▶ (d) Use of a peer mentor for support (Koegel et al., 2013).
- ▶ Preliminary research shows that this intervention is successful in increasing the number of social activities with typical peers for college students with ASD (Koegel et al., 2013).

A Spectrum of Possibility: Building Relationships with College Professors

- ▶ Building relationships with professors can help faculty better understand how students learn best and how to implement accommodations students may need in class.
 - ▶ Meet privately and early on to get to know your professors
 - ▶ Students on the autism spectrum often repeat a single concept: “Personal relationships with professors are crucial.” Meetings with professors allow students to share strengths, support needs, and preferences.
 - ▶ Encourage Students to disclose accommodation needs to faculty early in the semester
 - ▶ Have students review syllabus with faculty and turn in assignments on time

Bellini, S. (2006) Building Social Relationships - Five Step Model

- ▶ Assess Social Functioning
 - ▶ What is precluding the student from establishing and maintaining social relationships?
- ▶ Distinguish Between Skill Acquisition and Performance Deficits
 - ▶ A skill acquisition deficit refers to the absence of a particular skill or behavior.
 - ▶ A performance deficit refers to a skill or behavior that is present, but not demonstrated or performed.

Bellini, S. (2006) Building Social Relationships - Five Step Model (Cont'd)

- ▶ Accommodation and Assimilation
 - ▶ When selecting intervention strategies, it is important to consider the notion of accommodation versus assimilation.
 - ▶ Providing skill instruction (assimilation) without modifying the environment to be more accepting of the student also sets the child up for failure.
 - ▶ The key is to teach skills and modify the environment. This ensures that the new skill is received by peers with both understanding and acceptance.
- ▶ Implement Intervention
 - ▶ Social skills instruction should be provided in multiple settings (home, classroom, clubs, community, etc.)
- ▶ Evaluate and Monitor Progress
 - ▶ Begin to develop the methods for evaluating the efficacy of the intervention.

Case Example – Classroom Situation

- ▶ Faculty reached out about how to engage a student in class.
- ▶ Student clearly comprehends what the professor says but will not respond verbally. Nor will she join in any class discussions.
- ▶ Student sat at her desk during group work with her head on the desk and wouldn't join in or respond to her fellow students.
- ▶ When I asked her a question, she closed her eyes and retreated physically from the professor, even though she kept at a distance.
- ▶ Faculty member can't hold a conversation with her about her coursework, and is unsure how to proceed as her teacher.

Case Sample – Recommendations:

- ▶ Speak to other professors if possible to see if this student is engaging in these behaviors in all of the classes and getting some feedback and history. You want to know if this is done across all classes or just in this one. If it is just in this class, it can potentially be the subject or something/someone in the environment.
- ▶ Do not place too many demands. Something simple as asking someone “how are you?” is a demand. Try not to ask too many questions, instead give a few (no more than 2 or 3) options for the student to choose. Giving her a choice will help with building rapport.
- ▶ If face to face communication is not effective, try to communicate with the student another way (e-mail).
- ▶ Being in a group is hard and can be overwhelming. Advise the professor to have the student work with just 1 other person he/she thinks would be a good match and slowly introduce other peers one at a time.
- ▶ Build rapport. This one is very important. You want to encourage the professor to have the student look forward to having classes and to know that you are there to support him/her.
- ▶ Praise. Give positive verbal praise for any little thing he/she does that is good (eye contact, not putting her head down, responding to you, coming in to class). You can do this privately in case he/she does not like the attention if told in front of the class.

LaGuardia Neurodiversity Program (Academic & Social Student Integration for Success Team - ASSIST)

- ASSIST Actively promotes a campus wide environment of inclusion and understanding of neuro-diverse students and seeks to enhance access to services for students on the autism spectrum that:
 - Provide successful educational opportunities
 - Increase self-knowledge in the areas of
 - **executive functioning**
 - **self-regulation**
 - **social interaction**
 - **self-advocacy**
 - **career preparation**



Gallo-Silver & Varin-Mignano, 2016

ASSIST Program Components

- Psychosocial support and peer coaching services are organized using universal design
- For people on the Autism Spectrum this requires a mixture of
 - positive psychology
 - motivational interviewing
 - cognitive-behavioral therapies
 - professional and peer counselor interventions

Gallo-Silver & Varin-Mignano, 2016



Case Management Services:

- Students on the Autism Spectrum often become overwhelmed in over-stimulating environments. College presents all students with more autonomy, decisions, and people per class than primary education environments.
- Students on the Autism Spectrum struggle with feelings of loneliness, social anxiety and social isolation.
- Organizing case management services using universal design for people on the Autism Spectrum helps to enhance and preserve accessibility to a college education.

Case Management Services:

- The case management service model enables the modeling of sequencing, organizational skills and by focusing on strengths, abilities and talents of the student.
- The universal design focus of the case management services enables coaches to appreciate neuro-diverse students in a college setting as differently abled than neuro-typical students and increases the students' sense of mastery and confidence in the their ability to manage the college environment's numerous social interactions.
- In turn, students on the Autism Spectrum develop persistence and resilience skills that preserve their access to higher education.

Care and Consistency:

- The case management model provides a caring and consistent individual and/or team of individuals to work with each student from the moment they enroll into the program until they graduate.
- This consistency is especially important for students on the spectrum due to the socialization issues that they deal with.
- Students with ASD thrive on predictability and routine.
- Setting up regularly scheduled appointments with either a Peer Coach or Counselor can provide an increased level of oversight and support and provide the repetition that assists these students' in mastering competencies that might be met in a single meeting for typically developing students

Building Relationships with Peers: Individualized Coaching:

Our Coaches operational role focuses on addressing academic issues related to social discomfort in class and generally on campus (Ithaca College, n.d.). They include the following:

- **Executive Functioning**

Studying; Organize and write papers; Keep track of tests, assignments and appointments; Plan for long-term assignments.

- **Social Interaction**

Understanding one's social interaction style; Join a campus club if desired; Make friends on campus if desired, Work in a group.

- **Self-Advocacy**

Ask for help; know what is needed; Explain needs

- **Self-Regulation**

Handle changes to schedule and/or plans; Think of solutions to problems; Handle feelings in order to be able to continue class and class work, and achieve personal goals.

Behavioral Coaching

- The students would make weekly contacts with a Student Support Assistant (Coach) to help interpret a social interaction that occurred that day or to review organizational issues, including blockades to complying with a daily schedule or completion of a homework assignment.
- These meetings serve as buffers against stress and also keep help seeking behaviors under some sort of control.
- In addition, a coaching approach also promotes accountability by providing another person who serves as a judge of whether certain social tasks have been carried out.

Training for Coaches

- Training is focused on incorporating a blend of Behavioral Modification, Motivational Interviewing Techniques, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques, and Positive Psychology core traits.
- Training for Coaches is ongoing and is conducted during weekly team meetings which meet for 90 minutes.
- Training is focused on incorporating the above to enhance and develop the students interpersonal skills and executive functioning needs.



Coaching: Behavioral Health Accommodation Focused on Interpersonal Skills

- Helps to interpret a social interaction that occurred between faculty and/or student that confuses or upsets the student with ASD
- Reviews organizational issues, including internal and external obstacles to complying with a daily schedule or completion of a homework assignment
- Serves as stress modulators by helping student during class
- Seeks to control help seeking behaviors
- Promotes personal responsibility by providing another person who reality tests of whether social tasks have been attempted

Gallo-Silver & Varin-Mignano, 2016

Positive Psychology: Coaching and Counseling

- Positive Emotions can generate therapeutic change.
- Positive Psychology Theory intersects with Strength-Centered Therapy because both share a focus on strengths.
- The metaphor they share is calling strengths character traits.
- Character traits are either existing or desired.
- Each person has a signature trait.
- Traits can be “broadened and built upon”.

Fitzpatrick & Stalikas 2008, Wong 2006a, Seligman et al 2006, Lopez & Kerr 2006, Fredrickson 2001

Positive Psychology Core Traits

Fredrickson 2001; Dunn & Dougherty 2005;

Fredrickson & Levenson 1998; Folkman 1997

- Altruism
- Contentment
- Courage
- Creativity
- Forgiveness
- Hopefulness
- Inquisitiveness
- Capacity to feel Joy
- Capacity to Love
- Capacity to be Loved
- Perseverance
- Pride
- Resilience
- Sensory Pleasure
- Tenacity
- Wisdom

Elements of Positive Psychology

- Explicitizing = Identifying character traits (strengths) using reframing.
- Envisioning = Identifying the traits the person wants to develop-desired traits and how to use existing traits.
- Empowering = The use of desired traits (strengths).
- Evolving = Encouraging continued autonomous development.

Motivational Interviewing Techniques

RULE

- **R-** Resist the “righting reflex”, not trying to “fix” the student
- **U-** Understand the student’s motivation, motivation comes from within the student
- **L-** Listen to your client, acceptance without agreement, understanding the student’s perspective
- **E-** Empower your client, all change is self-directed and self-implemented

Rollnick et al, 2008; Moyers et al, 2007; DiClemente, 2003

MI Techniques taught to Peer Coaches during Weekly Supervision

- 1. The Key Question; Collaborating on a Plan
- 2. Demonstrating a Change Plan
- 3. Using Reflective Listening in MI
- 4. Reflective Listening, Offering Advice / Information
- 5. Demonstrating Reflective Listening
- 6. Recognizing and Evoking Change Speech
- 7. Demonstrating Evoking Change Speech / Softening Sustain Speech
- 8. Softening Sustain Speech; Reducing Discord
- 9. Opening an Encounter or Topic
- 10. Working with Ambivalence

Elements of Motivational Interviewing Techniques

- Creating a Relationship-OARS
 - **OARS**
 - **O**- Open-ended questions
 - **A**- Affirmations
 - **R**- Reflection
 - **S**- Summarization
- Focusing- establishing, cultivating and nurturing a sense of direction
- Evoking- identifying student's desire, ability, reasons and needs for change
- Planning- creating a change strategy and enhancing commitment

Miller & Rollnick, 2011

Interpersonal Behavioral Health for Students with ASD-1 (Varin-Mignano, 2016)

- Use and interpret speech literally. Until you know the capabilities of the student
- Avoid idioms and humor (e.g., save your breath, jump the gun, second thoughts; most jokes have double meanings)
- Remember that facial expressions and other social cues may not work.
- Most individuals with ASD have difficulty reading facial expressions and interpreting "body language".
- If the student does not seem to be learning a task, break it down into smaller steps or present the task in several ways (e.g., visually, verbally, physically).

Interpersonal Behavioral Health for Students with ASD-2 (Varin-Mignano, 2016)

- Avoid verbal overload. Be clear. Use shorter sentences if you perceive that the student does not fully understand you.
- Prepare the student for all environmental and/or changes in routine. Use a written or visual schedule to prepare him for change.
- Consistent treatment and expectations from everyone is vital.
- Be aware that normal levels of auditory and visual input can be perceived by the student as too much or too little.
- Consider environmental changes such as removing "visual clutter" from the room or seating changes if the student seems distracted or upset by his classroom environment.

Interpersonal Behavioral Health for Students with ASD-3 (Varin-Mignano, 2016)

- Interrupt perseverative communication by having the student write down the communication as this usually begins to calm down the student and stops the repetitive activity.
- Assume nothing when assessing skills. Uneven skills development is a hallmark of ASD.
- Explain at the beginning of the semester it will not always be possible to predict all the changes that might occur, so the student can be prepared for such an occurrence.
- Make the environment predictable or routine. Try to keep tutors, note takers, and proctors, the same throughout the class Explain any necessary changes with as much advance notice as possible.†

Summary

- Neuro-diversity reframes ASD and diminishes stigma
- College is both an opportunity for academic and social growth
- ASSIST focuses on social anxiety management and social goals
- The coaching function of peer mentors offers students with ASD an accommodation that can help academically and socially
- The student identifies the specific concrete goal of counseling
- The student identifies the steps needed to reach the selected goal
- Positive Psychology diminishes focus on pathology
- Motivational Interviewing is foundationally empowering

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