

Information sheet, Asperger syndrome

Tips for faculty members and advisors

Students with a disability or chronic illness have special needs which cannot always be recognised and interpreted at first sight. This information sheet is intended to provide you with specialist knowledge for open and sympathetic communication in your dealings with the students concerned, and to contribute towards understanding and improving the situation of students with impairments.

Diagnosis

Asperger syndrome (AS) is a congenital, lifelong disorder which impacts on perception and information processing and on socio-emotional development. It results in difficulties in social interaction, communication and behaviour, as well as special characteristics in sensory perception and motor skills.

Asperger syndrome (classified under ICD-10, F84.5) is a mild form of autism. Since distinctions between different forms are blurred, we now also speak of autism spectrum disorders.

Functional description

The externally visible consequences of these characteristics, as well as the extent of physical impairment, differ from person to person, depending on the seriousness of the disorder, the person's intelligence (which in the case of AS ranges from normal to above average) and age. Increasing experience of life can improve social impairments and extend the limited scope of action. As a rule, people affected by AS do not feel ill, disabled or impaired, but simply "different" or special.

They perceive their environment "differently". Their learning options are impaired by the fact that they perceive, process and reproduce information differently. They often take their bearings from details and find it difficult to apprehend a situation in its entirety. In communication, they often understand things literally; thus, they fail to recognise irony, for instance, and have difficulty interpreting expressions of emotions, for example in their interlocutors' faces. Underdeveloped empathy, an unusual use of language (including pitch), a tendency to be pedantic, prolonged response latency and increased distractability are frequent.

In social interaction, special characteristics may manifest themselves in eye contact, in facial expressions and gestures, possibly diminished interest in other people, awkward ways of establishing contact or a lack of understanding of closeness and distance or of processes within groups.

Due to the impairment, there may also be difficulties with regard to motor coordination and hypersensitivity to certain noises, scents and touches. These perceptual disorders can cause a substantial degree of confusion in those people who are affected.

People with AS have many valuable skills which in their development should be recognised and fostered as strengths. They often display a fascination and talent for certain things, particularly things in which clear structures and rules predominate, which is unusual in its intensity and concentration.

Furthermore, people with AS are of at least average intelligence but may be highly talented or specifically talented. They are usually good at analysis and the (visual) recognition of details, and have a good memory. In the course of their development, many of those affected by AS manage relatively well to compensate for certain deficits with their strong cognitive skills. This constant adaptation requires a great deal of effort and results in states of exhaustion or even depression.

About one per cent of the population is affected by a form of autism spectrum disorder, some of them by the mild variant, Asperger syndrome. Since the visible anomalies may be slight, particularly in young, highly talented people, the diagnosis is often made late (adolescence, young adulthood).

Effects in the academic environment

- Working in groups can be a problem for students with AS. Please show yourself to be flexible and offer your support, for example when groups are formed and students are assigned to groups.
- Students with AS may find it difficult to maintain eye contact in discussions. Deficiencies in gestures and facial expression for the regulation of social interaction may also occur. A lack of eye contact does not signify a lack of interest. To the contrary, people with AS often look away when they are concentrating on what is being said.
- Students with AS often fail to master the subtleties of diplomacy; they say what they think. Their direct way of communicating or suggesting improvement should not be misinterpreted as an attack or discourtesy.
- It could also be that people affected by AS interpret statements literally. If you refrain from using irony, wit, metaphors, figures of speech and ambiguities, you can avoid misunderstandings. People with AS find it difficult to *read between the lines*.
- Students with AS often have an increased need for structuring. If possible, provide them with support in prioritising.
- In oral examinations, make sure that questions are formulated precisely and unequivocally. Limited competencies with regard to communication skills, such as an insurmountable inhibition when it comes to asking questions, may also occur. Students with AS welcome it if situations are clearly structured.

Effects on performance assessments

Students who are affected by Asperger's syndrome have the option of submitting an application for special arrangements with regard to **performance assessments** to the Disability Advice Service (information at www.ethz.ch/behinderung).

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Karin Züst, **advisor for students with mental impairments** (044 632 35 92 / karin.zuest@sts.ethz.ch).