

# Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum: Beyond the Basics

## Presented By:

Sue Haddad, College-Wide Chair  
Disability Support Services (DSS)

Melissa Scarfone, Counselor  
Disability Support Services (DSS)

# Learner Outcomes

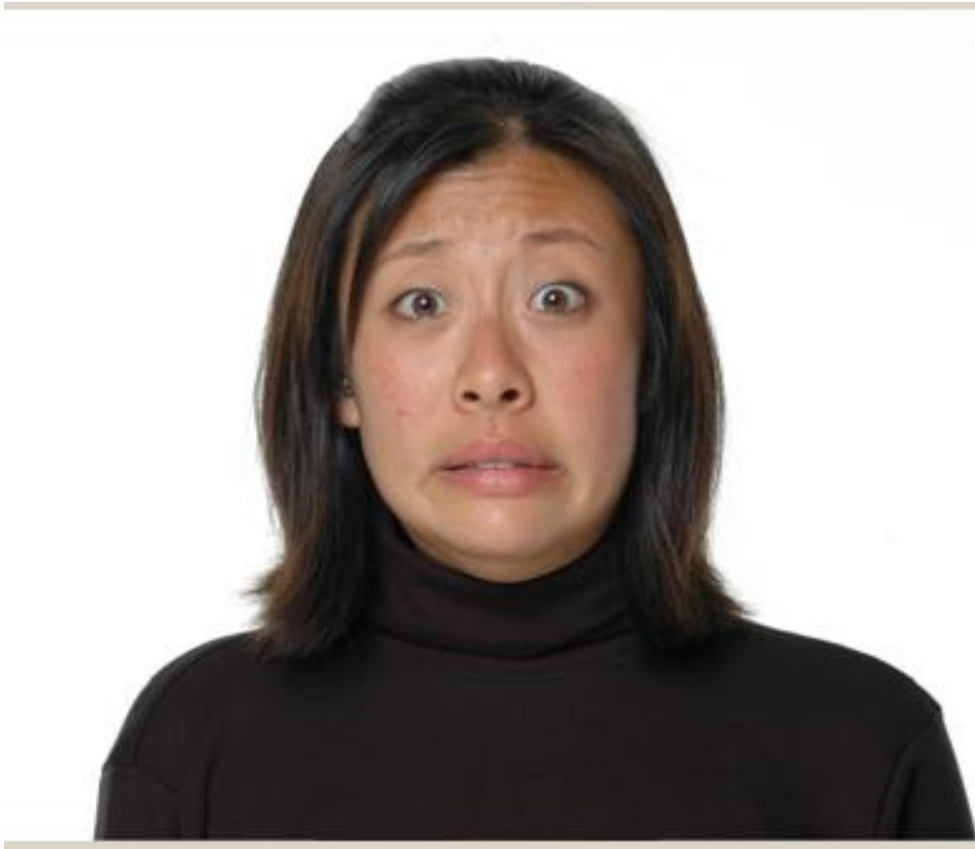
- By the end of this session, you will be able to:
  - To identify characteristics and behaviors associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
  - To identify how behaviors are easily misunderstood and misinterpreted.
  - To identify strategies for working with students on the spectrum that promote inclusivity in the classroom.

# How well do you read people...?

- A. Embarrassment
- B. Fear
- C. Sadness
- D. Anxiousness

Identify the emotion





**FEAR**

- A. Politeness
- B. Flirtatiousness
- C. Happiness
- D. Interest





# Happiness

- A. Sadness
- B. Pain
- C. Disgust
- D. Anger





Anger



- A.Pride
- B.Contempt
- C.Interest
- D.Excitement



# Pride



- A. Fear
- B. Surprise
- C. Interest
- D. Compassion



SURPRISE!!!



# What about now?

- A. Shame
- B. Anger
- C. Sadness
- D. Pain



Pain



# Focus on what we see, ASD focus on what is said



# Facts and Characteristics of ASD



# Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a group of complex **neurodevelopment** disorders characterized by **repetitive** and characteristic patterns of behavior and difficulties with **social communication and interaction**
- Often find comorbidity with other conditions including anxiety, depression, ADHD/ADD, OCD, and/or LD
- “Spectrum” describes the variability within and across areas of challenge, for there are many possible combinations and levels of ability and disability.
- Far more complex than just “high” or “low” functioning; can be “high” in some areas and “low” in others! Huge amount of diversity
- **Used** to be called Asperger’s Syndrome which refers to those on the “high” end of the spectrum

# Facts about ASD

- 1 in 68 children have ASD
  - 1 in 55 children in Maryland
- 5 Times more common among boys
- 1/3 of all young adults with ASD will attend college
- Total cost per year for children with ASD is about 11.5 - 60.9 Billion
- There is no cure; however, it can be treated

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics*

# Neurodiversity

- Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences like ASD and ADHD are the result of normal, natural variation in the human genome.
- We are realizing that autism, ADHD, and other conditions emerge through a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental interaction; they are not the result of disease or injury.

# General Characteristics of ASD

- May exhibit unusual behavior
- Inflexibility; adherence to routines (difficulty with transitions)
- Intense or focused interests
- Sensory sensitivity
- Attention to detail; difficulty seeing the big picture
- Difficulty understanding non-verbal communication (eye-contact, facial expressions)
- Difficulty understanding and interpreting the needs of others (may appear aloof or distant)
- Difficulty initiating, monitoring, planning, organizing and synthesizing information
- May use repetition of phrases or words
- Very literal understanding of sentences, phrases, etc

# Confusion with Language

a dime a dozen

as tough as nails

tone it down

## RIDDLES

a whole new ball game

a little bird told me

# What does this mean?

a piece of cake

let's wrap it up

## IDIOMS

hop to it

a bitter pill

a drop in the bucket

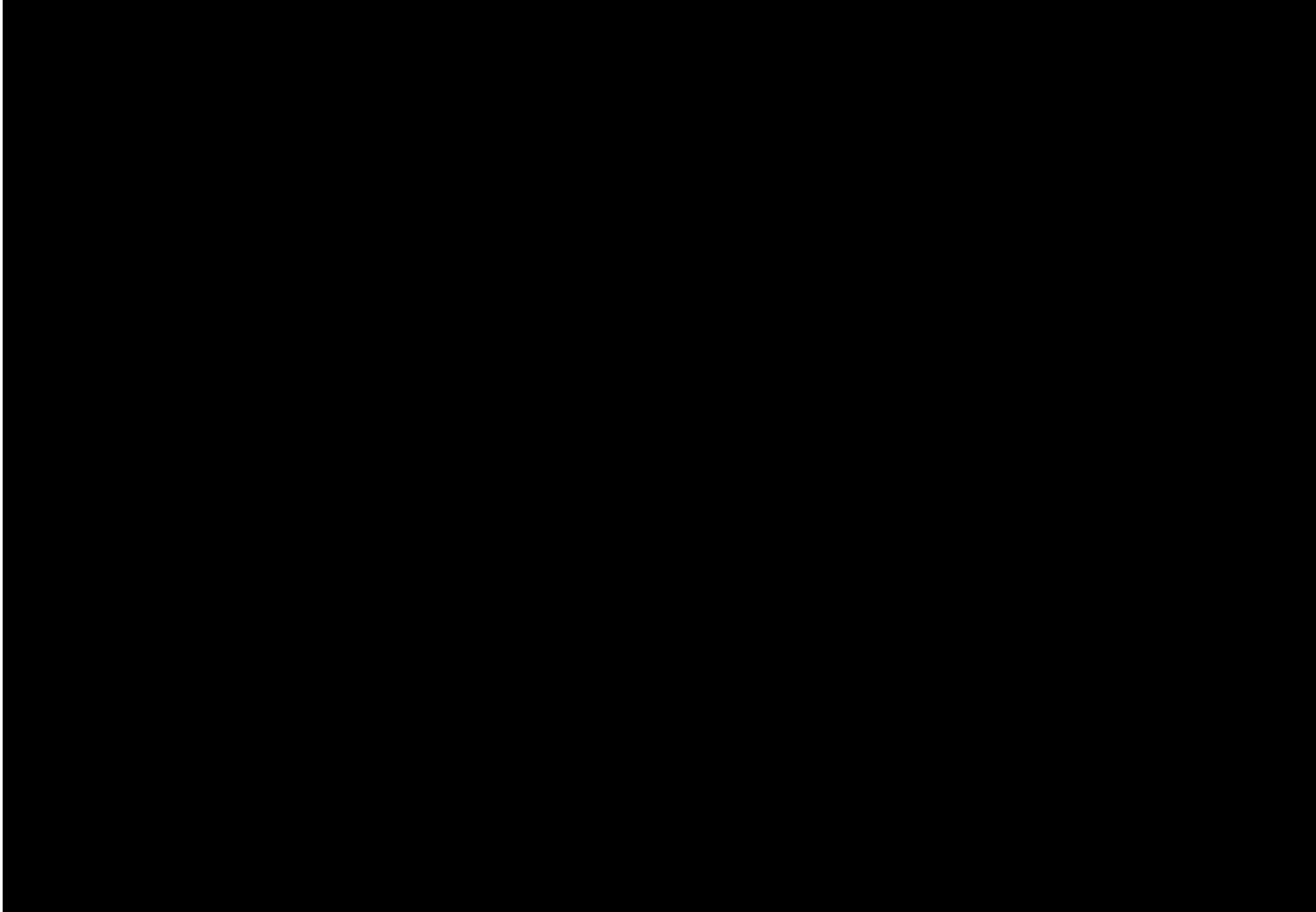
## SARCASM

a slap on the wrist

# Characteristics of ASD

- **Sensory Overload**
  - Neuro-typical brain **subconsciously** processes over 80 percent of incoming information.
  - The neuro-diverse brain processes most information on a **conscious** level due to delayed processing
  - The nervous system then becomes overwhelmed as it requires so much more cognitive energy

# Sensory Overload

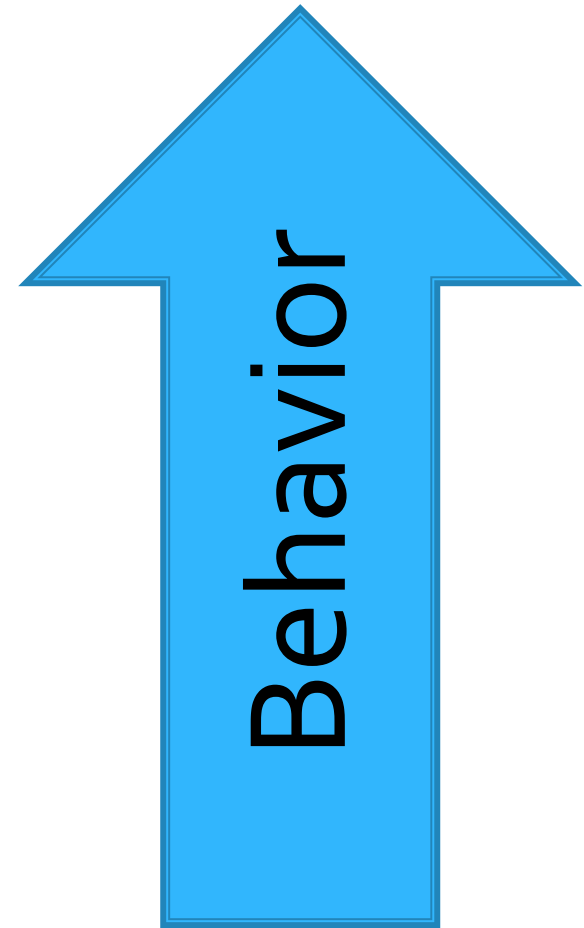
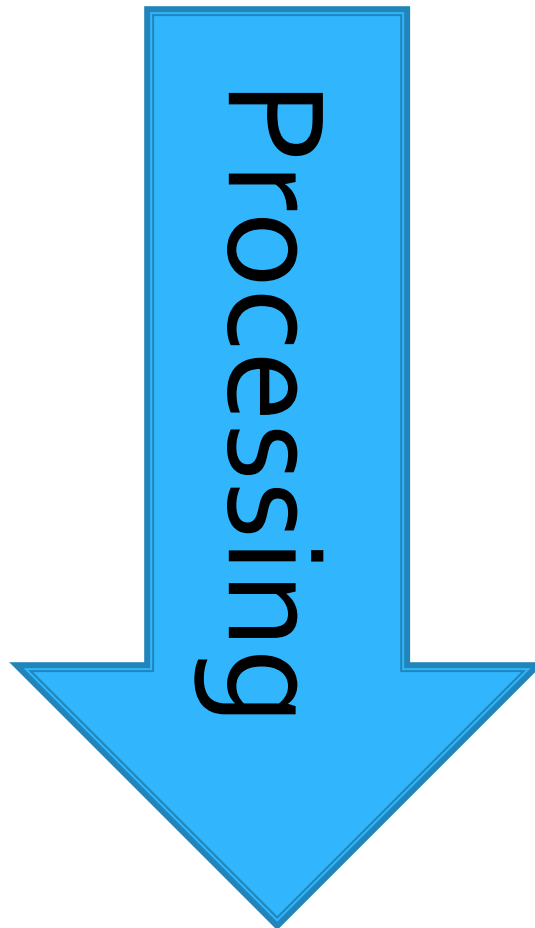
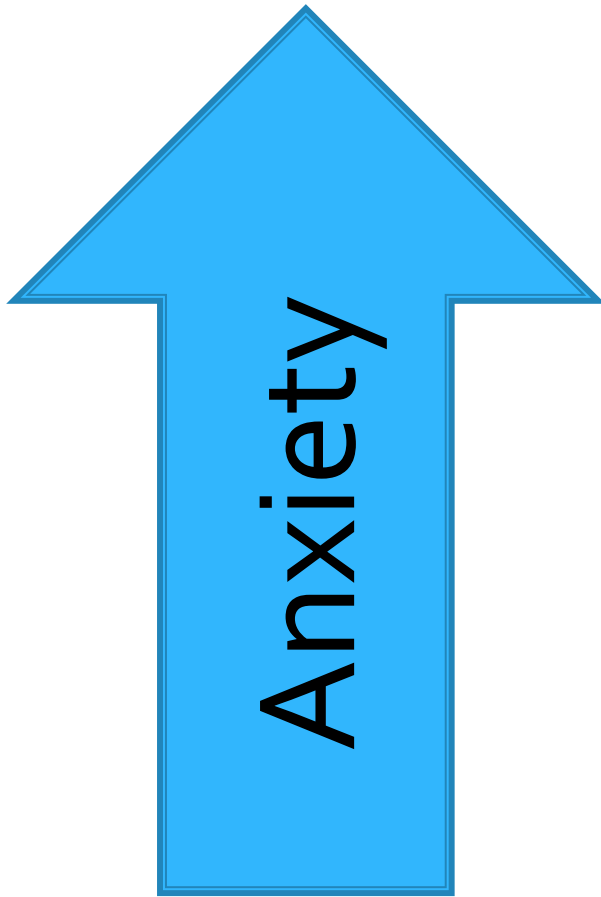


# Contributors to Sensory Overload

- **Auditory**
  - Students talking in the background in the classroom
  - Sounds in the hallway while in class
  - Air conditioning/heat
  - Crowded spaces
- **Visual**
  - Lights
  - Activities outside the window
  - Loud or harsh music
  - Crowds; gatherings
  - Fire alarm/lock downs
- **Other Sensory Input**
  - Smells
  - Touch
- **Other**
  - Changes in routine



# Sensory Overload



# Additional Characteristics

- Attention to detail
- Problem-Solving Skills/Out-of-the-Box Thinkers
- Excellent Memory Skills
- Reliable (once expectations are understood)

# Neurodiversity

- [Deb Lipsky talks about the differences between people with autism and those without](#)



# How Behaviors are Often Misunderstood

# Behaviors that are Misunderstood

OBSERVED BEHAVIOR	COMMON PERCEPTION	STUDENT EXPERIENCES
Calling out/interrupting in class	Rude, inappropriate, impulsive	Excitement about topic, unawareness
Head down on the desk	Sleeping, tired, bored	Overstimulation, overwhelmed
Correcting the professor	Show-off, disrespectful	Sharing factual information and knowledge
Asking too many questions	Annoying, off-putting, time consuming, disruptive	Curiosity, perseverating
Does not recognize you	Aloof, rude	Limited facial recognition
Walks away from conversation or leaves the class	Rude, disrespectful	Overwhelmed, sensory overload; misunderstanding that the conversation is over

# Understanding Accommodations

- Accommodations are meant to reduce/eliminate an access barrier (level the playing field)
- Students with disabilities who are otherwise qualified are held to the same academic standards
- All students must follow the Student Code of Conduct

# Reasonable Accommodations

- Avoid calling on student (or call, then come back)
- Breaks as needed
- Preferential seating
- Alternatives to group work
- Alternatives or modifications to oral presentations
- Note-taker/digital recorder
- Reduced-distraction testing environment
- Assistive technology
- Permission to bring a sensory object
- Prompting/Cueing
- Reduced course load
- Distance learning options

# Strategies to Promote Inclusivity in the Classroom



# Examples of Classroom Environment Strategies

- Professor and DSS counselor inform the student that he/she may ask **2 questions per week**
- Student will write down all comments during class that are not spoken out loud and review later with professor
- Student gets to stand up once per class period
- Student use a sensory object that does not disrupt the class
- Allow student to wear sunglasses in class

# Instructional Tips

LOGIC IS A  
STRENGTH!!

- Clearly define course requirements
- When possible, give advance notice regarding syllabus changes
- Organize lectures in a sequential and logical manner
- Provide direct instruction; use concrete terms; write it down!
- Avoid misinterpreting behavior (e.g., head on desk)
- Provide consistency between blackboard and syllabus
- Make sure all expectations are direct and explicit
- Utilize Universal Design principles



# Tips to Facilitate Communication

## COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

- Too much information at once
- Using open ended questions, too many choices
- Using small talk “How are you?”
- Being specific when you really mean general (“Time to hit the road!”)



## STRATEGIES

- Have student repeat what was said
- Be concrete, literal (say what you mean)
- Incorporate a special interest in conversation
- Teach talking skills (greeting, staying on topic, listen, wrap up conversation, exit conversation)

# Group Work Considerations

Student with ASD brings:

- Unique perspective to group activities
- Potentially vast knowledge of a wide range of subjects
- Willingness to do the required work

Student with ASD may have:

- Difficulty understanding social dynamics of group work
- Difficulty being accepted by the group
- Difficulty understanding the distribution of work among members

# Tips for Group Work

- Selection of partner
- Division of tasks
- Periodic check-ins or monitoring
- Work alone (as a possible accommodation)

# Additional Tips

- Students want to do well; as such, your advice and guidance is appreciated
- Don't be afraid to tell the student your expectations and requirements for the class
- Set clear rules and boundaries
- Oftentimes, a student may not be aware of an issue but is accepting on guidance about classroom etiquette

# Case Scenario

Alex is a second year student at Montgomery College who is taking a history course. Professor Patience conducted a review session prior to the scheduled mid-term exam. During the review, Alex questions the answer to one of the True/False statements. Alex believes the statement is TRUE; however, the professor explains that the answer is FALSE. Alex becomes visibly upset, and repeatedly states, "It can't be, it can't be, you're wrong." Alex goes on to explain why the statement is TRUE. After hearing Alex's reasoning, Professor Patience recognized that indeed, Alex is *also* correct. The Professor informs Alex that both responses could be correct and believes that he resolved the situation. Despite Professor Patience reassurance that he would accept Alex's answer on an exam, Alex raises his voice and states, "It can't be, it can't be, how can it be true **and** false..." He abruptly closes his book and walks out of the class.

# Case Scenario

1. Identify characteristics that may be related to ASD.
2. What behaviors related to ASD may be misunderstood?
3. What strengths does Alex show?
4. As the professor, what might you do next?



# College Resources/Supports

- Disability Support Services
- Safety and Security
- Counselors
- Professors
- Mentoring
- Tutoring/organization & planning
- External resources
- DORS/pathways program





# Selected Resources

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Autism Society of America. (n.d.). *Facts and Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.autism-society.org/what-is/facts-and-statistics/>

Brown, T.B. (2018, July). *Neurodiversity and campus culture*. Presented at 2018 Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD).

Robison, J. E., (2017, April 5). The controversy around autism and neurodiversity. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/my-life-aspergers/201704/the-controversy-around-autism-and-neurodiversity>

*What autism feels like*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2oDIK1Yt3A>