



## Supporting students on the autism spectrum student mentor guidelines

By Catriona Mowat, Anna Cooper and Lee Gilson



Accept difference. Not indifference.

# Supporting students on the autism spectrum

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# Introduction

These guidelines were initially prepared as a resource for newly appointed student mentors supporting students with autism and Asperger syndrome at the University of Strathclyde.

This guide has been rewritten as a useful resource for any university employing and training its own student mentors, or considering doing so. Readers may reproduce the guidelines, or relevant sections of the guidelines, as long as they acknowledge the source.

This new version was made possible by a grant from the Scottish Funding Council in 2009, which has supported not only this publication, but also a research project (led by Charlene Tait of the National Centre for Autism Studies, University of Strathclyde) into transition and retention for students on the autism spectrum, and the delivery of a series of workshops on this topic (jointly delivered by the University of Strathclyde and The National Autistic Society Scotland).

We wish to extend particular thanks to the student mentors at the University of Strathclyde, whose direct and practical experience has provided valuable tips and strategies, examples of which are given throughout this guide. Thanks also to Charlene Tait (our critical friend) for her feedback on the initial draft version.

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## 1. Understanding the autism spectrum

As a student mentor you may find yourself supporting a student diagnosed with either autism or Asperger syndrome (AS)<sup>1</sup>, which is a form of autism. In these guidelines, we refer mainly to AS, but the principles apply equally to supporting other students on the autism spectrum.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects social and communication skills. People on the autism spectrum may find it difficult to understand how the world around them operates and to interact with others. In particular they may have trouble learning, understanding and interpreting the unwritten rules of social interaction and relationships that most people take for granted.


Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that, while all people with autism share difficulties in three main areas, the impact of these will vary from one person to the next. So, while people with classic autism may have associated learning disabilities and use little verbal communication, people with a diagnosis at the higher-end of the autism spectrum, such as AS, are likely to be of average or above average intelligence and have fewer difficulties related to verbal communication.

"I can stand up in front of 300 people at a conference and talk about my condition but sometimes I can't ask the bus driver for a ticket to get there. Social interaction on a one-to-one basis is too intense and I become very anxious and find it difficult to speak. In the past I have run off the bus when the driver asked where I was going."

Student with Asperger syndrome

Autism is not a physical disability so it can often be invisible to the rest of the world. It is easy to recognise when a person in a wheelchair has difficulty negotiating a building with poor access, and this will usually produce an empathetic and helpful response from other people. Tolerance and empathy are often harder to come by for people with hidden disabilities. In particular, people with AS are often simply seen as 'odd' or eccentric because they do not react appropriately to social rules. Some people with AS may even appear 'standoffish' or rude. This can often lead to them being ridiculed or ostracised by their peers.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Asperger syndrome' was first used in an influential study in 1979 by Dr Lorna Wing and Dr Judith Gould, which examined the prevalence of autism among a group of children known to have special needs.



"In the past I have had trouble with social interaction. I have trouble with small talk as it makes me very uncomfortable. I would avoid speaking to people because I would often say inappropriate things. Because of this I chose to spend breaks on my own but people just thought I was weird."

Student with Asperger syndrome

## The triad of impairments

People with AS have difficulty in three main areas. These are usually referred to as the 'triad of impairments'<sup>2</sup>.

The areas of difficulty are:

- › social communication
- › social interaction
- › social imagination.

### Social communication

People with AS can experience difficulties in communicating with others and in understanding what others are communicating to them.

For example, a person with AS may:

- › use language which seems overly formal and stilted
- › be unable to initiate or sustain two way communication (they may lose interest quickly, talk regardless of the listener's interest or interrupt others)
- › make abrupt or insensitive comments
- › find it difficult to understand sarcasm, irony or metaphors
- › interpret instructions literally (eg "go and wash your hands in the toilet")
- › have difficulty reading other people's facial expressions and avoid or overuse eye contact.

These difficulties with social communication can impact greatly on a student's university experience. Most degree courses require students to use and develop communication skills, whether by giving presentations, working in groups or undertaking work placements. Students are also expected to communicate appropriately with a broad range of people, including academic staff, support staff and their peers.

Difficulties with social communication can also impact on a student's ability to form friendships and interact socially with other students.

### Social interaction

Social skills are something that most people take for granted - but people with AS cannot always interpret the actions and intentions of others, making social interaction very difficult.

It is often wrongly assumed that people with AS do not want to interact with others. Although this may sometimes be the case, most people with AS simply lack the skills and understanding to be able to do this easily. If social interaction makes the person

<sup>2</sup> Wing, L. (1981). *Asperger's syndrome: a clinical account* Psychological Medicine 11, p115-129.

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anxious, they might also avoid it in order to reduce the emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety.

## People with AS may:

- appear aloof and uninterested
- be unable to understand social rules (eg standing too close, inappropriate greeting or choice of conversation)
- develop rule-bound behaviour and inflexible routines, which can inhibit social development
- find it difficult to understand turn-taking and group work
- not understand the concept of relationships and friendship in the same way as other people.

Students with AS respond well to a study routine, but may struggle with unexpected changes to timetables, topics, rooms, deadlines etc. Some students may experience difficulty in group work or tutorials, either by under-contributing or contributing too much (eg dominating discussion or asking too many questions). Students seeking friendship may misinterpret casual interactions or gestures as indicative of genuine friendship.

## Social imagination

To say that people with AS have difficulty with imagination would be highly misleading – in fact, many people with AS have extremely creative imaginations. It is perhaps better to describe this as a difficulty with *flexibility of thought*. People with AS tend to be rigid thinkers and cannot always conceive of hypothetical situations or empathise with another person's point of view.

Students with AS may, for example, experience the following difficulties.

- Adapting to changes of routine, such as the transition from school to university or between semester time and the lengthy university holidays.
- Dealing with frequent changes of topic, and following multiple concurrent subjects. People with AS tend not to be able to multi-task, and find it difficult to shift attention readily between subjects and tasks.
- Working in groups that don't follow rule-bound behaviour. People with AS may become anxious when other students miss agreed deadlines or fail to show up at agreed times.

Special interests and obsessions are also a feature of AS. Where a special interest is compatible with the student's subject choice, it can be a positive aid to learning (eg a Computer Science degree student who has a passionate interest in computer programming). However, special interests can also be a barrier to learning when compulsory subjects of study fall outside that narrow frame of interest. A student with AS may actively pursue their interest at the expense of other required tasks and study priorities (eg by staying up all night developing a computer game).

## Psychological theories

A number of theories have been developed to explain the difficulties experienced by people with AS. As theories, they are all subject to academic debate, but can help you as a mentor to understand how a student with AS may experience the world around them.





## Theory of mind

People with AS are often said to lack ‘theory of mind’. This is the ability to recognise other people’s thoughts, feelings and agendas and understand that these differ from their own<sup>3</sup>. It means that people with AS may be less able to empathise with others and can struggle to understand other people’s feelings.

Some people with AS may assume that you know exactly what they are thinking or that you know precise details about a previous situation they were involved in, even if you weren’t there. As a mentor, it can take some guesswork and clarification to find out exactly what situation the person with AS is referring to.

### Example:

Joe has AS and is at university studying Maths. He has a dentist appointment on Wednesday morning at 11.30am. When it is time to go, he gets up and leaves the class without saying anything to his tutor or anyone in the group he is in, as he assumes that they will know where he is going. When he is back in class the next day his tutor is clearly angry with him and Joe doesn’t know why.

It may also be difficult for people with AS to recognise and judge other people’s intentions. This can make them vulnerable to bullying and exploitation. This is something mentors need to be very mindful of - there are a number of instances of students with AS being taken advantage of by people who they believed to be their friends.

## Central coherence

Central coherence is the ability to bring lots of small details together to form the ‘whole picture’. It could also be described as the ability to ‘read between the lines’ of a situation.

For example, if a person without AS walks into a meeting room and sees a group of people in suits having a discussion and taking notes, they will most likely conclude that a meeting is taking place.

A person with AS may be unable to draw the same conclusion, due to having a weak central coherence system<sup>4</sup>. They may instead focus on one particular detail, such as the colour of the carpet.

## Executive function

Executive function is the ability to organise and plan actions, routines, thoughts and behaviour in a logical and rational way. People with AS may struggle with executive function and therefore have an inability to decide which actions to carry out, and in what order, to complete tasks. Even if they have been told how to carry out an action before, they may find it hard to apply this knowledge again in a new situation.

<sup>3</sup> Baron-Cohen, S., Leslie, A. M., and Frith, U. (1985). *Does the autistic child have a “theory of mind”?* Cognition, 21, pp37-46.

<sup>4</sup> This theory was first suggested by Uta Frith in the late 1980s, and has been questioned by a number of studies since

"I've found that students with AS tend to compartmentalise their learning. They can have difficulty transferring skills to new pieces of work. To address this, I would get the student to think about the types of skills they need to do a task, and then where they might have these skills from past study tasks or other areas of their life. I would also try to help them to reflect on previous strategies which had been successful in that context, and to consider whether they might be appropriate in the context of their university studies. Where the gaps in their skills became apparent, we could then set about identifying new strategies."

Student mentor

## Environmental and sensory issues

Another characteristic of AS is the way in which the person's central nervous system processes sensory information<sup>5</sup>. A person with AS may be either over-sensitive (also known as hyper-sensitive) or under-sensitive (also known as hypo-sensitive) and this can occur in one or more of the five senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

For example, a sound that most people would ignore might be unbearably distracting or loud for a person with AS who is hyper-sensitive. In some cases, this may cause anxiety or even physical pain. A person who is hypo-sensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. In such cases the person may spin, rock or flap their hands in order to stimulate some sensation and to help them deal with stress.

"I cannot stand strip lighting. The lights give off a low buzz which is painful to my ears."

Person with Asperger syndrome

Some people with AS may need the sensation of touch in order for them to concentrate or feel reassured. This is not always appropriate, so it is important to address such issues when setting ground rules for your sessions. It is also important to bear in mind that some people with AS may not tolerate any touch. Even a friendly tap on the shoulder might cause them unbearable pain or anxiety.

<sup>5</sup> This difficulty with 'sensory integration' was first described by Anna Jean Ayres in *Sensory Integration and the Child* (1979).



Sensory issues are important and should be discussed prior to any work with a student with AS in order to avoid any undue stress for both parties.

"Because I don't know how a student feels about physical contact, I never dive straight in to shake their hand when I meet them. Of course, if they offer me their hand, I'll shake it."

**Student mentor**

Provided you are aware of any sensory or environmental issues the student has, there are usually some simple adjustments that can be made. For example, you might need to choose a dimly-lit meeting place or find a quiet room. Some students may have an existing strategy, such as holding an object for sensation to help them to concentrate. In such cases, you should ensure this strategy continues to be used.

## Anxiety

Many people on the autism spectrum experience high levels of anxiety, which can manifest itself in both physical and psychological symptoms. Anxiety may be associated with transition and unexpected changes in routine and environment. It may also be triggered by sensory overload, or extreme frustration due to exposure to unpredictable or uncontrollable situations. The ability of people with AS to manage anxiety may be hampered by difficulties with social imagination, and an inability to understand emotions.

It is helpful if both student and mentor understand and acknowledge how and when anxiety may occur, and that both learn to recognise any physical or behavioural manifestations that may accompany the onset of anxiety, so that it can be managed more effectively.

Further information about anxiety and AS can be found on The National Autistic Society website ([www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)).

## 2. Your role as student mentor

It will be reassuring to you as a student mentor to know that you will in all circumstances be part of a broader framework of support. What this support looks like may vary considerably from one student to the next, and may include formal and informal elements.

Many students with AS opt to remain in the family home for the duration of their studies, and so continue to have access to their established informal support networks of family and friends.

A range of people will have a defined role in supporting the student throughout their university career, such as their academic counsellor, adviser of studies, tutors and other members of the academic team. The student will also have access to a range of specialist support services within the university, such as the Careers Service, Counselling Service, Student Finance Advisers, Student Health Service, the Chaplaincy and so on.

Your role as a mentor is not to replace or replicate any of these existing services and provisions.

In addition to general support, disabled students may have additional arrangements - and these will likely extend beyond the provision of a mentor.

The university's Disability Service will conduct a needs assessment for students and applicants who disclose a disability, including students with a diagnosis of AS. A needs assessment considers the impact of a disclosed disability on the person's ability to follow their chosen course. The assessment may trigger a broad range of adjustments and support arrangements to address that impact, including:

- recommendations to the student's academic department about adjustments that may be made to teaching or assessment practices which would lessen or remove the impact of disability on study

- providing assistive technology and software, and the training needed to use it, enabling the student to remain an independent learner without the need for further support interventions
- providing additional one-to-one support, such as a note-taker, one-to-one study support or a student mentor.


A needs assessment may also trigger a referral to (or acknowledge existing support from) an external agency. These may include health care providers or programmes delivered by The National Autistic Society or other voluntary sector organisations.

### What is a student mentor?

Mentors are appointed to assist students with AS to gain access to their studies, their university environment and life on campus.

The precise nature of a student mentor's duties will vary considerably depending on the needs of the person they are supporting, but are likely to include some or all of the following.

- To meet the student on a regular basis (usually at least once a week) and to assist them in reviewing their progress and planning for the following week.
- To provide guidance and encouragement to the student in the development and use of effective study skills, including organisation skills, managing deadlines, breaking down tasks into component parts and prioritising tasks.
- To provide advocacy and liaison support, where appropriate.
- To assist the student in identifying and accessing university facilities and services (eg Careers Service, Student Finance, IT Services, Library) and accompanying them to use these services where appropriate.

- 
- To support the student in accessing leisure facilities on campus, such as the sports centre, Student Union and food outlets, as appropriate.
  - To encourage and support the student in making the most of the range of services and opportunities available, and in increasing their confidence and independence.

As a student mentor, you may also provide guidance and support in personal development skills such as communication and emotion management.

It is increasingly common practice to offer a mentor to most incoming students with AS who have disclosed potential needs. Some students may only require the support of their mentor in the early stages of their course, or in making the initial transition from school or college to university. Others may find it helpful to receive mentor support throughout their degree, albeit on a less frequent basis as time progresses.

The role of mentor will in many cases be very similar to that of a study support assistant (ie someone who teaches effective study skills and strategies to students with a specific learning difficulty). But as a mentor working with students with AS, you may need to use different strategies and approaches and be more proactive and more directive. You may be expected to undertake additional training and CPD (continuing professional development).

## What skills and background experience do you need to be a good student mentor?

### Credibility

To be a credible student mentor, you should have successfully undertaken university level study and you should be familiar with the student's own university. Most mentors will be recent graduates of the university, or will currently be undertaking postgraduate level study. Having a good knowledge of the university (its campus layout, procedures, support services, key contacts etc) is a required skill for all mentors. It also helps if you have a good knowledge of the things which aren't written down, which you only learn through the experience of being a student yourself (eg the quieter areas in the library, where students usually eat lunch, whether going out partying four nights a week is the norm etc).

Ideally, mentors will be assigned to students in the same faculty as them, or the faculty they have graduated from. On occasions, you may be mentoring a student who is in the same academic department as you. This can have its advantages (eg an indepth knowledge of departmental procedures, how to approach individual members of staff, where a particular student common room is located and what students use it for) and disadvantages (eg a difficulty adhering to the boundaries of your role, an expectation from the student that you may assist with their understanding of course content).

## Good communication skills and an ability to reflect

A good mentor will always have strong communication skills. It's not just a matter of having a warm personality (although that will certainly help); it's also about your ability to actively listen, to communicate clearly (avoiding the abstract and hypothetical) and to offer advice and guidance in a way that is direct but not disempowering or patronising to the student.

You'll also have to be a reflective communicator. It may take a few meetings with a student before you are both communicating effectively. If one approach doesn't work, reflect on why that might be, and try something different next time.

Being able to communicate with clarity is a key skill. You should also be comfortable with regularly checking that the other person understands what you have just said. A useful way of making sure you are being clear, and ensuring that the student has understood, is to ask them to reflect back to you what you have discussed and agreed. Another way would be to offer to write it down, or ask them to write it down.

## Reliability and honesty

In other words: "say *what you mean and mean what you say*". If you agree to meet a student at a certain time, be there on time. If you say you're going to find something out for a student before your next meeting, make sure you do. A successful mentoring relationship requires trust.

As a mentor, you are also responsible for delivering any support which the university has deemed to be a requirement in order for the student to participate in their course<sup>6</sup>. It is therefore imperative that you deliver that support to the best of your ability, as set out in the mentoring agreement. Failure to do so may result in disadvantage to the student and the university (as your employer) failing to meet its lawful duty.

## Responsibilities, relationships and boundaries

When a student is assigned a mentor, the mentoring agreement (see *figure 1*) will typically describe the nature of the support required, but also the respective responsibilities of the mentor and the student.

The Mentoring Agreement helps clarify your respective roles, but also helps to clarify the nature of your relationship from the outset. The student knows what to expect from you and how this might differ from the roles of other members of staff, and from a friend.

<sup>6</sup> The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, as amended, offers protection from discrimination for disabled students. Discrimination may occur through failure to make a reasonable adjustment, which places that student at a substantial disadvantage compared with their non-disabled peers. The provision of a student mentor is a form of support which could be construed as a 'reasonable adjustment'.

Figure 1: Sample mentoring agreement

## Responsibilities of student mentor

1. Meet the student at agreed times and locations.
2. Advise the student by email/text of any unavoidable changes to arrangements at least 24 hours in advance.
3. Keep a record of work done and issues arising, which can be referred to in review meetings with the Disability Service
4. Communicate with the student in clear and specific terms, providing written instruction as a back up where appropriate (eg in tasks the student may be required to complete in their own time).
5. Attend regular meetings and training, as required by the Disability Service.
6. Any other support consistent with the defined role of student mentor.

## Responsibilities of student

1. Meet your mentor at agreed times and locations.
2. Advise your mentor by email of any unavoidable changes to arrangements at least 24 hours in advance.
3. Attend review meetings with the Disability Service when requested.
4. Communicate any concerns or difficulties in working with your mentor to your Disability Adviser.

"There are aspects of the role where you might feel a bit like a counsellor. But that's not my role. I might ask 'Why do you think you find it difficult to get ideas down on paper?' and that might elicit a response which relates to a personal issue. I'm always clear about my role though, and if I had the slightest concern about any student I work with, I would discuss it with someone in the Disability Service straight away."

Student mentor

# Supporting students on the autism spectrum

The Mentoring Agreement helps clarify your respective roles, but also helps to clarify the nature of your relationship from the outset. The student knows what to expect from you and how this might differ from the roles of other members of staff, and from a friend.

To be successful, the relationship between a student and their mentor needs to be one of trust and mutual respect. Being friendly sits well with the professionalism required, indeed many of the qualities of a good mentor would be comparable with the qualities we would look for in a good friend.

However, it needs to be recognised that becoming close friends can create problems for either party: for example, the student must get an appropriate level of service and may be asked to give critical feedback to their mentor or the Disability Service. There may also be circumstances in which the friendship breaks down, and it is important that the working relationship is not threatened in the process.

In some cases, the student may become confused as to what service is being provided as part of the contracted relationship, and what is being offered as a part of the friendship.

Part of your assigned role as a student mentor may be to facilitate the student's access to recreational activities and the 'social' side of university life.

This might involve accompanying the student to some Fresher's Fayre events, making enquiries about clubs and societies on their behalf or arranging to have your meetings in a social space, such as a cafe or the Union bar.

To avoid any misunderstanding or confusion, it will help to discuss such plans in the context of your role as mentor, and it may help to agree an 'exit plan' in advance.

For example, say you agree to attend the first meeting of the Debating Society with the student, so that they are supported in locating the venue, finding out what happens and what is expected of members. You could plan to discuss the experience with the student afterwards, with a view that once the student is familiar with what is involved, and has met a couple of other people in the Debating Society, he or she will attend the next meeting unaccompanied.

Be aware that without explicit clarification and a mutual understanding of your role, your presence could act as a barrier to the student making genuine friends. Mentors should discuss any emerging or difficult issues with the student and/or with a Disability Adviser, as they arise.

**A Mentoring Agreement helps to clarify your role and the role of the student.**





## 3. Getting started

It is important to establish a relationship with the student from the start so that they feel comfortable and confident working with you. Students who do not feel comfortable in their relationship with their mentor may be disinclined to disclose the full extent of their difficulties, thereby making the task of mentoring all the more difficult.

People with AS find it difficult to cope with change and new situations, so it is important to recognise that your initial meetings could be a cause of some anxiety. You can help to alleviate this anxiety by explaining the mentoring process. This may include discussing what is expected of the student (eg how often they keep in touch or meet you) and what they can expect from you as a mentor. You may also find it beneficial to show the student potential meeting places, agree on favourites, and to take time to look around these places to allow the student to feel more familiar with their surroundings.

*"In the first few meetings, I felt under pressure to start delivering support with the student's studies. In hindsight, it was more important during those first few meetings to concentrate on building a relationship and establishing effective communication."*

Student mentor

## Learning to communicate effectively


It is as impossible to generalise about the behaviour and characteristics of people with AS as it is to generalise about people who do not have AS. Some people with AS are extremely chatty and outgoing, whereas others may be extremely quiet. Students who are quiet may have low self-esteem, may not be confident speakers, or may find it hard to understand what has been said and have difficulty formulating a response. Students who are extremely chatty may seem easier to work with. However, a talkative student may tend to talk about one particular topic they are interested in, and not listen so attentively to anything else that is being said to them.

Many people with AS want to be sociable and enjoy human contact. However, they often find it hard to understand non-verbal signals, including facial expressions. They may have trouble interpreting body language or identifying how tone and pitch impacts on what a person says. This can become an issue if it leads to them misreading communication with others.

Imagine if you found it difficult to understand tone and body language. You may not realise that someone is annoyed or bored with you.

Similarly, you may not realise that you are using an inappropriate tone, volume or facial expression when having a conversation. As a result, you may be considered by others to communicate or express yourself in an unconventional way.

These difficulties frequently make it harder for students with AS to form and maintain social relationships with their peers.



"I can't read facial expressions  
so I don't know if people are  
kidding me or being serious."

Adult with Asperger syndrome

"You can misinterpret what  
people say and think you're  
being criticised. That's something  
I've really had to learn -  
that people are trying to help."

Adult with Asperger syndrome

Social skills are something that people with AS have to learn, just as another person might learn a new language. Part of your role as a mentor may be to offer friendly and straightforward advice on ways the student can adapt their communication style in certain situations.

"I find eye contact too intense  
and it makes me very anxious,  
so I avoid it. People have told  
me this makes me look shifty and  
untrustworthy. I have learned a  
trick to look at the nose instead of  
eyes. They don't know any different  
and I don't get so anxious."

Student with Asperger syndrome

Often people with AS will take what others have said literally. Common turns of phrase and metaphors such as "she bit my head off" may be a cause of some amusement or alarm. It is therefore best to avoid ornate or figurative language. Similarly, some students may struggle to understand sarcasm due to a tendency to take what is being said at face value, as well as their difficulty in interpreting tone and facial expression.

Increasingly, students who received their diagnosis of AS at an early age may have had significant input from learning support services and other professionals to help them develop their communication skills. This early intervention may enable some students with AS to mask aspects of their communication difficulties. For example, they may present with very good eye contact and well-polished conversation skills, but may still feel anxious about unstructured or unplanned social interaction, or have difficulty interpreting ambiguous language.

"I think some people with AS  
have learned responses, such  
as nodding, smiling or agreeing  
to something which can mask  
the reality. It's a good idea to  
check their responses, test their  
understanding of what you have  
said, or actions that you've  
agreed. You need confidence to  
do this. I think I was concerned  
at first that I might seem

## Supporting students on the autism spectrum

patronising. But I realise now the importance of clarifying and checking."

Student mentor

For some students, more in-depth work on communication and social interaction skills will be useful, particularly where it helps them to feel more able and confident in dealing with others. These skills are vital to sustain a successful academic career.

Areas to work on may include:

- > appropriate conversation topics
- > forming and maintaining relationships
- > listening skills
- > body language
- > facial expressions
- > turn-taking in group discussions.

"I find it beneficial with some of my students to keep an index of phrases and words that they do not understand, along with their definitions. We add to this during our sessions but the student can also add to it themselves during the week and then we can discuss any new words or phrases at our next session."

Student mentor

"Some students like to poke fun at literal meanings of words and phrases. They have a heightened awareness of how these words can be interpreted. Everyday words such as 'right', 'cool', "take a seat" or 'two seconds' can be met with responses such as 'left', 'I'm quite hot actually', 'which seat?' or 'one... two...'. I have had to be a lot more aware of things that I say and always have to be thinking in advance."

Student mentor



## Hints and tips for communication

First impressions count, so before making any contact with the student you have been assigned to mentor, it is worth taking some time to reflect on your personal communication skills and consider what may help you, or stand in your way, when communicating effectively with a person with AS.

**Do not make assumptions** - we tend to assume people know certain things. We might see some things as 'common sense'. It is best not to make any assumptions about what the student knows and always provide clear steps or instructions. If in doubt, check that the student is clear about what has been asked of them.

**Try to avoid using sarcasm, irony and metaphors** - for example, "It'll cost you an arm and a leg" or "I could have died from laughter".

**Avoid using other forms of figurative speech** - people with AS may take things literally, so it is best not to use figurative speech. For example, if you say you will be "back in a minute" the student may fully expect you to be back in one minute.

**Be direct** – people with AS usually prefer direct instructions or questions. Asking for something in an indirect manner usually involves more ambiguous language, which can be misinterpreted by some.

**Be precise** – when giving instructions or explanations it is best to be precise and say specifically what is required. For example, saying "make three copies of this and give the copies to John, Dave and Erin" rather than "make sure everyone gets a copy of this".

**Don't be patronising** - people with AS generally have an average or above average IQ.

**Check that you have been understood** – if you feel that there may be any confusion, always check that the student has understood a comment or instruction. If arrangements are left vague, don't be surprised if things don't get done.

**Write it down** - it often helps to back up verbal instructions with written ones. Flow charts, mind maps or bullet points may be useful, depending on the student's individual preference.

**Follow the six second rule** - after asking a question, allow up to six seconds for the student to respond. Although this seems like a long time, it can take some people with AS this long to process a question and develop a response. If your question still elicits no response, try to rephrase it.

## Planning your meetings

### Why are we meeting?

If you don't have a clear purpose for meeting, this is a fair question for the student to ask - especially as they already have a busy timetable.

It is therefore helpful to establish a structure and agenda in advance of your meetings.

### Structure

By agreeing and establishing a format or 'structure' to your meetings with the student, you will both be clearer about what to expect, and will probably both find that your meetings are more constructive and provoke less anxiety.

Establishing a structure doesn't mean you have to be rigid and inflexible. A structure will help to manage both your expectations about what can realistically be covered during the available time. It will also give your meetings a familiarity through routine, which can be reassuring and helpful to the student.

"One student I was working with needed to relieve stress at our meetings, due to having no in-built 'off valve'. So I allowed a fixed amount of time in our sessions, say the last 20 minutes of an hour long session, during which he was permitted to vent

his frustration. I found this worked well. If I allowed him to start the session with a rant, it could be difficult to get him to stop. I've used the same approach with another student who liked to talk at length about Star Wars."

Student mentor

### Agenda

It is always helpful for the mentor and the student to agree an agenda, or at least the purpose of the meeting, in advance. If the student is able to identify which issues you might be able to help them with, and which of these are priorities, then agreeing an agenda will be easy. However, many students with AS will have some difficulty with this, and you may find that you have to encourage and support the student in this process.

"When you're delivering study support, it is ideal if students turn up with a number of concerns or priorities they would like to address. But I've found that students with AS can have



difficulty reflecting and realising priorities when it comes to their studies, and I might need to help them to achieve this."

Student mentor

Agreeing a list of potential extra topics to work on can help to make sure that your meetings remain productive and worthwhile for the student. This might include support with finding holiday-time employment, independent living skills and planning for leaving home, as well as looking into student clubs and societies, etc. Try to avoid putting exact dates on when these additional topics will be covered, as the schedule may have to change due to other more urgent issues arising in the mean time.

### Where should we meet?

If you fail to identify a suitable venue in advance of your meeting, this can have a disruptive effect on your ability to deliver support.

"We wasted lots of time during the initial sessions simply trying to find a suitable space to talk. You can't predict in advance whether the library or chaplaincy or computer labs will be busy or quiet. Also, the student I was working with had a number

of sensory issues. He was really easily distracted and didn't like bright lighting."

Student mentor

You should take account of a range of factors when choosing a location to meet.

- **What is the agreed purpose of your meeting?**  
If you're having an informal catch-up on how the week has gone, or to discuss how the student is settling into campus life, it might be best to choose a quiet area in a 'social space', such as a café or a student common room. If you're meeting to do focussed work on strategies for managing deadlines, you'll probably want a quiet area with fewer distractions, such as a private room or one of the individual study spaces in the library.
- **Which locations is the student familiar with?**  
Make sure that the student knows and is familiar with any venue you suggest. If not, your meeting may prove counter-productive, causing the student unnecessary anxiety.
- **Does the student have any sensory sensitivities?**  
If you know that the student has a particular sensory sensitivity, you should consider the impact of background noise, strong lighting, cooking smells etc. when suggesting a venue.
- **What facilities may the student need?**  
For example, if you're going to be helping the student draw up a plan for the following week, and will need the student to access their electronic diary, you will probably want to meet in an area which has wireless broadband.

# Supporting students on the autism spectrum

"I can't concentrate in the library, as there's so much background noise. I can't filter out sounds like other people seem able to. It's really distracting when I'm trying to listen to someone speaking and there's background noise like traffic or other people talking."

Student with Asperger syndrome

Some students will have a preference for meeting in the same place every week. For others, it might be helpful to suggest a change of venue from time to time.

## When should we meet?

The Mentoring Agreement will always include guidance on the frequency of your meetings. During transitions, it is possible that you will need to meet on a daily basis. Once patterns and routines have been established, weekly or twice weekly meetings might be more effective. As with all forms of study support, there is a general expectation that the amount of support a student requires from their mentor will decrease over time as they become more independent and confident.

When you agree a suitable time to meet, you should also take account of:

- › the student's timetable and other fixed commitments. If your meetings are going to be taken up with focussed work on study skills,

then it's probably not sensible to plan these meetings for 4-5pm in the afternoon, after a full day of lectures.


- › potential restrictions related directly or indirectly to the impact of the student's disability. For example, inflexible transport arrangements (some students with AS may have difficulty using busy public transport at peak times due to anxiety), commitments to external support services, increased difficulties at particular times of day due to disturbed sleep patterns etc.
- › the need for any student to have sufficient rest breaks and time set aside for lunch in their timetable.

When deciding on a time and place to meet, it will be easier to give consideration to all these factors if you look over the student's timetable together.

"Because the student I was working with was unable to use public transport at peak times, we were really restricted about when we could meet. He was in the science faculty and so already had a full timetable. I actually wondered if it was an added pressure to the student, trying to fit support sessions into an already busy timetable."

Student mentor





It's a good idea to agree whether or not the student wants to receive reminders about your agreed meetings, and if so, how they would like to receive this. Some students may benefit from a prompt, such as a reminder text at the start of the day you are due to meet, or an email delivered the day before. If the student has a particular difficulty with organisation, and is prone to missing meetings, then exploring strategies for managing this difficulty independently is probably a better idea. This might mean using the reminder or alarm function on their mobile phone or PDA.

### Managing your meetings effectively

Once you have decided on the format of your meetings, and where and when you will meet, it's prudent to employ some strategies to keep things on track. This might involve employing particular communication techniques, reviewing the arrangements if problems arise and recording outcomes from your meetings, which you can both learn from.

Strategies that may be suitable include:

- › using visual or written timetables to help plan and organise daily tasks if necessary (see 'Useful resources')
- › using logical and visual problem-solving approaches to help the student make well-considered decisions (see 'Useful resources')
- › looking out for signs of stress and hidden difficulties – each person will be different but it is important to recognise when the student is anxious or worried about something
- › agreeing what will happen next at the end of any meeting. Agree your next meeting date and record any agreed interim action points, timetabling

these if appropriate. For some students, it may be helpful to email a brief summary of the topics you discussed and the action points you agreed, following your meeting.

"I always get the students I am working with to write down anything they agree to do, any plan, agreed action, or the date of the next meeting. Sometimes I have to provide direction, insisting that they get their to-do list, diary, mobile phone or laptop out and write it down straight away. If they've forgotten their diary, I would usually give them a sheet of paper and ask them to write it on that."

Student mentor

## 4. Supporting a student with Asperger syndrome to...

### ...manage time

Time management can be an issue for some people with AS; for example, they may turn up to appointments extremely early or extremely late. The student you are working with may need extra support and advice in managing their time, as well as encouragement to be punctual.

An alarm clock, mobile phone or PDA may help and remind students with AS when they need to attend meetings or classes. It may also be useful to go over the reasons why it is important to be on time for appointments and classes, as students may not fully understand this. You could also talk through a 'time plan' with them which focuses on how long it takes to get ready when they get up (eg getting dressed, shower, have breakfast etc) and how long their journey to university takes. In this way, the student can understand how much time they need to give themselves to get to class or other appointments.

"The student I work with is really disorganised. He often forgets to bring the things he needs for university or misses appointments with tutors. We looked at ways of addressing this, and have started using post-it notes as reminders. It is really simple but very effective. He leaves these in

places he will see, such as on the front of his work folders, on his computer screen or on his bedroom door. It has really helped him to remember important things he needs to do, or things he needs to bring with him."


#### Student mentor

It is usually helpful to give students with AS a timeframe for completing a task. Without a specific timeframe they may spend too long on one thing. However, students with AS may also take deadlines so seriously that they become anxious if they are unable to complete tasks within the given time. You should encourage the student to let you know if they are struggling to meet a deadline. Always review deadlines with the student to check their progress and make sure the time scale is still realistic.

See 'Useful resources' for daily and weekly planner templates.

### ...build confidence and self-esteem

People with AS are particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties like depression, especially in late adolescence and early adult life. This is often because they may feel isolated from their peer group due to poor communication and social skills. Everyday interactions and the daily challenge of trying to make sense of the world may be extremely stressful.



Recent research suggests that approximately 1 in 15 people with Asperger syndrome experience depression at some point in their life<sup>7</sup>.

Another factor which can affect self-esteem and confidence for some people with AS is a constant striving for perfection. A student with AS may have been a high academic achiever at school, and may have difficulty managing their expectations of their university career. Some people with AS find it difficult to understand that it is natural to make mistakes, so they get stressed and upset if they happen to make one. People with AS can also find it difficult to accept criticism.

"Some of the students I have worked with have linked their self-esteem very closely to their academic achievement and have had very high expectations, due to being high achievers at school. It can be difficult to make that jump from being top of the class at school to becoming average in your peer group at university."

**Student mentor**

In these instances it is important to explain to the student that mistakes are natural and that it is not a catastrophe or the worst case scenario. If you need to give feedback to the student, use constructive criticism. Try to focus on the positives and be selective about how you phrase your comments. For example, rather than saying "that's not the way you do that, you're doing it wrong" you could say "you're doing really well so far and I'm impressed with your progress. This new technique may help you to do even better".

High levels of anxiety can also contribute to low confidence and lack of self-esteem. For many people with AS, coping with change and managing social interaction are major causes of anxiety - but there are many other things which can cause anxiety as well. If anxiety levels are not managed, they can affect a person's ability to cope with everyday situations and may ultimately lead to emotional meltdown.

Building confidence is an important part of helping people with AS to succeed in their studies. To help the student deal with negative feelings, you may want them to keep a list of positive things in their lives to look at when they are feeling down. Encouraging them to focus on all the positive aspects of their personality and abilities may also help. You can add to this list yourself or suggest things that they may not realise or believe; for instance, "I think you have a great sense of humour and you always manage to make me laugh". In some cases, counselling may be more appropriate, although it is recommended that you discuss any concerns with a Disability Adviser in the first instance.

<sup>7</sup> Tantam D. (1991). *Asperger syndrome in adulthood*. In U. Frith (ed.) *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, pp. 147-183. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## ...deal with change

Dealing with change is one of the biggest problem areas for people with AS. Change can be nerve-racking and frightening for most people.

Think about when you started university - how did you feel? Perhaps you were nervous about meeting new classmates, worried you wouldn't fit in or that you wouldn't be able to pick up the course work quickly enough? It can also be quite overwhelming trying to learn new procedures and remember names. By the end of each day you may feel completely exhausted and irritable. However, most people can predict these types of scenarios and work through responses and solutions in their heads.

People with AS may not have these forward-thinking and planning skills. As they are unable to predict what will happen, the nervous and anxious feelings they have will be exacerbated. It's like going abroad but not knowing where you are going, how to get there, what you will be doing when you arrive and being unable to speak the new language.

"Dealing with the change in moving from school to university was the most difficult thing for the student I mentor. It was a really tough thing for him to realise that, whilst he could manage the academic work, he just wasn't coping with all the other changes."

Student mentor

Unexpected changes can be particularly stressful for people with AS. They may be unable to figure out what will happen next, what is expected of them and how they should react. This can lead to severe distress which in turn may lead to an extreme behavioural reaction.

The student you are mentoring may benefit from talking through different scenarios and possible outcomes and what to do in situations which are unpredictable. They should be encouraged to ask you, or an appropriate member of staff, if they are unsure or anxious about how to handle a situation. Timetables and calendars will help them to know what will happen next and where they are expected to be. A student diary or a written list of instructions may also be useful. If the student uses a laptop, then calendar software (eg the calendar in Microsoft Outlook) can be a highly effective planning tool.

You should help and encourage the student to examine their worries and talk them through. This includes looking at specific problems which affect them and how these can be overcome. You may also want to go over stress management and breathing techniques, visualisation or muscle relaxation. Many of these techniques are available online or you can contact The National Autistic Society for advice on using these (see 'Useful resources').

Finally, help the student to keep things in perspective and see the positive aspects of change. Reinforce the point that the student can ask other people for advice if they are unsure of what is expected of them or how to react in a particular situation. It may also be beneficial to give the student a list of key contacts with an outline of their roles and responsibilities, if they don't already have this.

## ...consider issues around disclosure and confidentiality

When a mentor is matched to a student, a certain amount of information regarding the nature and impact of the student's unseen disability is usually communicated by the Disability Service. This information is on a 'need to know' basis, and will have relevance to the way that you offer support, and the particular study-related issues that you prioritise in your meetings with the student.

Students with AS have a legal entitlement to a degree of confidentiality. This means that you should regard any information that you are given (directly or via the Disability Service) about the student in the course of your employment as sensitive personal data, and should not share this with your friends or any third party, including lecturers or the student's parents, without the student's consent. It is crucial to establish boundaries and guidelines about this with the student. For example, you should make them aware that in some instances they may disclose information to you that you will have to pass on to relevant third parties, such as your manager.

It is up to each individual student whether they wish to disclose an unseen disability, such as AS, and to whom.

"I need my lecturers and tutors to know that I need extra time in my exams, and that I need copies of their notes, but I don't want everyone to know that I have Asperger syndrome. People can react differently to you if they know that. What I need isn't that different to what students with dyslexia need. They don't need to know that I have AS."

Student with Asperger syndrome

"I can sometimes find it a bit difficult keeping up with the pace of the work in class, as I get a bit distracted and waste time on tasks. It helps to have the lecturer know about this, so that I can be told when to move on to the next question or the next step in the experiment."

Student with Asperger syndrome

The Disability Service will typically communicate information about a disabled student's academic needs to their academic departments. This record may specifically state that the student has AS, or it may simply relate the possible impacts of a disclosed disability on study.

So, there are potentially both positive and negative aspects to disclosure. If a student you are working with is considering disclosure (eg to their lecturers, flatmates, classmates or employer), it may be worthwhile exploring these pros and cons with them.

## ...make decisions or move on

Helping a student to tackle their own procrastination and get things done has, on occasions, been one of the biggest challenges for mentors. Simply creating an action point and getting the student to put a particular study task in their diary may not be enough. Their inability to complete a task may be due to an underlying reason, which may not be immediately apparent and which the student may or may not be able to articulate.

"The biggest problem I have is a total lack of confidence. Call it depression... I can't make decisions about what I am going to do. When I do make a decision I find it difficult to know where to start."

Adult with Asperger syndrome

Some common reasons why students find it hard to get something done include:

- a lack of interest or connection with the material or topic. It may be that the subject material falls outside the student's special interests. Students with AS will generally find it difficult to motivate themselves to focus on a study task if they are not interested in the subject.
- a lack of confidence, or a difficulty in interpreting either the material or the task they are being asked to complete. It may be that the manner in which the material has been presented or the class has been delivered has been off-putting or difficult to follow.
- a failure to see the point or purpose of the exercise. Students will at times be required to complete tasks of which the purpose and value may not always be immediately apparent. However, failure to complete the task may lead to a loss of marks or credit for that class.

Get to the root cause of the problem and you will be able to work with the student to identify a strategy for completing the task.



## 5. Useful resources

### Mind maps or spider diagrams

Mind maps, or spider diagrams, can be drawn by hand or by using a software package. Tony Buzan has popularised the use of mind mapping as a planning strategy, and has published a range of books on the subject, which are readily available in most libraries (see 'Further reading').

"When I'm working through a problem or issue with a student, I think it helps to see what it might look like. I might draw a tree to explore options, along the lines of "What will happen if...". I would use this to explore possible outcomes, and to help with decision making. I might use a similar approach to address a problem like "Why can't you do group work?" - maybe using a mind map. Again, this helps draw out the issues, break down thoughts and identify any barriers and solutions."

A student mentor

Popular mind-mapping software packages include:

#### Mind Genius Education

Download a fully-functional 30-day free trial at [www.mindgenius.com](http://www.mindgenius.com)

#### Freemind

Download an open source (non-commercial, entirely free) alternative software package at [www.rsc-ne-scotland.ac.uk/eduapps](http://www.rsc-ne-scotland.ac.uk/eduapps)

### Confidence rating scales

Confidence rating scales (see *figure 2*) help a student to identify priorities and manage their workload accordingly.

"I've found using rating scales a helpful way of assessing confidence levels. Other than using a simple 1 to 10 scale to ask the student how confident they feel, I might, when helping the student prioritise their revision, ask them: 'If you were to sit this exam tomorrow, what percentage would you expect to get'. The exams where the student might expect to get twenty or thirty per cent are probably going to be the subjects to prioritise."

Student mentor





## Prompts and reminders

Every student will, as a minimum, require a personalised timetable and the use of a diary or calendar to know when their deadlines are and keep track of where they need to be.

Students with AS may also need 'prompts' or reminders, which could include:

- > **post-it notes** placed strategically around the student's home or study bedroom, to offer a visual reminder of something that needs to be done
- > **an alarm function** on a mobile phone or PDA, providing both a visual and auditory reminder of a scheduled event or change of activity (this is useful if the student is prone to becoming very engrossed in a single activity)
- > **post-dated emails or an electronic calendar**, such as in Microsoft Outlook (this is particularly useful for longer-term planning).

## Schedules and action planning

It's not enough to know when your deadlines are. You also need to know when to start a task, in order to meet that deadline. Students with AS often have difficulty knowing how long a particular task may take, so it can be useful on the first assignment to help them to break down that task into its component parts, with a view to establishing 'mini-deadlines' for each.

The daily and weekly planner templates on pages 32-33 were produced by Dr Christine Sinclair of the University of Strathclyde and can be used to help students when writing assignments and managing time.

Figure 2: Confidence rating scale

Rate your level of confidence in each of the following topics, with '10' meaning you are very confident and '1' meaning you are not at all confident.

Topic/issue	Confidence rating									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

## Day Planner

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**NB: Allocate some time for relaxation**

Before 8am	
8-9am	
9-10am	
10-11am	
11am-12pm	
12-1pm	
1-2pm	
2-3pm	
3-4pm	
4-5pm	
5-6pm	
After 6pm	

### Main Tasks

### To do if there's time

### Notes



<b>Week Planner</b>	For week beginning _____						
	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	<b>Saturday</b>	<b>Sunday</b>
Before 8am							
8-9am							
9-10am							
10-11am							
11am-12pm							
12-1pm							
1-2pm							
2-3pm							
3-4pm							
4-5pm							
5-6pm							
After 6pm							

## 6. Further reading

### General books on autism

Atwood, T. (2007). *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Haddon, M. (2004). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. London: Vintage

### Understanding and supporting students on the autism spectrum

Harpur, J., Lawlor, M. and Fitzgerald, M. (2004).

*Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome: A Student Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Prince-Hughes, D. (ed.) (2002). *Aquamarine blue 5: Personal stories of college students with autism*. Ohio: Ohio University Press

### General study skills resources

Buzan, T. (2006). *The Buzan Study Skills Handbook: The Shortcut to Success in your Studies with Mind Mapping, Speed Reading and Winning Memory Techniques*. London: BBC Active

Cottrell, S. (2003). *The Study Skills Handbook, 2nd Revised Edition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

### Websites

The National Autistic Society

[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

## 7. Glossary of terms

### **Aspie**

An informal term used by some people with Asperger syndrome to refer to themselves.

### **Asperger syndrome (AS)**

An autism spectrum disorder named after the Austrian Paediatrician Hans Asperger, who first described the combination of characteristics which were later standardised as diagnostic criteria.

### **Autism**

A developmental disorder affecting social interaction, communication and imagination.

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

A term used to describe any diagnosis on the autism spectrum, including Asperger syndrome.

### **Central coherence**

An ability to understand context and 'see the big picture'.

### **Executive function**

The ability to plan, organise, think flexibly and in the abstract, and take appropriate action.

### **Mentoring agreement**

A written agreement, usually prepared by a Disability Adviser, which describes the support which the mentor will provide to the specific student, and their respective responsibilities within the mentoring relationship

### **Needs assessment**

An assessment of a disabled student's learning needs, usually conducted by the Disability Service within the student's own university. A needs assessment may identify a need for appropriate study aids and strategies and adjustments to teaching practice and course assessment methods.

### **Neurotypical (NT)**

A term to describe people who are not on the autism spectrum.

### **Restricted interest**

A narrow, specific interest or 'hobby', the pursuit of which is a frequent characteristic of people on the autism spectrum.

### **Sensory sensitivity**

Many people on the autism spectrum report over- or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli. This is thought to result from a dysfunction in integrating sensory information.

### **Theory of mind**

The ability to understand other people's minds (ie their beliefs, intentions, wishes and knowledge) and the fact that they might differ from your own.

# Supporting students on the autism spectrum

## Notes



# Supporting students on the autism spectrum

## student mentor guidelines

The National Autistic Society  
393 City Road  
London EC1V 1NG  
Switchboard: 020 7833 2299  
Autism Helpline: 0845 070 4004  
Minicom: 0845 070 4003  
Fax: 020 7833 9666  
Website: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)  
Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)

NAS Scotland  
Central Chambers  
1st Floor  
109 Hope Street  
Glasgow G2 6LL  
Tel: 0141 221 8090  
Fax: 0141 221 8118  
Email: [scotland@nas.org.uk](mailto:scotland@nas.org.uk)

NAS Cymru  
6/7 Village Way  
Greenmeadow Springs Business Park  
Tongwynlais  
Cardiff CF15 7NE  
Tel: 029 2062 9312  
Fax: 029 2062 9317  
Email: [wales@nas.org.uk](mailto:wales@nas.org.uk)

NAS Northern Ireland  
59 Malone Road  
Belfast BT9 6SA  
Tel: 028 9068 7066  
Fax: 028 9068 8518  
Email: [northern.ireland@nas.org.uk](mailto:northern.ireland@nas.org.uk)

### [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

The National Autistic Society is a company limited by guarantee registered in England (No.1205298) and a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427), registered office 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG.

### **The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism.**

Over 500,000 people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over two million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. Which means that many of these two million people get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

*Together, we are going to change this.*