



Glennon, T. J. (2001). The stress of the university experience for students with Asperger syndrome. *Work, 17*(3), 183-190.

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Annotated by Sarah Weitzel and Samantha Rohrbaugh - 12/02/2016

**ABSTRACT** College students, with or without disabilities, are faced with numerous stressful situations within the university environment. For an individual diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, success at this level requires non-traditional supports. With limited knowledge of this disorder, the university staff are faced with a distinct disadvantage in their efforts to outline an appropriate plan. While providing traditional academic assistance is now commonplace, federal laws mandate that universities widen the scope of support so as not to exclude any student from campus activities or programs.

In an effort to provide a framework for support, this article interfaces diagnostic information with the realities of college life. Areas of focus include the transition process, social rules, engagement in academic activities, and mastering a new life of independence. It is hoped that the presented suggestions might prove helpful as universities begin to establish service support teams and outline plans of support.

## SUMMARY

**Purpose of Study** This study was designed to examine how stress impacts the lives of college students with Asperger syndrome (AS). In addition to identifying stressors, several strategies are presented to help mediate these issues. By identifying these stressors on a broad scale it makes it easier to design treatments that can then be catered to each individual.

## Framework

AS is on the autism spectrum. The diagnostic criteria for AS includes social impairments, recurrent odd behaviors and/or limited interests, "significant social, occupational, or other impairment in functioning," no significant delay in language or cognitive development, and no diagnosis of schizophrenia or any pervasive developmental disorder. In addition to the diagnostic material, people with AS often have normal or high intelligence, desire for social relationships, and a lack of social skills including appropriate eye contact and conversational timing. These students appear "normal", but that can be "confusing" for others including peers, faculty and staff as they may have differences in their behavior and language patterns. Students on the spectrum need additional and different kinds of supports than those traditionally given to students with disabilities. Additionally, the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome often comes later so these students may be entering college without a diagnosis already in place. In addition, there is a preconceived notion that individuals with ASD prefer



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loneliness. However, the authors explore the idea of engagement in social relationships in light of their social deficits that may act as a barrier in forming these relationships.

### **Population and Sample**

The people considered in this study included neurotypical college students, students on the spectrum, and the larger community of people with autism. As this study is a literature review the population and sample in question are not explicitly stated, but the application is focused on college students with AS.

### **Overview of Methods**

The article does not explicitly state the method of data collection, but the study was primarily a literature review. There was no mention of any sort of systematic approach to the analysis or data gathering. The study cited 48 articles published before 2001.

### **Variables or Broad Topics**

Types of stress - life events and chronic strains

- The transition to college
- Social factors
- Academics
- Independent living

Possible interventions, supports, treatments

### **Findings/Results**

- The transition to college
  - i. Transitioning to college is especially difficult for people on the autism spectrum
  - ii. Feelings like loneliness and nervousness as well as worry can be magnified in the transition
  - iii. Students with AS don't always show that they are stressed or having problems
  - iv. Levels of stress prior to college and poorer levels of adjustment is an unknown area of difficulty for students with AS



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- v. Having support services going into the transition and college are very important
  - vi. Flexibility and the unknown can be particularly troubling, but predictability and strict routines can separate students
  - vii. College support staff should communicate the social and academic expectations in the college to the student
  - Social aspects
    - i. People with autism don't know what social skills they need to use
    - ii. Relating to people and non-verbal cues are hard to understand for people on the spectrum
    - iii. The campus environment can be a critical place, which is hard to navigate especially considering that people on the spectrum don't always grasp that
    - iv. People with AS need coping skills to deal with how people react to them so as to not internalize any negative feelings that could become stressful
    - v. A social support network is important for mental and physical health as it can lead to less negative emotions and stress, and it lessens the effects of stress on the immune system.
      - a. Building a new social support network can cause stress
    - vi. Social events that would be stress reducers for neurotypical students would be stressful for people with Asperger's syndrome
      - a. Responding to social situations can be confusing for people with autism if they don't have a precedent
      - b. The thought of a wrong response could cause even more stress
  - Academics
    - i. Some stressors are common to everyone at college including midterms, finals, and keeping up with work
    - ii. Group assignments are particularly stressful, and people with AS need accommodations in these situations
    - iii. The professor should mediate these issues within the classroom and outline specific expectations beforehand
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- i. Independent living
  - a. Some students with AS entering college don't have a lot of independent living skills such as hygiene and cleaning
  - b. Becoming independent can be stressful on its own, but losing supports can cause even more stress
- ii. Components of cognitive behavioral intervention
  - a. The student must understand how thoughts and the environment can impact feelings

## Implications

Given the stressors Glennon offered several recommendations

- Some interventions for social factors include peer mentors, "peer observation, discussion, role-playing, real situation practice, and feedback"
- Academic accommodations should be tailored to the student
- Some specific recommendations for the transition to college were
  - a. A campus tour tailored to the student's schedule including classes, cafeteria, bookstore, safe places, etc.
  - b. Meeting with teachers, residence hall personnel, roommate to learn about expectations and who to go to with issues
  - c. Going over what to expect from classes and on campus to see what will be appropriate for the student
- The student must be taught to "recognize the anxious feelings and subsequent somatic reactions," as this can help them to change their cognitions and behaviors

## CRITIQUES & LIMITATIONS

### Conceptual

The article specifies that Asperger syndrome is part of autism disorder, but it refers to Asperger syndrome as a separate diagnosis. Since the changes in the new DSM V, AS falls under autism spectrum disorders. This distinction could be detrimental

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as it is restricting the recommendations to people with Asperger syndrome, when people with high functioning autism could also benefit.

### **Data**

We do not know how the literature was found. There could have been major findings that were left out or missed. Additionally, there was not a lot of data for college students on the spectrum, so it would be beneficial to know if the researcher is generalizing from other populations.

### **Analysis**

There was no statistical analysis performed. The lack of empirical data is a limitation since things are moving towards treatments that are backed by empirical evidence. Additionally, since readers have no raw data they are unable to draw their own conclusions. Since we don't know the method of the literature review, we don't know how or where they got their data. Without going through each individual reference, we don't know about the quality of the literature cited.

### **Interpretation**

The way the researcher partitioned stressor into specific areas could limit the supports, and it doesn't account for interactions between the multiple areas. This is problematic as AS affects all aspects of people's lives, all of which need to be considered.

### **Application**

The article gives recommendations for interventions and supports, but for these to be successful they should always be tailored to the individual and not all will be applicable to everyone.

### **FOLLOW-UP**

#### **Little Questions**

- i. How would the accommodations for students with AS compare to accommodations for other students on the spectrum?
- ii. Would you need to separate accommodations for the two, even though they all fall under Autism Spectrum Disorder?

#### **Big Questions**



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- i. What area is the most important area to make accommodations for in the lives of college students with AS?

### **Next Steps**

- i. A good research direction is the nature of stress and prevalence in college setting.
- ii. Research into where the majority of stress comes from, academics or interpersonal relationships, or if the stressors are daily hassles or major life events. These differences could affect which interventions are more appropriate.
- iii. The interactions or overlap of the different areas of stressors should be considered to determine if the author's approach is valid, or if there should be a different method for examining supports.

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