

Studying during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: suggestions for autistic university students

Context

The Association of Autism Practitioners in Higher Education has contributed to the development of this guidance based on their experience of working with autistic university students. The guidance aims to give autistic students some ideas about how to manage the impact of the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic on their wellbeing and productivity in relation to their studies.

We understand that student responses to the pandemic will be individual, and not all the advice and guidance in this document will apply to everyone. Some students may be finding working remotely beneficial, and easier to engage with, which is positive and worth celebrating. However, we are aware that some students are finding learning remotely challenging, and the suggestions in this guidance document are designed to help with the effective management of study related challenges.

Ideally this guidance would have been co-produced with autistic students but, because of the urgency of producing something useful quickly, this has not happened. Feedback from autistic students is of course very welcome. If you are an autistic student and have some feedback, please email the person who sent this guidance out to you or contact the authors directly.

You are advised to contact the University Disability Department if you need to talk further with someone about the impact the pandemic is having on your studies. The Disability Department will be continuing to work and will have an overview of your university's approach to the situation. Disability staff can help you to navigate university systems, and can liaise, with your permission, with academics and other staff, including your Specialist Mentor and Specialist Study Skills Tutor if you have them. This guidance is study focussed rather than being more generally applicable to other aspects of life.

Overview

- This is an unexpected and stressful situation. Nobody expected to be working in a totally different way in the middle of an academic year.
- This guidance is designed to help you to work out how to manage your studies at this time and how to go about getting help if you need it.
- It is important to work out who from the university can help you to deal with managing your studies during this time.
- Look out for information from your university about how your course is being organised and what you need to do. There are people thinking about this and they want to make it work for you and other students.

- Seeking information from all sorts of different people is likely to increase your stress. Your Disability Department will be continuing to work and can help you to navigate university systems if necessary. Try to avoid sending emails to lots of different people.
- Change is inevitable at this time and help is available if you are (understandably) finding this difficult.
- Your wellbeing is just as important as your course. It is quite possible that you will be less productive than usual at this time, but you are not alone in this. You can only do what you can do. Taking things calmly one step at a time will enable you to engage with your course even if you cannot do so as effectively as before.
- This is a temporary situation which affects everyone. It will not last forever.
- Whatever works for you is OK. Help is available if you need it. You can do it.

Further Detail

Managing change and setting expectations

Your **top priority** should be to do whatever you need to do to maintain your mental and physical wellbeing. This might mean trying to keep your environment, your routine and your household as **calm** as possible, finding ways to **manage your stress**, or it might mean finding a way to stay on top of your studies. There is no right or wrong answer, as long as your approach helps to keep you safe and well.

- Find ways to manage your stress and work through this change calmly
- How you manage your mental and physical wellbeing is up to you. There is no right or wrong answer, as long as it works well for you.

Managing unpredictable change can be more challenging, and it can help to create as much predictability as possible in this new situation. This will take some time. It will also take time to transition back into routines once the current lockdown rules are relaxed, and you may need to plan for this too. For some students, developing a routine to stay on top of work might be beneficial.

- Create or adapt a routine for this period

It may help to **lower your expectations** around your studies. It is more important to prioritise your wellbeing at this time – this includes good nutrition, exercise, leisure activities and rest. Looking after yourself is as much of an achievement as doing well in your academic studies. Many people are finding it challenging to keep up with their studies at the moment, as we all take time to learn new systems and processes, and to become familiar with new ways of working. **You are unlikely to be able to achieve as much during the day as you might have done before the pandemic, and that is ok.** Give yourself credit for what you do achieve and try not to worry about what you cannot manage to complete.

- Accept you may not be able to achieve as much studying as before
- Acknowledge that looking after yourself is also an achievement

If you do feel that you cannot keep up your studies, or that you do not have enough time to fit everything in, talk with your academic department, your course leader, pastoral support contacts within your department, or contact your Disability Advisor. They can help you work out how to balance your work, and they will support you with processes to ask for additional time. There is more information about how to do this in the 'What to do if things go wrong' section of this guidance.

- Contact your Mentor/Study Skills Tutor, Academic or Disability Advisor for support or to discuss your progress and deadlines

Remember that navigating all the current changes means that you may also be **gaining valuable non-academic knowledge and experience**, such as developing life skills and coping strategies. Recognising these may mean that you can use these new skills into your life after the lockdown. If you do not feel like you are gaining any new skills, that's ok too.

- Recognise any new skills, knowledge or experience you are developing, and think about how these will transfer into your life after lockdown

Feeling good about yourself and managing stress and anxiety

Many autistic people experience a lot of stress and anxiety and have worked out ways of managing them to some extent. The current situation is probably **increasing anxiety for a lot of people**, including many people who do not normally feel it. So, if you are feeling more anxious and stressed than usual you are not alone. You probably have your own ways of dealing with stress, but here are some suggestions:

- Spending time on your interests/things you enjoy.
- Exercise, particularly outside
- Stimming movements
- Meditation and other forms of relaxation
- Spending time with animals if this is possible. If you do not have an animal maybe you can work out a safe handover with a friend who does.
- Going to a park or quiet natural area. The [Government guidelines](#) have been relaxed to allow autistic people to go out more than once a day and to travel away from home to find a quiet area to exercise. You can take advantage of this but should make sure you keep safe while travelling.
- Talking about your interests to other people, but you may need a time limit on this.
- Online games or other leisure activities you enjoy.
- Destressing activities, such as bashing a cushion/punch bag or shouting if you have somewhere to do this where it will not disturb other people.

This is an unprecedented situation, and no one knows exactly what might happen next, which means that there is a good deal of speculation on the news and in social media. Think about how looking up Covid-19 information makes you feel. If it has become a particular interest which you are enjoying, great - there is a lot of information out there and a lot of people wanting to talk about it. If this makes you stressed, then do not feel you have to keep up with the news. Try to reduce how often you look up information, unless this makes you feel more stressed. Having an opportunity to reflect on the news, and discuss it with others, may also help, especially if you can focus on what needs to be done, by whom, and why.

- Think about how looking up Covid-19 information makes you feel. If it makes you stressed, then you may want to limit how much news you interact with.
- No-one knows how this situation will develop – we all feel uncertain and concerned – this is normal
- Some of the news at the moment is guesswork; don't read or listen too much if this is stressful for you as the media may only be able to speculate on some matters. It may help to limit watching the news to once per day, for example
- Consider where you are getting information from. It is advisable to get your news/information from reputable sources. For example, reading or listening to expert reports and discussions may make you feel better informed, and therefore less anxious
- Speak to your family or people you live with; how do they feel? How are they coping? Tell them how you feel – you may be surprised to hear your thoughts are very similar

During these challenging times, it is easy to feel out of control, as everything is changing so rapidly. It may help if you **focus on what you can control and plan**, rather than what you *cannot* control. This might include tangible, achievable actions, such as 'Do some exercise once a day, either at home or in your local area'. It is also important to notice your anxiety triggers and avoid these where possible.

- Focus on what you can control – plan your own timetable, with deadlines, planning stages of work, reading & note-making
- Don't forget to include exercise, hobbies and mealtimes!
- Notice your anxiety triggers and avoid these where possible

Remember that **you are not alone in this situation**: this is a global pandemic, affecting every country in the world, and everyone is having to learn how to adapt very quickly. Your peers at University will be facing similar challenges with online learning, as will your module leaders, who are also having to learn new ways of doing even simple tasks. It is ok not to know how to do something new, and it is ok to ask for help.

- Many of us in the world are having to change how we do things – its ok to feel confused
- We are having to do many things differently, so ask if you don't know

If you are **accessing support outside University** to help you to deal with anxiety it is worth keeping up with this arrangement if you are finding it useful.

- Keep accessing mental health support if you already have this in place
- Your GP is likely to be the best contact if you need to talk about mental or physical health concerns. You could contact your GP practice online initially to avoid visiting the surgery unnecessarily

Try to recognise and praise yourself for whatever you do in a particular day, whether related to studies, eating properly, not getting stressed, keeping to your routine, even if it does not seem a lot. This may sound a bit strange and almost like you are patronising yourself, but focussing on what you have achieved, rather than what you have not achieved and praising yourself for it can be helpful.

Accessible learning materials and reasonable adjustments

There are a lot of good online learning materials available. However, learning out of the classroom does not necessarily mean only using online materials or using them at all. **You need learning materials that are accessible to you** and take account of your particular needs. This could include access to a printer so you can print out hard copies of documents, being able to record online lectures, captions/subtitles of the spoken content of lectures and library books being delivered to you at home. These are just some examples. There are a lot of other options. This is something you should discuss with the Disability Service and your course lecturers. If you are experiencing problems with learning, it may be due to not having the right type of learning materials. This is something that can be put right and your university has a legal responsibility to do this. So do not struggle unnecessarily.

- Make sure your learning materials are accessible to you
- If they are not accessible to you, talk with your Disability Advisor or your course team

Creating a routine

Having a **realistic routine** can help you feel more in control of your situation. Make sure your routine includes non-study activities, such as mealtimes, exercise/leisure time and rest time. It might be useful to make a visual timetable for quick reference, perhaps by using colour-coding, symbols or pictures. Your Outlook calendar may well serve the same purpose, or you may have a preferred smart phone app which will work for you. Where possible, try to incorporate elements of the routine you had before the pandemic, so that your new routine feels more familiar. Share your timetable with other people in your household so they know what activities you will be undertaking, and when.

- Think about what worked for you in the past. Can you use this to help you with this new way of learning?
- Ask a friend or family member, or your Specialist Mentor, to look at your timetable. Do they think it covers everything? Do they think it's realistic?
- If you have Brain in Hand, or something similar, use it to remind yourself of your helpful strategies and maybe input some new ones
- Remember that your routine may need to change if your circumstances change. It is ok to adapt it.
- There are apps and other resources which can help you manage your time. Some ideas are listed in the Additional Resources section at the end of this document.

It may help to focus on **one piece of work at a time**, if this works best for you. You may be receiving multiple pieces of work in a short time frame; if it is difficult to work on multiple pieces of work at once, you can talk with your Specialist Mentor, Specialist Study Skills Tutor, or your course team about how to balance your work better.

- It may help to focus on one piece of work at a time.
- Talk with your Support Worker or your course team if you are finding it difficult to balance your work.

Taking the time and space to decompress can be useful if it's all getting to be too much. You may have calming mechanisms such as engaging in a favourite activity or something which is physically comforting. These can be meaningful, and you should not feel that you need to stop them, especially at such a challenging time.

- Use any restful skills you have learned, meditation, breathing, exercise, think about what calms you most and add time slots in for this to your timetable
- If you really enjoy reading around your academic subject this in itself can be calming and productive. On the other hand, taking a break and focussing on another of your interests can be rewarding and calming.

Creating an effective workspace

It is a good idea to try to **identify a workspace** for your studies. It is important to ensure that this space is comfortable, ergonomically safe, and minimally distracting. You can find guidance on how to set up a safe workspace [online](#). Make sure you have access to everything you need for your studies, such as your laptop, or a pad and pen, and your notes and textbooks.

- If you can, find a quiet place to study, and keep your books and stationery items with you
- Where possible, talk to household members/family in advance of any assessment or study period to help reduce distractions or interruptions

- Some people find listening to music, or using noise cancelling headphones or earplugs useful when trying to concentrate.
- A plant on your desk can be beneficial to your wellbeing while studying indoors
- It can help to take regular movement breaks to modulate the sensory environment while studying, and it is also ergonomically beneficial to move or change posture regularly.
- Set up a backup tool to save your work as you go along. For example, by getting yourself a USB stick or cloud storage in advance of an assessment or while studying
- Make sure all your equipment is set up and working well in advance of any assessment or exam starting time.

Changes to exams and assessment

Your university may have made **changes to your assessment methods**. Some exams, particularly for earlier year groups, may be cancelled. If you are in this position, it takes a lot of the pressure off you. However, you should continue studying as much as you can, as you will find it helpful the following year.

Where there are exams there is generally some form of online assessment. Make sure you know what the rules are and do not be shy about asking as many questions as you need to understand the instructions and expectations. Some or all the reasonable adjustments you normally have may no longer be relevant. However, you may need other reasonable adjustments. Talk to your disability advisor about this.

Many universities have chosen to replace exams with Open Book Exams. These exams are generally offered over a period of 24 or 48 hours but remember that you are not expected to write for the entire period. There should be instructions for the exam that tell you approximately how many words you should write or advise you on approximately how much time you should spend writing. If this is not clear to you, contact your course team for further advice. There is [guidance online](#) about Open Book Exams and how to prepare for these.

- Familiarise yourself with new forms of assessment, such as Open Book Exams
- Talk to your course team if you are not clear about your assessment expectations or instructions
- Talk to your Disability Advisor if you are concerned about the reasonable adjustments you might need for online exams

Engaging with support

You should be able to continue to **engage with your usual support**, even when you are not on campus. This might include support from a Specialist Mentor, a Specialist Study

Skills Tutor, or a Disability Advisor. Working in new ways might mean that you need a different focus to your support, and you can talk about this with your Support Worker or Disability Advisor.

- Keep engaging with your usual support

Maintaining social contact

Although 'social distancing' has been advised, in reality, this means 'physical distancing' which limits direct, face to face contact with people outside your household. Social contact is still allowed, but this should be something you enjoy rather than do as a duty. Enjoyable social interaction can make you feel better and study more effectively. However, many autistic people can find social interaction tiring or stressful, so do not feel you have to engage with social interaction when you do not feel like it.

If you do want to connect socially with other people you can do this via various platforms, e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, Facetime. Think about how you might maintain social contact with your friends and family, and plan this into your routine. Joining WhatsApp, Facebook groups and other groups to find out how other students on your courses are managing - what tricks they are using and what they are finding difficult - can be very helpful. This will also show you that, if you are experiencing difficulties studying you are not the only one. Other students may have good ideas for studying more effectively or they may be able to explain things you are having difficulties with. Explaining things to other students or working through problems together with them can also be a good way to learn.

- How do you usually contact your friends? You can try phone, text, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter – whichever way works for you, make sure you maintain contact with other people
- Your university might be offering various online platforms such as Microsoft TEAMS to enable you to interact with lecturers and peers. This may work for you. If it does not it is worth discussing with the most appropriate person at your university about alternative ways to access the course. If you have any difficulties using the university's online platforms, you should contact your course team as soon as possible to discuss and resolve these

What to do if things go wrong

If you are facing challenges with your studies, it is important that you try to resolve these using the **usual support structures** at your university. Although most university campuses are closed, remember that staff are working remotely, and they are still available to support you. Most universities are continuing to offer support via phone, email or video call.

- Remember that you can still access support, even when your campus is closed

If things do go wrong, **remember to talk with your Disability Advisor** as soon as you can so that they can help resolve the issues, and work with you to make a plan for what to do next. For example, it might be possible to negotiate extensions to your work, or a break from your studies if you are finding the current situation overwhelming.

- Talk with your Disability Advisor as soon as you can if things do go wrong. They can liaise with your course team (with your permission) in order to advise you effectively.

Many universities have dedicated Coronavirus webpages, which are updated regularly. It is worth **checking these pages** for additional information and guidance. Some universities are also **emailing students regularly**; although the number of emails you are receiving might feel overwhelming at the moment, it is important to look out for these updates as they may tell you what support is available, and how to access it.

- Keep checking for updates on what support is available, and how it is being delivered

Who to contact for support, advice or guidance

Having a single contact at university might be the most helpful approach. Your Disability Advisor could help you to organise this. If you have a DSA funded Specialist Mentor, it might be useful to give them permission to liaise with your university contact as necessary and with you copied in. A three-way conversation between your university contact, your mentor and yourself to help you to plan how you might approach your studies could be useful.

If you're not sure who to contact, you can use the guidance below to help direct your enquiry. When contacting people or teams for support, it is usually best to contact **one person or team at a time** so that you do not get lots of different answers to your question. If you do not get an answer from your first contact, try the next one.

If you are sending an email you need to **direct it to the appropriate person**. Your Disability Advisor may be able to advise if you are not sure who this is. In the email it is important to ask your question succinctly at the beginning, provide a subject header which indicates what your email is about, and keep it as short as possible. Staff will be getting lots of emails so don't take it personally if you do not get a response straight away.

- Keep your emails short and succinct.
- Remember that there may be a delay in replying as staff are receiving a lot of emails

Support roles and department titles vary across Higher Education and they might have different titles or remits. The following information is a guide to contacts that are commonly found at Universities, but they may not match what you know about your own university.

Support with academic studies: if you are finding it difficult to study, you can't access your learning resources, you are worried about your assessment, or you have any other concerns about your studies, you could contact one of the following people or teams:

- The Student Support Office or Academic Advisor in your academic department
- Your supervisor or tutor in college
- Your Disability Advisor (sometimes called a Disability Officer, or Disability Coordinator)
- Your Specialist Mentor
- Your Specialist Study Skills Tutor

Support for students living in university accommodation: if you are still living in university accommodation, and you have concerns about your living arrangements, you could contact one of the following people or teams:

- Your Accommodation Office or Security Team
- The warden or residential team in your accommodation

Support for your mental health and wellbeing: if you are concerned about your mental health and wellbeing, you could contact one of the following people or teams:

- Your student counselling or wellbeing service
- The Student Support Office or Academic Advisor in your academic department
- Your tutor in college
- Your GP (doctor)
- NHS 111 option 2
- [Student Minds](#)

In an emergency, or if you feel you need urgent medical help, you should:

- Go to the Accident & Emergency department of [your local hospital](#)
- Contact the Emergency Services on 999
- Contact your GP (doctor)
- Call [NHS 111](#)

You can find more information about who to contact on the [government website](#).

Summary

This is a challenging time, and it is normal to find aspects of your studies and your life more difficult. The pandemic will not last forever, and you will be able to return to more familiar

ways of studying. In the meantime, the strategies in this document may help you to manage the impact the pandemic is having on your studies and your wellbeing. Remember that you are not alone and that there is support available to you.

Additional resources

The following is a list of resources which you may wish to refer to.

Coronavirus

- **National Autistic Society** guidance on Coronavirus:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>

Managing anxiety

- Information from **Mind** about well-being during this unprecedented time of change
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>
- Advice from **Anxiety UK**: <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/blog/health-and-other-forms-of-anxiety-and-coronavirus/>
- Advice from **Autistica** about coping with uncertainty: <https://www.autistica.org.uk/what-is-autism/coping-with-uncertainty>
- A video from **Purple Ella** on coping with coronavirus:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilpvdMVnfGs&feature=youtu.be>
- Advice from **The Calm Zone** on coping with social isolation:
<https://www.thecalmzone.net/2020/03/putting-the-social-into-social-distancing/>
- Advice from **The Mental Health Foundation** on looking after your mental health during the pandemic: <https://mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus>

Resources for managing your time

- Advice from London Metropolitan University on freely available apps and other resources: <https://student.londonmet.ac.uk/life-at-london-met/wellbeing-at-london-met/disabilities-and-dyslexia-service-dds/make-the-most-of-it/>
- Advice from the University of Leeds on free tools to support learning: https://students.leeds.ac.uk/info/1000032/support_for_disabled_students/1171/assistive_technology
- A factsheet from Ability Net on autism and technology for study: <https://abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets/autism-and-computers> and a blog post on apps to aid focus and motivation: <https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/great-apps-help-students-focus-and-motivation>
- Information from Diversity & Ability on the main study tools available to students: <https://diversityandability.com/resources/>

A note on the authors

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Image 1: Coping Calendar, produced with the kind permission of [Action for Happiness](#)

COPING CALENDAR: KEEP CALM. STAY WISE. BE KIND

30 actions to look after ourselves and each other as we face this global crisis together. Please use & share 🙏

- 1 Make a plan to help you keep calm and stay in contact
- 2 Enjoy washing your hands. Remember all they do for you!
- 3 Write down ten things you feel grateful for in life and why
- 4 Stay hydrated, eat healthy food and boost your immune system
- 5 Get active. Even if you're stuck indoors, move & stretch
- 6 Contact a neighbour or friend and offer to help them
- 7 Share what you are feeling and be willing to ask for help
- 8 Take five minutes to sit still and breathe. Repeat regularly
- 9 Call a loved one to catch up and really listen to them
- 10 Get good sleep. No screens before bed or when waking up
- 11 Notice five things that are beautiful in the world around you
- 12 Immerse yourself in a new book, TV show or podcast
- 13 Respond positively to everyone you interact with
- 14 Play a game that you enjoyed when you were younger
- 15 Make some progress on a project that matters to you
- 16 Rediscover your favourite music that really lifts your spirits
- 17 Learn something new or do something creative
- 18 Find a fun way to do an extra 15 minutes of physical activity
- 19 Do three acts of kindness to help others, however small
- 20 Make time for self-care. Do something kind for yourself
- 21 Send a letter or message to someone you can't be with
- 22 Find positive stories in the news and share these with others
- 23 Have a tech-free day. Stop scrolling and turn off the news
- 24 Put your worries into perspective and try to let them go
- 25 Look for the good in others and notice their strengths
- 26 Take a small step towards an important goal
- 27 Thank three people you're grateful to and tell them why
- 28 Make a plan to meet up with others again later in the year
- 29 Connect with nature. Breathe and notice life continuing
- 30 Remember that all feelings and situations pass in time

“Everything can be taken from us but one thing: the freedom to choose our attitude in any given set of circumstances” ~ Viktor Frankl

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Find out more about the Ten Keys to Happier Living, including books, guides, posters and more here: www.actionforhappiness.org/10-keys