At one time the DSM manual defined a marked difference between an individual with Aspergers and one with Autism. Today they place all individuals with such symptoms into the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Instructors may not be informed where the students in their classes fall on this spectrum, so it is best to think in general terms about the variety of behaviors that may be encountered in the classroom. Any ASD individual on the spectrum may have average to above average IQ. It is best to discover the ASD student’s strengths before passing judgement on them in a negative manner, since using those strengths may be the key to their success in any give subject.

The most notable characteristic of individuals with ASD is their lack of social skills. Some students on the spectrum have been able to learn the appropriate social skills and direct their interests in such a manner that they can be successful in college. However, there are some individuals on the spectrum that are likely to say exactly what they are thinking, without thought to the social appropriateness of their communication. They do not read facial expressions and often are not aware that they have offended anyone with their comments or their overly emphatic statements. As a result of this lack of sensitivity, they often find it hard to make and keep friends very long or get along with classmates.

It is important for instructors to require respectful comments and not ignore rude, disrespectful behavior towards the instructor or other students. Emphasize this when reviewing the Syllabus the first day of class to set the tone from the first day of the class. Blurt out comments and monopolizing the teaching hour with their ideas and stories is not acceptable behavior for any student and should not be tolerated. If such behaviors are observed in class, remind the class in general to be respectful of others views. If the ASD student continues such behavior, invite them to an office hour for a discussion, making certain the student understands this type of behavior is disruptive and will not be tolerated according to the Shasta College Student Code of Conduct. A student may not use their disability as an excuse for failing to maintain the Student Code of Conduct. You may even want to work out a signal to let them know when they are stepping over the line. If they ignore the signal and continue such behavior you may have to ask them to leave the classroom and make clear if and when they can return. Please do not put up with this behavior at the expense of losing students who become uncomfortable with it. Address it immediately with a BIRT member.

ASD students may also have sensory integration dysfunction which may include: being under sensitive or over sensitive to auditory, visual and tactile stimulation. Sometimes these students are quite unaware of these tendencies and may become irritable in such a way that seems out of proportion to the expected response to their environment. It is fine to ask them privately if they have sensitivities to the environment of the classroom, in case there is something that can be changed. For example one student was highly sensitive to the odor from white board markers and a simple accommodation of odorless markers which she carried to each class resolved the issue easily.

Another major difficulty that challenges an individual with students on the Autism spectrum is that of change. They have a very hard time switching gears and going with the flow, especially in environments that seem chaotic to them. If the class was told there would be a video and you discovered it was not available or could not get the Internet connection to show the video, it could be upsetting to an ASD student. It is probably wise not to announce such events. On the flip side, if you did not announce that there might be a quiz and suddenly spring a pop quiz on the class, be prepared for a negative reaction. It is best to send such a quiz to DSPS ahead
of time and let the student know that they will need to arrange their testing time with DSPS sometime before the next class meeting and then inform them of the time lecture will begin when the class completes the pop quiz.

Many individuals on the Autism spectrum take everything very literally and may have a melt down if they mistake the meaning of your words. Care must be taken in wording assignments, test questions and handouts. If you explain the expected behavior to an ASD student you may have to check for understanding. While an ASD student may be able to parrot back exactly what they are told, they may not know the meaning of the words they used. Ask for them to give you an example of what was stated to check for understanding.

Be aware that the student on the spectrum may also have a method of problem solving that enables them to discover the right answer, but may appear quite different from the formula given in class. They often think outside the box and can identify solutions that non ASD individuals do not consider. They may be very gifted in certain subjects and might have tremendous insight into subjects they are interested in, often wanting to bring this topic into every classroom discussion whether it fits or not. Giving them the option of only having 2 opportunities to share on their subject, if it fits, might limit the off topic interruptions.

Do not feel threatened if they appear to “get in your space” when asking questions. They may lack a proprioceptive sense which tells them where their body is in relation to the space around them. They may also have a balance problem causing them to bump into others due to an inability to judge personal distance to people and objects. They honestly may not know how close they are to you and they are not trying to intimidate you. Some ASD students are rather clumsy and often have trouble navigating crowded rooms. When you notice this, help them learn appropriate social distance by letting know that they need to respect yours and everyone else’s personal bubble.

Finally, the most important thing an instructor or staff member can do for individuals on the Autism spectrum is to model appropriate social interaction and practice unconditional positive regard towards them to reduce stress. Every student on the Spectrum is different and it is often said, “if you've met one autistic, you have met one autistic.” Please contact the DSPS office for help in appropriately interacting with each student. If you find that attempting to interact in a positive manner, while giving them appropriate warnings about negative behavior is not working, please contact a member of BIRT immediately. Please do not subject your class to behaviors that prevent you from delivering the level of education your students are expecting and deserve.