

NAVIGATING A NEW WORLD: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

A rising number of youth with High Functioning Autism (HFA) are entering institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities offer accommodations for those individuals who register for them, however, many people with HFA choose not to register with disability services. For students with HFA who request accommodations, those provided do not always meet their specific needs based on the challenges they face due to their diagnosis. This qualitative study sought to explore the lived experiences of students with HFA who were enrolled in 4-year institutions of higher education.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study utilizing Interpretative Phenomenology as its methodology. Semi-structured, in person interviews were conducted with 17 college students. Participants were recruited with assistance from the Disability Directors at six private colleges in a metropolitan area in a Mid-Western state.

Interviews were transcribed and coded to extract salient themes.

RESULTS - THEMES

Salient themes included:

- Social-communication challenges interfered with their ability to interact with instructors, peers, and establish friendships.
- Accommodations provided through Disability Services did not match several of their autism challenges. Social-communication difficulties were not addressed through accommodations.
- Mental health challenges interfered with their ability to perform academically. Anxiety and depression were common.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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PARTICIPANT QUOTES- SOCIALIZATION

Just because I don't seem socially active, don't leave me alone. Because the one thing I crave more than learning is social attention. I just can't phrase it right. I can't go out and make friends as easily as somebody not on the spectrum. Doesn't mean I don't want those friends. So, if I'm sitting there being quiet you know, just doing my work, bug me. Please! William - Sophomore

PARTICIPANT QUOTES- MENTAL HEALTH

I was to the point where I was skipping classes, and I was basically spiraling down to the point of - I would get sick, from my anxiety. I would get like really bad headaches, and I would just be worn out... what was going through my mind was I didn't really want to admit that I was failing. That I wasn't - that I wasn't doing the work and that I wasn't going to pass... I couldn't escape from it. Elizabeth - Senior

RESULTS - DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant demographic and other characteristics:

- 17 total students, 9 males, 8 females.
- Age range: 18-42 years. Mean age 21, median age 22 years.
- Year in school: 3 freshman, 3 sophomore, 6 junior, 5 senior.
- Age of diagnosis: 47% preschool age, 41% middle/high-school, 12% adult (2 females).
- Various majors: 35% Education, 23% STEM, 58% various Liberal Arts majors.

PARTICIPANT QUOTES - COMMUNICATION

It's really hard. Um, to put in words what I need is very difficult. And even when I can put it in words, sometimes they don't understand. And so there's a communication barrier. And it's huge. Frodo - Senior



College students in classroom, one student with head resting on arms. Photo from paid subscription to ClipArt.com.

CONCLUSIONS

- College students with HFA may benefit from accommodations that assist them with challenges specific to autism, including social-communication difficulties.
- Greater understanding about the characteristics of autism is needed among higher education staff, professors, and students to promote more inclusive environments.
- Mental health disorders are common and can be debilitating, interfering with academic performance.

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