

A-Levels: A Guide for Autistic Students

Strategies for success in study and exams



Understanding the Challenges

A-Levels present unique challenges for everyone, but if you are an autistic student you may face additional hurdles. These can include:

- **Sensory sensitivities:** The size and unfamiliarity of exam halls, plus things such as strip lighting, noise, smells, an invigilator walking around the hall can all be distracting or even overwhelming
- **Executive function difficulties:** Organisation, planning, and time management can be difficult.
- **Social communication differences:** Group work and interacting with teachers might present challenges.
- **Anxiety:** The pressure of exams and academic performance can lead to increased anxiety.
- **Rigid Thinking:** Adapting to changing routines or unexpected situations can be stressful. Room changes, change in daily routine, sub -teacher all may throw a student off balance for the rest of the day.

- **Focus:** You may have difficulty focusing especially if one of the above has overwhelmed you.

To be at Bishop Luffa Sixth Form you've successfully navigated school and gained your GCSEs and hopefully know what strategies work for you and these need to be communicated to the Sixth Form Learning Mentor, subject teachers and form tutors. If you have a diagnosis then you will have a Student Learning Passport which is our way of communicating what works with you with all of your teachers.



Strategies for Success

Organisation and Time Management

- **Visual Timetables:** Create detailed visual timetables with specific time slots for each subject and breaks.
- **Task Breakdown:** Break down large assignments into smaller, manageable tasks.
- **Checklists:** Use checklists to track progress and ensure all steps are completed.
- **Digital Tools:** Explore apps and software for task management and scheduling.
- **Consistent Routines:** Establish consistent study routines to minimise anxiety and promote predictability.

Effective organisation is crucial. Many autistic students benefit from **visual aids** and **structured routines**. As soon as you get your timetable at the beginning of the year make yourself familiar with it. Experiment with different methods to find what works best. Remember to include time for breaks and preferred activities to prevent burnout. Tools like calendars and task management apps can be incredibly helpful. Most importantly, stick to a consistent schedule whenever possible. Remember to **prioritise tasks** based on deadlines and importance.

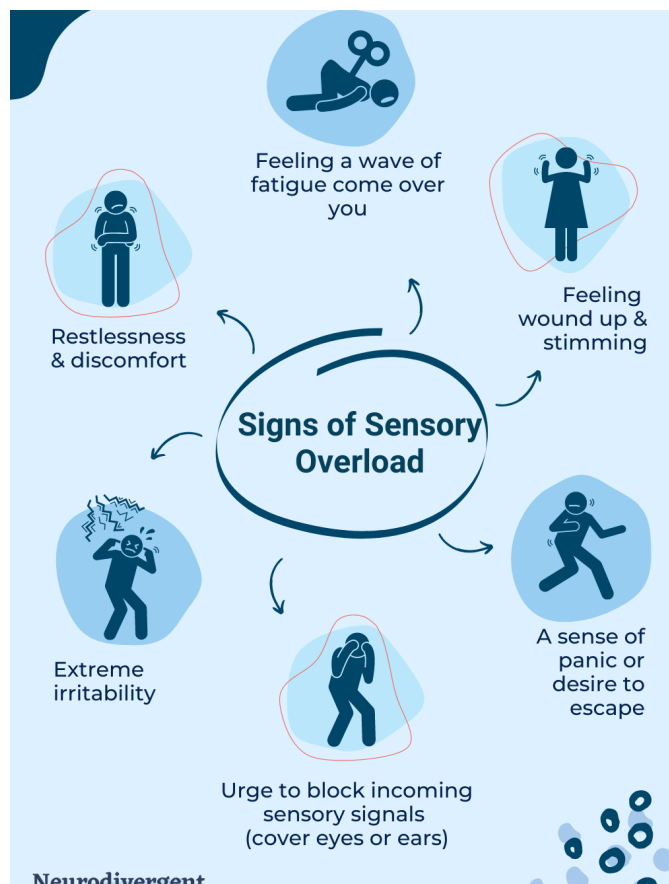
Tips on Study Skills - check out the Study Skills booklet.



Managing Sensory Needs

- **Sensory Breaks:** Schedule regular sensory breaks in a quiet, comfortable environment.
- **Sensory Tools:** Utilize fidget toys, noise-cancelling headphones, or whatever works for you - try to not distract other students.
- **Study Environment:** Create a designated study space at home with minimal distractions and controlled lighting. In the Sixth Form we have several areas you can access to study, they are all very different so try them all out and see what works for you.
 - The Library - silent
 - Large Common room - quite noisy with lots of distractions and people walking through
 - Small Common room - quieter and just off the Large Common room
 - Study Corridor - varies but can be quiet with minimal chatter
 - Study Hub - quiet with no through traffic
- **Communication:** Communicate sensory needs to teachers and request reasonable accommodations.

If you have sensory sensitivities and if they significantly impact concentration and well-being and they impact on your learning then let us know. Identify specific sensory triggers and develop strategies to minimise their impact. Communicate your needs to teachers and request accommodations such as sitting away from distractions or using noise-cancelling headphones during study periods. If you do get sensory overload then regular **sensory breaks** are essential to prevent overload. Experiment with different strategies and tools to find what provides the most relief. If you don't communicate the fact you're feeling overwhelmed and hide or mask it then teachers will find it difficult to know when you need a break. We want to support you but we have to work together.



Exam Preparation

- **Past Papers:** Practice with past papers under timed conditions.
- **Structured Revision:** Create a structured revision schedule, allocating specific topics to each day.
- **Flashcards:** Use flashcards to memorise key facts and concepts.
- **Mind Maps:** Create mind maps to visually organize information and identify connections.
- **Mock Exams:** Simulate exam conditions with mock exams to build confidence and identify areas for improvement.

Exam preparation requires a structured and consistent approach. Practicing with past papers under timed conditions is essential. Create a detailed revision schedule, breaking down the syllabus into manageable chunks. Utilise **visual aids** such as mind maps and flashcards to enhance memory and understanding. Consider taking **mock exams** to simulate the exam environment and identify areas where you need more practice. If possible, revise in the same room the real exam will take place in.

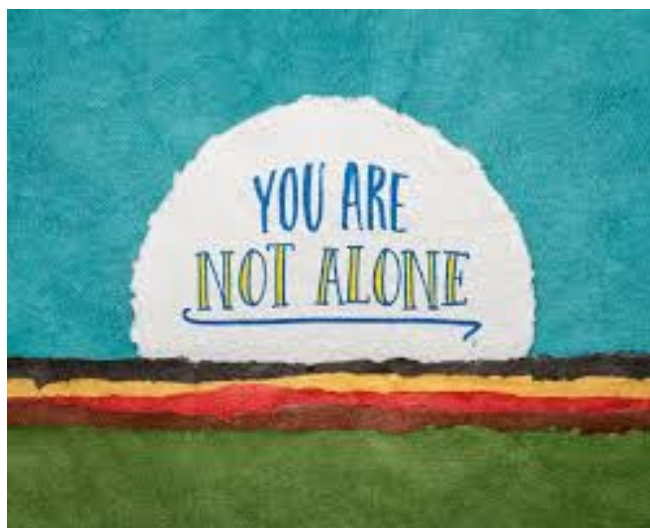
Check out the Study Skills and Exam Anxiety booklet - there are loads of different ways to study - find the way that works for you to try and reduce any anxiety. Start practicing straight away in Year 12 - before you know it you'll be in Year 13.



Accessing Support

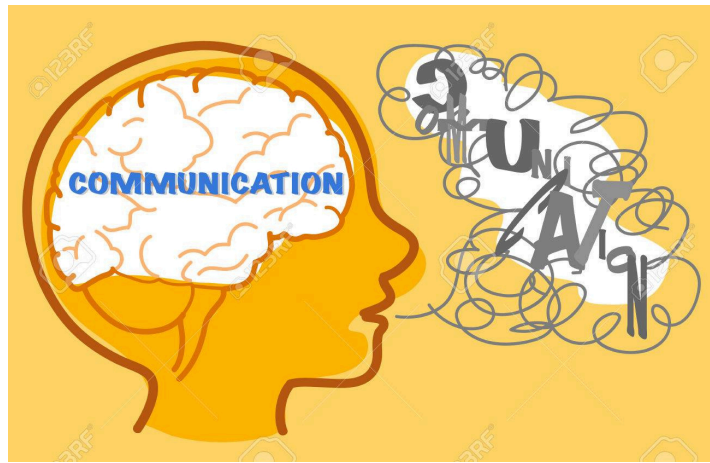
- **Sixth Form Learning Mentor:** Connect with the Sixth form Learning Mentor to discuss any support needs.
- **Teachers:** Communicate with teachers about learning preferences and challenges.
- **Support Groups:** Join support groups for autistic students to connect with peers and share experiences.
- **Mentors:** Seek mentorship from older students or professionals.
- **Therapists/Counsellors:** If anxiety is a significant issue then consider therapy or counseling to manage anxiety and develop coping strategies.

Don't hesitate to seek support from available resources. Connect with your form tutor, subject teachers and the Sixth Form Learning Mentor to discuss your individual needs and request reasonable adjustments. Communicate openly with your teachers about your learning preferences and any challenges you are facing. Consider joining support groups or seeking mentorship from older students or professionals. If anxiety is a significant concern, therapy or counselling can provide valuable support and coping strategies. You are not alone.



Exam Day Strategies

- **Sleep:** Try to build in good sleep hygiene so that you're not overtired.
- **Plan Ahead:** Know the location of the exam room and plan your route in advance. If you have never visited that room ask a teacher to take you in to some of the rooms you may be doing your exam in. Familiarise yourself with the format of the exam papers - your subject teachers will do this but you can also search up past papers on the exam board websites.
- **Arrive Early:** Arrive early to allow time to settle and reduce anxiety.
- **Sensory Regulation:** Bring sensory tools, such as silent fidget toys or earplugs. You will ONLY be allowed to wear ear plugs if these are your normal way during the rest of school so if this is the case you MUST communicate this with your teachers and the Sixth Form Learning Mentor.
- **Read Instructions Carefully:** Take time to read the exam instructions thoroughly.
- **Pace Yourself:** Manage your time effectively and avoid spending too long on any one question.
- **Advocate for yourself:** If you find an aspect of the Exams/lessons/assessments overwhelming then communicate this - we are unable to support you if this doesn't happen.



Success

- After the exam - tick the exams off your timetable as you complete each one. It will give you a sense of satisfaction seeing them get ticked off.
- Ensure you have something to look forward to after the exam - favourite food, time with friends, straight home to chill and decompress.
- Whatever is your way of celebrating - do it and be kind to yourself. You're awesome.

Summary

Navigating A-Levels as an autistic student requires proactive strategies and self-advocacy. By implementing effective organisation techniques, managing sensory needs, preparing thoroughly for exams, and accessing available support, you as an autistic student can achieve academic success and thrive in your A-Level studies. Remember, you possess unique strengths and abilities. Focus on your goals and celebrate your achievements along the way.

Moving forward ...

If you are an autistic student and feel that something in this document needs amending then please let us know. This really doesn't, by any means, give all the answers and is very much a starting point for support and we're happy to listen.

Please note that all information in this guide is gathered from across the WWW and various organisations and is by no means the only information out there but you will find more information on Google. Please do your own research and use this document as a platform to get you started.