**Autism**

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that affects sufferers in three ways.

* *Verbal and non-verbal communication.*
* *Social interaction, particularly empathy.*
* *Flexibility, coping with change.*

In the past students experiencing different degrees of difficulty with any of these three aspects autism were diagnosed using differing terminology. For example autistic students with more developed language skills were said to have Asperger’s disorder.

Today doctors recognise that all three aspects of the condition can be experienced on a spectrum ranging from a profound degree of impairment to a mild degree of impairment. Different degrees of impairment can be experienced in all three aspects leading to a confusing range of possibilities. Students with this disability are now referred to simply as being on the spectrum. They have ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder.

ASD students can experience some or all of the following challenges:

**Anxiety**

This anxiety can be the result of a variety of different things and many of the behaviours they express are an attempt to modify or control their anxiety.

**Disorganisation:**

ASD students may be very capable in some areas but find it difficult to use their knowledge to complete a task or solve a problem. It can be difficult for them to organise ideas or information and express these in a logical way.

**Sensitivity:**

Some ASD students can be over sensitive to sensory stimulus.

A flickering light, a squeaky door, a tag that rubs on their neck, an unusual taste or smell can cause significant anxiety and distraction.

**Social Skills and Emotions:**

Students with ASD can find it difficult to engage in a two-way interactions with others. They can seem aloof, not wanting to engage with others or can be bossy, wanting to control others including adults they encounter. Many are happy to be alone or seek older or younger children who are content to listen.

Processing and understanding emotions can be hard for them. Not knowing how to explain their feelings or being uncertain how to ask for help is common.

**Empathy:**

ASD students can seem unaware or disinterested in other people’s feelings or experiences. Their responses can also seem inappropriate at times. They may laugh when someone gets hurt because it looked funny when they fell. Their response is in what they see or hear not how it might affect others.

**Change:**

Routines and predictable events help to make an anxious student feel safe. ASD students can feel betrayed if sudden changes occur. Changing from one task to another can also be a challenge. Leaving a task incomplete or finding someone else sitting on their chair can cause confusion and heightened anxiety.

Often these students engage in repetitive behaviours with their hands or feet or focus on one idea or topic. This is a way to help them feel safe by doing something or touching something familiar.

**Help:**

Help is available for ASD students. A paediatric assessment will highlight any areas of particular need, such as Speech Therapy or Occupational Therapy. Social Skills programs and social stories can also help to teach students how to respond or how to ask for help.

**For further information:** Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) https://www.autismspectrum>org.au/