

JAN

Job Accommodation Network

Practical Solutions • Workplace Success

Accommodation and Compliance Series

Employees with Asperger Syndrome

Job Accommodation Network
PO Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080
(800)526-7234 (V)
(877)781-9403 (TTY)
jan@askjan.org
askjan.org



ODEP

Office of Disability
Employment Policy

A service of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy

Preface

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JAN'S ACCOMMODATION AND COMPLIANCE SERIES

Introduction

JAN's Accommodation and Compliance Series is designed to help employers determine effective accommodations and comply with Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Each publication in the series addresses a specific medical condition and provides information about the condition, ADA information, accommodation ideas, and resources for additional information.

The Accommodation and Compliance Series is a starting point in the accommodation process and may not address every situation. Accommodations should be made on a case by case basis, considering each employee's individual limitations and accommodation needs. Employers are encouraged to contact JAN to discuss specific situations in more detail.

For information on assistive technology and other accommodation ideas, visit JAN's Searchable Online Accommodation Resource (SOAR) at <http://askjan.org/soar>.

Information about Asperger Syndrome

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome, sometimes called "high-functioning autism," is one of five pervasive developmental disorders known as the Autism Spectrum Disorders (NIMH, 2006). People with Asperger Syndrome typically have average or above-average cognitive ability, but have extreme social deficits (Klin et al., 2000).

The common characteristics of Asperger Syndrome are underdeveloped social skills and underdeveloped communication skills (DSM-IV, 1994). Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may also have deficits in tactile perception, psychomotor coordination, and/or visual-spatial organization (Klin et al., 2000).

People with Asperger Syndrome are self-described loners who may be unable or unwilling to participate in spontaneous social interaction. Though friendship is desired, frustration occurs when trying to build social relationships, likely due to previous failed attempts (Klin et al., 2000).

People with Asperger Syndrome can excessively elaborate on their own topics of interest, however, be unable or unwilling to participate in other parts of conversation or to end a conversation, partially because of the inability to gauge social context or interpret social cues (Klin et al., 2000).

Gross motor skills, including posture and gait, and fine motor skills such as manual dexterity may be under-developed, making people with Asperger Syndrome seem clumsy or physically awkward (Klin et al., 2000).

What causes Asperger Syndrome?

In the past, public interest rose around a theory suggesting a link between the use of thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative used in the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, and autism. These theories have been refuted in subsequent studies by American and Danish researchers (NIMH, 2006). Research into the causes of autism now involves genetic sampling, and detailed study of the brain to include imaging, tissue sampling, and post-mortem evaluations (NIMH, 2006).

How is Asperger Syndrome treated?

Medications are used to treat people with Asperger Syndrome. This includes medications for anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive behavior such as Prozac and Zoloft, and medication for inattention or hyperactivity such as Ritalin (NIMH, 2006). Most experts agree that treatment for Asperger Syndrome not be limited solely to the use of medications. Treatment can also include behavioral therapy, addressing the development of interpersonal relationships, time management, self-discipline, goal-setting, and decision-making (NIH, 2006).

Asperger Syndrome and the Americans with Disabilities Act

Is Asperger Syndrome a disability under the ADA?

The ADA does not contain a list of medical conditions that constitute disabilities. Instead, the ADA has a general definition of disability that each person must meet (EEOC, 1992). Therefore, some people with Asperger Syndrome will have a disability under the ADA and some will not.

A person has a disability if he/she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (EEOC, 1992). To be a disability covered by the ADA, the impairment must substantially limit one or more major life activities. These are activities that an average person can perform with little or no difficulty. Examples are: walking, seeing, speaking, hearing, breathing, learning, performing manual tasks, caring for oneself, and working. These are examples only. Other activities such as sitting, standing, lifting, or reading are also major life activities (EEOC, 1992).

Most courts have agreed with the activities listed by the EEOC. For example, in *Brown v. Cox Medical Centers*, 286 F.3d 1040 (8th Cir. 2002), the Court noted that the “ability to perform cognitive functions” is a major life activity. In *Gagliardo v. Connaught Laboratories, Inc.*, 311 F.3d 565 (3d Cir. 2002), the court held that “concentrating and remembering (more generally, cognitive function)” are major life activities (Fram, 2004).

For more information about how to determine whether a person has a disability under the ADA, visit <http://askjan.org/corner/vol02iss04.htm>.

Accommodating Employees with Asperger Syndrome

(Note: People with Asperger Syndrome may experience some of the limitations discussed below, but seldom develop all of them. Also, the degree of limitation will vary among individuals. Be aware that not all people with Asperger Syndrome will need accommodations to perform their jobs and many others may only need a few accommodations. The following is only a sample of the possibilities available. Numerous other accommodation solutions may exist.)

Questions to Consider:

1. What limitations does the employee with Asperger Syndrome experience?
2. How do these limitations affect the employee's job performance?
3. What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
4. What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? Are all possible resources being used to determine accommodations?
5. Can the employee provide information on possible accommodation solutions?
6. Once accommodations are in place, can meetings take place to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations? Can meetings take place to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?
7. Would human resources or personnel departments, supervisors, or coworkers benefit from education, training or disability awareness regarding Asperger Syndrome? Can it be provided?

Accommodation Ideas:

Speaking/Communicating: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty communicating with co-workers or supervisors. For people with Asperger Syndrome, poor communication may be the result of underdeveloped social skills, lack of experience/exposure in the workforce, shyness, intimidation, behavior disorders, or low self-esteem.

- Provide advance notice of topics to be discussed in meetings to help facilitate communication
- Provide advance notice of date of meeting when employee is required to speak to reduce or eliminate anxiety
- Allow employee to provide written response in lieu of verbal response
- Allow employee to have a friend or coworker attend meeting to reduce or eliminate the feeling of intimidation

Time Management: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may experience difficulty managing time, particularly if involved in an enjoyable or exciting task. This limitation can affect their ability to complete the task within a specified timeframe. It may also be difficult to prepare for, or to begin, less-desirable work activities.

- Divide large assignments into several small tasks
- Set a timer to make an alarm after assigning ample time to complete a task
- Provide a checklist of assignments
- Supply an electronic or handheld organizer, and train on how to use effectively
- Use a wall calendar to emphasize due dates

Impulsivity: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may exhibit over-activity or impulsive behavior. This could be disruptive to the work environment or could inhibit efficient and effective work performance.

- Provide structured breaks to create an outlet for physical activity
- Use a job coach to teach/reinforce techniques to control impulsivity
- Allow the employee to work from home
- Review conduct policy with employee
- Adjust method of supervision to better prepare employee for feedback, disciplinary action, and other communication about job performance
- Use services of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if available
- Provide private workspace where employee will not disturb others by tapping, humming, or fidgeting

Stress Management: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty managing stress in the workplace. Situations that create stress can vary from person to person, but could likely involve heavy workloads, unrealistic timeframes, shortened deadlines, or conflict among coworkers.

- Provide praise and positive reinforcement
- Refer to EAP
- Allow employee to make telephone calls to doctors (and others) for support
- Provide sensitivity training for workforce
- Allow the presence and use of a support animal
- Modify work schedule

Maintaining Concentration: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may experience decreased concentration which can be attributed to auditory distractions (that can be heard) and/or visual distractions (that can be seen). People with Asperger Syndrome report intolerance to distractions such as office traffic, employee chatter, and common office noises such as fax tones and photocopying.

- To reduce auditory distractions:
 - Purchase a noise canceling headset

- Hang sound absorption panels
- Provide a white noise machine
- Relocate employee's office space away from audible distractions
- Redesign employee's office space to minimize audible distractions
- To reduce visual distractions:
 - Install space enclosures (cubicle walls)
 - Reduce clutter in the employee's work environment
 - Redesign employee's office space to minimize visual distractions
 - Relocate employee's office space away from visual distractions

Organization and Prioritization: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty getting or staying organized, or have difficulty prioritizing tasks at work. This is likely the result of limited executive function, which are cognitive skills required to prepare and execute complex behavior like planning, goal setting, and task completion.

- Develop color-code system for files, projects, or activities
- Use weekly chart to identify daily work activities
- Use the services of a professional organizer
- Use a job coach to teach/reinforce organization skills
- Assign a mentor to help employee
- Allow supervisor to prioritize tasks
- Assign new project only when previous project is complete
- Provide a "cheat sheet" of high-priority activities, projects, people, etc.

Social Skills: People with Asperger Syndrome may have difficulty exhibiting appropriate social skills on the job. This might manifest itself as interrupting others when working or talking, demonstrating poor listening skills, not making eye contact when communicating, or inability to correctly read body language or understand innuendo. This can affect the person's ability to adhere to conduct standards, work effectively with supervisors, or interact with coworkers or customers.

- Behavior on the job:
 - Review conduct policy with employee to reduce incidents of inappropriate behavior
 - Provide concrete examples to explain inappropriate behavior
 - Provide concrete examples to explain consequences
 - Recognize and reward appropriate behavior to reinforce appropriate behavior
 - Provide a job coach to help understand different social cues
 - Use training videos to demonstrate appropriate behavior in workplace
 - Encourage all employees to model appropriate social skills
 - Use role-play scenarios to demonstrate appropriate behavior in workplace
- Working effectively with supervisors:
 - Provide detailed day-to-day guidance and feedback
 - Offer positive reinforcement

- Identify areas of improvement for employee in a fair and consistent manner
- Provide clear expectations and the consequences of not meeting expectations
- Give assignments verbally, in writing, or both, depending on what would be most beneficial to the employee
- Establish long term and short term goals for employee
- Adjust supervisory method by modifying the manner in which conversations take place, meetings are conducted, or discipline is addressed
- Interacting with co-workers:
 - Provide sensitivity training to promote disability awareness
 - Allow employee to work from home when feasible
 - Help employee "learn the ropes" by providing a mentor
 - Make employee attendance at social functions optional
 - Allow employee to transfer to another workgroup, shift, or department
 - Encourage employees to minimize personal conversation, or move personal conversation away from work areas

Memory: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may experience memory deficits that can affect their ability to complete tasks, remember job duties, or recall daily actions or activities. This could be caused by a side-effect from medications. It could also be due to disinterest in the activity or misunderstanding the activity's level of importance.

- Provide written instructions
- Allow additional training time for new tasks
- Offer training refreshers
- Prompt employee with verbal cues
- Use a flowchart to describe the steps involved in a complicated task (such as powering up a system, closing down the facility, logging into a computer, etc.)
- Provide pictorial cues
- Use post-it notes as reminders of important dates or tasks
- Safely and securely maintain paper lists of crucial information such as passwords
- Allow employee to use voice activated recorder to record verbal instructions
- Provide employee directory with pictures or use nametags and door/cubicle name markers to help employee remember coworkers' names
- Encourage employee to ask (or email) with work-related questions

Multi-tasking: Individuals with Asperger Syndrome may experience difficulty performing many tasks at one time. This difficulty could occur regardless of the similarity of tasks, the ease or complexity of the tasks, or the frequency of performing the tasks.

- Separate tasks so that each can be completed one at a time
- Create a flow-chart of tasks that must be performed at the same time, carefully labeling or color-coding each task in sequential or preferential order

- Provide individualized/specialized training to help employee learn techniques for multi-tasking (e.g., typing on computer while talking on phone)
- Identify tasks that must be performed simultaneously and tasks that can be performed individually
- Provide specific feedback to help employee target areas of improvement
- Remove or reduce distractions from work area
- Supply proper working equipment to complete multiple tasks at one time, such as workstation and chair, lighting, and office supplies
- Explain performance standards such as completion time or accuracy rates

Situations and Solutions:

An employee with Asperger Syndrome works for a large marketing firm. Though she is knowledgeable in her field, she has difficulty participating in work activities with her team. JAN suggested job restructuring, which allowed her to work independently while providing information to her team electronically. This gave the employee the social distance she needed to be comfortable, yet also provided the team with information needed to move forward with marketing campaigns.

A new hire at a fast-food restaurant has Asperger Syndrome. He completes his job tasks quickly and efficiently then remains idle until someone tells him the next task to perform. The manager complains that the employee “just stands around” and “looks bored.” JAN suggested the use of a job coach to help learn the job, and how to stay occupied during down time. JAN also suggested using a training DVD from www.ConoverCompany.com to help build workplace social skills.

An applicant with Asperger Syndrome is applying for a research position with a chemical company. He has a verbal communication deficit, though can communicate properly through handwriting and by email. The employer wants to provide accommodations during the first stage interview, which involves answering questions from a three-person search committee. JAN suggested providing the questions in advance and allowing the applicant to furnish written responses during the interview.

A professor with Asperger Syndrome had difficulty keeping daily office hours, and experienced anxiety because the timing of students’ consultations was unpredictable. JAN suggested modifying the schedule as an accommodation. The professor keeps all required office hours, but only during three workdays. JAN also suggested adjusting the method by which students obtain appointments, asking students to schedule at least one day in advance and when possible, allow the professor to conduct consultations electronically, by phone, or by instant messenger. In addition, JAN suggested documenting each student consultation to ease his anxiety about the meeting and to refresh his memory about previous meetings with the student.

Products:

There are numerous products that can be used to accommodate people with limitations. JAN's Searchable Online Accommodation Resource (SOAR) at <http://askjan.org/soar> is designed to let users explore various accommodation options. Many product vendor lists are accessible through this system; however, upon request JAN provides these lists and many more that are not available on the Web site. Contact JAN directly if you have specific accommodation situations, are looking for products, need vendor information, or are seeking a referral.

Resources

Job Accommodation Network

West Virginia University
PO Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080
Toll Free: (800)526-7234
TTY: (877)781-9403
Fax: (304)293-5407
jan@askjan.org
<http://askjan.org>

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a free consulting service that provides information about job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the employability of people with disabilities.

Office of Disability Employment Policy

200 Constitution Avenue, NW, Room S-1303
Washington, DC 20210
Direct: (202)693-7880
TTY: (877)889-5627
Fax: (202)693-7888
infoODEP@dol.gov
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is an agency within the U. S. Department of Labor. ODEP provides national leadership to increase employment opportunities for adults and youth with disabilities while striving to eliminate barriers to employment.

Asperger Coach, The

Direct: (505)293-3344
<http://www.coachingasperger.com/>

The Asperger Coach works directly, one-on-one over the phone. The company works with adults with Asperger, couples where one or both partners has Asperger, teenagers with Asperger, and parents of young children with Asperger Syndrome and autism.

Autism Society of America

7910 Woodmont Avenue
Suite 300
Bethesda, MD 20814-3067
Toll Free: (800)3AU-TISM
Phone: (301)657-0881
info@autism-society.org
<http://www.autism-society.org>

Promotes lifelong access and opportunities for persons within the autism spectrum and their families to be fully included, participating members of their communities through advocacy, public awareness, education, and research related to autism.

Autism Speaks

2 Park Avenue, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10016
Direct: (212)252-8584
contactus@autismspeaks.org
<http://www.autismspeaks.org>

Dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments, and cure for autism.

National Autism Association

1330 W. Schatz Lane
Nixa, MO 65714
Direct: (877)622-2884
naa@nationalautism.org
<http://www.nationalautismassociation.org>

The mission of the National Autism Association is to educate and empower families affected by autism and other neurological disorders

Organization for Autism Research

2000 N. 14th Street, Suite 710
Arlington, VA 22201
Direct: (703)243-9710
<http://www.researchautism.org>

Organization for Autism Research (OAR) uses applied science to answer questions that parents, families, individual with autism, teachers, and caregivers confront daily.

Unlocking Autism

PO Box 208
Tyrone, GA 30290
Toll Free: (866)366-3361
<http://unlockingautism.org>

Committed to educating teaching community leaders about autism.

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