

FEATURE

The hindered path: learning to cope with each other

BY LAURA TIFFANY

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — Just before final exams Claire's walls were covered with giant sheets of paper. The papers were filled with complex diagrams. Claire is pursuing a master's degree, and while the road through post-graduate studies is rarely easy for anyone, she has found the journey especially difficult.

Claire is autistic. Sometimes, when she gets scared or "a bit frazzled," she climbs underneath her desk and refuses to venture out until she feels safe. Claire realizes most people don't react to stress in that manner, and has learned to cope with the response it sometimes elicits from her fellow students.

"It freaked out everyone who came into my room during that term, but I finally learned not to care," she said.

Autism is a neuro-cognitive developmental disability affecting the way the brain processes information. Autism is not a form of mental retardation, as many people mistakenly believe. It occurs in approximately 15 out of every 10,000 births. Approximately four out of every five autistic persons are male.

The disorder affects people with varying degrees of intensity,

explained Jared Blackburn, another autistic student. Blackburn refers to autism as a "spectrum disorder".

"It ranges in severity across a wide range of conditions, like the colours of a rainbow," he said.

Aspects of the condition include severe communication and language difficulties, an inability to relate to other people or form social relationships and unusual or problematic behaviour, such as responding oddly to sights and sounds.

Autism was first identified in 1943, and the cause is largely unknown. It seems to involve a "muddling" of the information the brain receives from the senses, which inhibits the accurate processing and integration of information.

Some of the biggest problems university students with autism face have less to do with academics and more to do with the social situations they encounter. Parties, class discussions, and even conversations with roommates can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for people with autism.

"The higher functioning students with autism...may excel academically, but they often have difficulty with the dormitories, the social scenes," said Carol Grey, a Michigan school board consultant for children and adults with autism.

"The worst problem is that it's noisy and chaotic here in these dorms," Jared said. "I like people, but I find them most strange, illogical, petty and superficial. I can intellectually grasp, but not relate to, their motives."

He explains that, because of autism, he feels like he is in a state of perpetual culture shock.

"I don't understand many of the basic social assumptions that others take for granted."

Autistic students also encounter difficulties understanding exactly what their professors expect from them on an assignment or exam.

"They might not be able to pick up on [what professors want]," Grey said. "They usually have to study longer and harder, and cover everything because they don't necessarily pick up on those strong points like the rest of us."

Jared finds himself spending a lot of time at his studies because he has difficulty scanning words into actual meaning while studying.

"I must stop and process letter by letter, syllable by syllable, and then word by word...so it takes me a long time to read," he said. "When I have many reading assignments, I spend all my time on them, get behind, and am too burned out to concentrate on anything within a week or two."

Dianne Wills, who is also pursuing a master's degree, admits that frustration over her studies sometimes lead her to harm herself.

"I often found math frustrating, and if I couldn't solve a math problem I would often bite myself. I bit myself when I was frustrated from as early as I could remember."

Coping with autism can affect a student's decisions throughout university.

To complete her master's degree, Dianne had the option of either taking an exam or writing a thesis. She chose the exam. "Writing a thesis would have been very difficult for me since, due to my autism, unstructured tasks don't come easily," she said.

Students also seek extra assistance from their schools to help them cope.

The most common request from university students who have autism, Grey says, is to have more time allotted for exams. She believes autistic students often require more time to complete an

examination. "It does take them longer to figure out what it is intended from a question and to formulate their response," Grey said.

But whether autistic students are allotted the extra time they need depends on the school they attend.

For Claire, it was not a problem. "My tutors were generally sympathetic and interested when I told them about my diagnosis, and I was able to get permission on medical grounds."

It is often suggested that the university community as a whole needs to become more aware of autism and the problems associated with it. Grey says one approach would involve "just improving...the understanding that professors have of students with autism so that they will not misinterpret or take offence at some of the social errors they might make".

For Jared, this surfaces as the "constant and frustrating" problem of being unable to get his points across to others, including his professors. "I might ask a question about one subject, and get an answer about another, totally unrelated subject," he said. "Since I am the common factor, the logical explanation is that I am not expressing myself well...in a way other people can understand."

University has been emerging as a reasonable goal for people with autism. Grey said, "We are identifying more and more high functioning people with autism...so we're dealing with a new population that we just became aware of." Assumptions that autistic high school graduates should get jobs in sheltered workshops are being challenged by the realization that there are other options, including university.

While pursuing a post-secondary education, autistic students are acquiring much more than diplomas and degrees. Some find their social skills can be helped just by attending college and university.

Dianne recalls eating lunch with fellow classmates.

"I remember making a very big effort to keep a conversation going and I must have been successful because they continued to have lunch with me," she said. "However, I wasn't able to feel a

real deep attachment with anyone. Still, I think those experiences of eating with those girls, and also socializing with other girls, was positive."

Jared adds that as time passed, it became easier for him to meet others.

"Before college, I had no real interest in socializing or spending time with other people. I preferred to be alone," he said. "During my early years of college, I developed a taste for company, which I previously lacked."

Dianne says she is happy she attained a post-secondary education, adding that it not only enhanced her social and communication skills, but also gave her a "very good career."

Many autistic graduates have gone on to successful careers in their chosen fields and lead fulfilling, productive lives. But they still must grapple with the realities of their condition. Grey explains that many of these students often end up in careers where contact with others is minimal, and where they "don't need to stand around the water cooler to make points, or to climb a social ladder. [They go] where they can just pursue an area of interest".

Whatever their destinations, it is evident that more and more people coping with autism will be making the journey through university. And though it will often be a difficult passage marked with frustration, as it has been for Claire, Jared and Dianne, chances are they will be the better for it.

Jared Blackburn says this poem, by Pamela Coleman Smith, captures the difficulties he has encountered with autism.

Alone
Alone and in the midst of men,
Alone 'mid hills and valleys fair;
Alone upon a ship at sea;
Alone. Alone and everywhere.
O many folk I see and know,
So kind they are scarce can tell,
But now alone on land and sea,
In spite of all I'm forced to dwell

*In cities large, in country lane,
Around the world, 'tis all the same;
Across the sea from, shore to shore.
Alone. Alone for evermore.*



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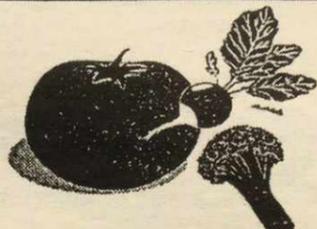
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