

Professional behaviours and masking behaviours for autistic students in the Institute of Dentistry

A guide for students and staff

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Terminology

This document will refer to "autistic student(s)" as it is the commonly accepted term by QMUL and entities such as the National Autistic Society and the NHS and recommended as the default by Barts Health Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism.

However, it is recognized that preferences vary, and some may opt to be identified as a student "with autism" or "with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."

Although this guide uses a consistent term for clarity, the Institute of Dentistry and QMUL prioritize individual comfort and will adapt the terminology accordingly in direct communications.

Staff and peers are requested to **verify and respect each student's preferred terminology.**



Frequently used terms:

Masking is a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear neurotypical to blend in and be more accepted in society.

Social scripting refers to tools or strategies used to help autistic individuals with navigate social situations more comfortably.

Scripts take various forms, such as written sentences, visual aids, or rehearsed verbal prompts. Their primary purpose is to provide individuals on the autism spectrum with guidelines for appropriate behaviour and communication in different social contexts.

Stimming or self-regulating behaviour includes arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning, or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements.

Introduction

Many undergraduate programmes, especially those in healthcare fields like dentistry and dental hygiene and therapy, involve a significant amount of social interaction, group work, and presentations.

For autistic students, these aspects of training can be particularly challenging.

Sensory overload in clinical settings, difficulty with social cues and unspoken expectations, and the constant masking and social scripting required to navigate social interactions can lead to anxiety, exhaustion, and hinder academic performance.

Despite these hurdles, autistic students can exhibit traits such as exceptional focus, detail-orientedness, and a strong sense of empathy.

By understanding the specific challenges autistic students face, we can create a more inclusive learning environment that allows them to thrive alongside their peers and develop into the very best healthcare professionals.

This brief guide is to raise awareness of autistic spectrum disorder and to help differentiate between those behaviours that are essential requirements for any professional and those that are not.

By highlighting the challenges faced by their autistic peers, it is hoped that this brief guide will not only help affected students develop their professional behaviour but also increase autism awareness and encourage support for autistic students.

The focus of this document is on supporting students but may also be helpful to support staff and patients too.

Guide

Professional Behaviours for a Dentist or Therapist

- **Communication:**
 - **Check:** Check notes for any additional needs before seeing the patient.
 - **Effective:** Clearly explain procedures, answer questions patiently, and actively listen to patients' concerns.
 - **Respectful:** Use appropriate language, avoid medical jargon when possible, and maintain a courteous tone.
 - **Masking misunderstanding:** Don't mask misunderstanding. Instead, seek clarification. This can be done by:
 1. Summarising what has been said, providing the speaker the opportunity to address any misunderstanding.
 2. Requesting the question/instruction is rephrased.
- **Patient Care:**
 - **Kindness:** Be generous, helpful, and caring about patients.
 - **Ethical:** Adhere to ethical guidelines and make decisions in the best interest of patients.

- **Empathetic:** Show understanding of patients' anxieties and fears. Be gentle and reassuring during procedures.
- **Competent:** Stay up to date on dental techniques and best practices. Provide high-quality care.
- **Confidential:** Respecting and protecting the privacy of patient information is crucial.
- **Professionalism:**
 - **Appearance:** Dress neatly and appropriately in a dental setting (e.g., scrubs, lab coat).
 - **Time Management:** Be punctual and minimize patient waiting times.
 - **Boundaries:** Maintain a professional relationship with patients.
- **Teamwork**
 - **Collaborate effectively** with the dental team to ensure comprehensive patient care.

Behaviours Not Essential for Professionalism

- **Eye Contact:** While important for connection, some autistic people struggle with prolonged eye contact. Brief eye contact or focusing on the bridge of the nose during conversation is perfectly acceptable.

- **Small Talk:** Chit-chat before or after procedures isn't essential. A friendly greeting and focusing on the dental needs is sufficient.
- **Facial Expressions:** Forced smiles or mirroring emotions can be draining. A neutral expression is perfectly fine as long as you're actively listening.
- **Stimming behaviours:** If they are not disruptive, there's no need to suppress natural self-regulatory behaviours.
- **Social scripting:** While some preparation for social interactions can be helpful, over-rehearsing can be exhausting and is not always required.

Additional Tips:

- **Open Communication:** Discuss masking concerns with colleagues or a mentor. They may be able to offer support and understanding.
- **Volunteer information:** When being supervised by a tutor, check if they would like you to volunteer information when they come to the bay rather than waiting for them to ask you to.
- **Focus on Strengths:** Many autistic people have exceptional focus and attention to detail, which are valuable assets in dentistry.
- **Self-Care:** Prioritize activities that help manage stress and sensory overload to maintain energy for work.

It is important to remember that professionalism in dentistry involves behaviours that ensure patient safety, trust, and quality of care. At the same time, it's equally important to work in a manner that is authentic and comfortable for the individual, which includes not masking to the point of exhaustion or mental distress. By focusing on core communication and clinical skills, a healthcare professional can be successful regardless of masking challenges.

Resources

1. Giroux M, Péliissier-Simard L. Shedding light on autistic traits in struggling learners: A blind spot in medical education. *Perspect Med Educ*. 2021 Jun;10(3):180-186. doi: 10.1007/s40037-021-00654-z. Epub 2021 Feb 20. PMID: 33611772; PMCID: PMC8187540.
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2. Shaw SCK, Doherty M, Anderson JL. The experiences of autistic medical students: A phenomenological study. *Med Educ*. 2023 Oct;57(10):971-979. doi: 10.1111/medu.15119. Epub 2023 Jun 1. PMID: 37264701.
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3. Shaw SCK, Fossi A, Carravallah LA, Rabenstein K, Ross W, Doherty M. The experiences of autistic doctors: a cross-sectional study. *Front Psychiatry*. 2023 Jul 18;14:1160994. doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2023.1160994. PMID: 37533891; PMCID: PMC10393275.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1160994/full>
4. National Autistic Society <https://www.autism.org.uk/>
5. The Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism (via e-Learning for Healthcare)
<https://learning.bartshealth.nhs.uk/#/detail/nav/n6/resources>