

Autism Connection Activities

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Introductions

What You Need To Include

- ✓ Share your name every time
- ✓ Describe your program of study like it is a Lesley undergraduate major.
- ✓ Explain why you are excited to facilitate this group (include a personal anecdote if you feel comfortable).

- ✓ If you are Autistic/have autism/are on the spectrum, say so! Even if you do not have a “degree” in autism and even though autism is a spectrum, your lived experiences will have important similarities with the lived experiences of your students.

Remember that being comfortable being uncomfortable is one of the things you want for the students. Do not ask for what you cannot put in yourself.

Sample Introduction

"Hi, my name is Kelly. I am a graduate intern at the LD/ADD Academic Support Program from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In terms of major, I think of it like a combination of Education and Psychology. I sought out the opportunity work with this group [the LD/ADD Academic Support Program “the Program”] because I care about Autistic college students. As an Autistic undergraduate, I experienced challenges that I didn't feel like I could talk to anyone about because I felt like the people around me just did those things naturally, like making friends."

Introduction Questions for Students

1. Name
2. Major (or plans for a major if you haven't declared yet)
3. Something good that happened this week
4. OPTIONAL: Something that was not good that happened this week

If a student chooses to share an answer to this last query, use active listening skills (e.g: “I’m sorry that happened to you”) and share if something similar has happened to you or someone you know. Helping students feel like their struggles aren’t novel can be valuable!

Why not ask about their year in school?

While it is tempting to try to identify “upperclassmen” to be contact points for “underclassmen,” I ultimately scrapped this question out of consideration for how sequenced Lesley’s course of study can be. If you “fall out of sequence” (e.g: failing a sophomore seminar and needing to retake it in “junior year”), you can be in a situation where you may “socially” be in one cohort but credits-wise in another. Lesley has a population of students taking less than a full semester’s worth of credits (which is not mutually exclusive with having a disability). For some students, college at a “slower” (according to the institution) pace is the best access point, and that pace should not be dictated by us as an event facilitator or commented on by peers.

Why not a question about their experience with autism?

Each student’s experience with autism is unique. By the same token, each student’s relationship with autism is unique. Some students are loud and proud about being Autistic. Others do not tell even their friends.

You are not here to debate students' relationships with themselves. The decision to disclose their autism to other people is solely theirs every time and the language they use to describe themselves is solely their choice.

While you can correct a student you do not use to describe you ("Real quick: The word 'Aspie' may be used to describe me, but I prefer to be called Autistic."), never correct a student's description of themselves, even if it is language you do not personally like.

Why not ask if they have been to Autism Connection before?

Students are busy! That means many cannot come to every meeting even if they want to (which some don't, which is never a slight against you). Thus, every meeting of Autism Connection should be standalone, with introductions and trust being re-built every time.



To use other words, Autism Connection is an episodic series, not a serialized one.

Norms

These norms were established by the first year's cohort. Based on feedback from the first session, ("I'm more of a rules follower than a rules maker.") for the rest of the first year, the norms were written in advance of the students' arrival.

However, depending on the cohort of students you encounter, they may express that they want to create the rules themselves. This is an equally valid approach to the norms.

Regardless of how the norms are constructed, **re-visit them every session and check in if any of the rules are confusing**. If any student is confused by any of the norms, discuss them and do not move on until every student expresses that they understand the norms. (This can be a great time to tap into the knowledge of the other students.) Emphasize the importance of everyone in the room understanding the norms by saying every session something to the effect of “I don’t know about you, but, for me, sometimes I feel like I’ve made a mistake in a conversation, but no one tells me what I did wrong. If I don’t know what I did wrong, how can I do better next time? **These norms exist so we can know if we did something wrong, so we can do better next time.**”

Ice Breaker Activities

[These activities](#) should always be done before problem-solving activities. Remember: Every meeting of Autism Connection should be standalone. Before diving into the difficult and sometimes-painful process of thinking about an issue you have encountered, students must feel like they know each other enough that no one in the space is a stranger.

Common Interest Round Robin

The objective of this activity is for students to see just how many things they have in common with their peers in this space. The steps are simple:

1. Pair students (have the facilitator be in a pair with the supervisor).
2. Set each pair of students by a section of whiteboard.
3. Set a timer (~5 minutes).

The rules are simpler:

1. Find as many interests in common with the other person as possible.
2. Do not compromise what you are interested in! You don’t “win” by having the longest list. You “win” by having something you know you can talk about (or even do) with the other person.

As an Autistic person, I find it is easy to talk about my interests. Here are some areas where I have observed students having difficulty and a tip to overcome that difficulty:

- One person in the pair dominating the conversation

If you notice a pair with one person taking up a lot of air time, go over and talk to the quieter person: You’d love to hear an interest they have. Do they agree with their partner? What’s something completely different from what has been written down/said so far?

- Narrowing in too quickly

If you notice that students are trading highly-specific interests back and forth with little/no luck of sticking, (e.g: a specific video game, a specific species of animal, a specific restaurant, etc.) show interest in the specific object. (e.g: “Oh, what is that? ... A restaurant? ... What kind of food is on the menu? ... Do you like X food/Y menu item too?”)

- Only talking about one type of interest

This happens most commonly when students have a lot in common, but it is valuable for students to see a wide variety of potential conversations and/or activities with the other person. If you notice a lot of video games on the list, for instance, ask what students do if the power goes out. If you notice a lot of food on the list, ask what students do between meals.

This or That?/Would You Rather?

This activity is focused on students explaining why they prefer one thing or another, rather than *what* they like. Emphasize that the point is the exercise of explaining why, rather than being correct. There are websites that generate questions for you, but sometimes they get disturbing quickly. I like [this list](#) and edited it to be more specific to Lesley/the group of students I have.

Food	Media	School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pineapple on pizza: yay or nay? • Do you prefer sour or spicy food? • Fruit-flavored candy or chocolate candy? • Nacho Cheese Doritos or Cool Ranch? • Do you prefer baking or cooking? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is Eevee a cat or a dog? • Do you prefer Mario or Luigi? • Batman or Superman? • Would you rather have only a smartphone or only a desktop computer? • E-books or physical books? • Would you rather be a famous guitarist or a famous drummer? • Would you rather be only allowed to play your favorite video game for the rest of your life or every video game is now free to you but your favorite video game now is erased from existence and memory? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you rather have shorter classes seven days a week or longer classes but a four-day class week? • Do you prefer math or history? • Would you rather teach a Lesley class for a day or have your parents teach a Lesley class for a day? • Would you rather sing or dance in front of one of your classes?

The steps and rules are simple:

1. Start by creating a hypothetical question with no clear-cut correct answer.
2. Have students take turns explaining why they picked their answer.
3. Have students move to one side of the room or the other to represent their final answer.
4. Every member of the group needs to pose a question before you move on.

What Is That?

The objective of this game is to work together to decipher unclear communication. The rules and steps are simple:

1. A student thinks of a thing but can only write down words that describe it, not the thing itself.
2. The other students must work together to figure out what the original thing being described is (Optional: Time each group. The person who stumps the group the longest wins!)

World's Worst

This game helps create laughs and allows you to exercise your creativity muscles. Consider using it if a large number of students said they had a bad week at the beginning.

1. Each person starts by picking a profession.
2. Everyone in the group says something that would be said by the world's worst person who has that job.
3. The game ends when everyone has had a turn picking a profession. (Optional: The person whose response generated the most laughter wins.)

Two Truths and a Lie

Better for when the students know each other, this game tests your knowledge of the other people in the room. The rules are simple:

1. Each person writes down two truths and a lie about themselves on the whiteboard.
2. Everyone tours the other entries and marks which statement they think is the lie.
3. The person who sleuths out the most lies is the winner!

Name Pictionary

Have students write their names by drawing pictures of objects that start with the correct letter. Because each person's name is a different length, do the first three letters of everyone's name. This serves two purposes: 1) To practice teamwork in solving a puzzle and 2) To see how well everyone remembers each other's names. Consider using when there are a lot of art students in the room.

1. A person randomizes the name of a group member, then draws three pictures. Picture 1 represents something starting with the first letter of the name. Picture 2 represents something starting with the second letter of the name. Picture 3 represents something starting with the third letter of the name.

2. The group must decipher what each picture is supposed to be (and know what letters those start with) and use that to determine which person's name was drawn!
3. Optional: Time each round, and the person who stumps the group the longest wins.

What's Different?

This game serves two purposes: 1) To “wake up” students’ attention to detail and 2) To help students get familiar with each other’s appearances, so they recognize each other on campus. The steps are simple.

1. Students are paired up.
2. Once students are in pairs, set an alarm for 30 seconds. The objective of those 30 seconds is for the students to memorize everything they can about their partner’s appearance.
3. When 30 seconds passes, have the students turn away from each other and change something about their appearance (e.g: take off a hat, undo a collar, button another button, move a pin). Students are not allowed to give hints to their partner!
4. The pair that identifies each other’s changes the fastest wins.

You Haiku

This game serves two purposes: 1) To practice describing yourself succinctly and 2) To practice discerning the most important parts of someone else and describing themselves succinctly.

There are two versions of this game that may operate as a Round 1 and a Round 2.

Describe yourself in the form of a haiku.	Pair students and have them compose a haiku about their partner.
<i>Recommended Round 2!</i>	<i>Recommended Round 1!</i>

Haiku variant: Instead of having it be 5 syllables, 7 syllables, and 5 syllables, have a haiku be 5 words, 7 words, and 5 words.

Make clear to students that the goal is not to make the best haiku but to learn about the other group members/describe yourself succinctly.

Problem-Solving Activities

This part of the meeting is predicated on students feeling like they know each other because these scenarios may bring up painful memories. Emphasize that there are multiple paths to a resolution, even if one is your first choice (best-case scenario).

“They made plans without me.”

The scenario:

- You are in the common room and a group of people you consider yourself friends with start talking around you about going out to eat. The time that they land on is more late at night than you feel comfortable going out during/they decide to get a type of food that you don't like. You and this group are the only people in the common room. They leave for these plans without even asking you if you are interested in going. What do you do?

The scaffolding:

- Let's say you have at least one of these people's contact information...
- Let's say you have class with one of these people after the outing....
- Let's say one of these people is your roommate...
- Do you know who the staff who live in your house are?
- “Has something like this ever happened to you? How did you handle it?” Mention that you will share what you did at the end.

Potential solutions:

- Contact the person you feel closest to/have the most interaction with and explain that you are hurt by being excluded. (That's what's important, not the fact that you didn't want to do this particular thing.) Make clear that if plans are being made in front of you, you want an invitation, even if you decide you don't want to go.
- Tell the residential staff about the situation. Ask if they can make an announcement, not implicating anyone in particular, about asking people you make plans in front of to those plans, even if you don't think they're interested.

How I handled it:

- Even though I didn't want to go out, I was bothered by the fact that it seemed like I was invisible to people I considered myself friends with.
- I was actually roommates with one of the people involved and played D&D with another.
- The morning after the outing, I told my roommate that I was hurt by not being asked to join.
- My roommate said that she did know I was in the room but said that she knew that I didn't want to go.
- I emphasized that the point was that, by being in the room with them, I knew everything about the outing... including that no one thought to even ask. What I wanted was just to be asked: something that isn't difficult to do.
- The next time this group made a plan in the common room, I wasn't the only one in the room. Even so, my roommate asked the whole common room if they were interested. Even though no one took her up on the offer, she kept asking, even through to graduation events.

“They yelled at me, even though I did all the work!”

The scenario:

- You're having a really busy time in classes, and part of that is a big group project. You are in a group of two for a late afternoon class, and the professor tells you to divide the work. Your partner tells you that they will work on creating the PowerPoint slides. Come the morning of the presentation, you check on the status of the presentation... but nothing has been done! Panicking because the presentation is part of your grade, you hastily create one. After the presentation, your group partner yells at you because they were supposed to be the person who created the presentation. What do you do?

The scaffolding:

- Emphasize the times mentioned, particularly the difference between the time you checked the presentation and the time it was due
- Ask if, in the scenario, you contacted the group partner before making the presentation
- Bring up how different syllabi treat group projects
- “Has something like this ever happened to you? How did you handle it?” Mention that you will share what you did at the end.
- Let's list parts of a group project/roles people can take. What roles have you taken in the past?
 - Timekeeper
 - Notetaker
 - Organizer
 - Presenter
 - Presentation maker
 - Writing correcter
 - Researcher
 - What are the equivalents in an art class?
- What roles do you feel you are the best at? How can you try to be in those roles and not others?
 - No “I like X.”
 - Yes “My strengths are/include X and Y.”
 - No “I need to do X.”
 - Yes “I think this project would best be served by me doing X.”
 - No “I can't do X.”
 - Yes “I think it would be best for the project if I did not do X.”

Potential solutions:

- Apologize to the person. Explain that you panicked when the presentation wasn't done by the morning it was due, and it was wrong of you not to check in before working on it. Offer to explain the situation to the professor if the group partner wants you to.

- Ask the professor for further clarification about how to divide roles in a group project.

How I handled it:

- I apologized to my group partner: I should have contacted you before working on the presentation.
- Next class, I was called up by my professor: The group partner decided to, without telling me, to talk to the professor about dissatisfaction with her grade.
- I explained my side of the story, and the professor decided that he had not provided enough supports to help group projects run smoothly. For the next project in the class, there was a required mid-project feedback form about how each group member felt they were contributing (e.g: too much, too little).
- I did not sign up to be in this person's group again.

“How do I tell them to stop?”

The scenario:

- At one of your classes, the person sitting next to you is struggling and asks you questions about the course material. They touch your hand to get your attention, and you don't like that. You don't think the person means any harm, but when they do this, it gets in the way of your own learning in the course. You also know that the person is an international student, but you don't know what country they are from and if touching people's hands to get your attention is normal there. What do you do?

The scaffolding:

- Talk about times you have done things without meaning harm
- Talk about supports (other than you) available to the struggling student
- “Has something like this ever happened to you? How did you handle it?” Mention that you will share what you did at the end.

Potential solutions:

- Tell the student that you are unable to keep helping them. Share other offices who can help them.
- Ask the student to stop touching your hand because it distracts you (can choose to say that you don't like it either) and if you're distracted, you can't help him
- Ask the professor if they can talk to the student, emphasizing that you do not believe that they mean to cause any harm

How I handled it:

- I asked the student to stop (without explaining why it made me upset or how it distracted me)
- "I'm just trying to get your attention."
- When he did it again, I told him that I asked him to stop and because he didn't, I was going to stop helping him. And so I did.
- Admittedly, I don't think I dealt with this one well. (Own when you don't think you dealt with a situation well, facilitator!)

"Do I disclose?"

The scenario:

- During one of your classes, you are allowed to use a computer as part of an accommodation to take notes when use of a computer is not usually allowed. You use your computer for solely that: notes. Even so, someone in your class comes up to you and tells you that they are being treated unfairly: You are having an easier time in the class because you can use your computer. What do you do?

The scaffolding:

- Whose decision is it that you get this accommodation?
- Whose choice is it to share information about themselves?
- Who worked with you to determine that this was an appropriate accommodation? Can you get in contact with them?

How I handled it:

- I told the professor, emphasizing that the comment was discriminatory/ableist
- The professor talked to the student
- The student didn't talk to me again

Potential solutions:

- Emphasize to the student that the Office of Disability Services decided that this was indeed fair and that you can take your issue up with them
- Emphasize to the student that you heard that remark as ableist. Did you mean to make a discriminatory remark?
- Talk to the LD/ADD Academic Support Program
- Tell the professor about how another student made an ableist comment

Create your own scenarios. Draw from your lived experience and say so: That is an important part of showing that you “actually get it.” (For particularly-dicey situations, consider using an example that didn’t happen at Lesley.)

Feedback Form

Feedback is essential whenever you want to improve your craft. Dedicate 5-10 minutes at the end of each Autism Connection meeting to giving time to fill out a quick feedback form.

The first year’s form is available at tinyurl.com/AutismConnectionFeedbackForm . Consider using this same TinyURL to create a sense of continuity across multiple cohorts, even if you adjust the content of the form.

Make clear that participation is 1) optional and 2) you cannot know who gave you what response. If you incorporate feedback, say that you got the idea/were thinking about the topic from the feedback form, not from any particular student. Ask that the students focus their feedback on how they feel (not assuming how others felt) and your performance (as opposed to how other students acted).