

"Succeeding In College On The Autistic Spectrum" by Kate Goldfield

Category : Postsecondary Education

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College can be a very daunting prospect for anyone, but if you have an autism spectrum disorder, it can be downright terrifying. Living on campus? Interacting with other people? Being away from home? It can sound like a nightmare to many people. But if you know a few things before you start, it can become a very manageable prospect, that anyone can do, even you.

I would like to share with you what I believe the most important tips are to succeeding in college with an autism spectrum disorder.

1) Most importantly, make connections with whoever you can. These will become your lifeline. Try to befriend your professors - they are often much easier to interact with than your peers. Try to choose a college small enough where you will be able to have a relationship with your professors. Stay after class and talk to them about the assignment or a particular idea you had about one of the topics from class. Comment about the weather. Ask their opinion of school wide issues. Any kind of repeated small talk leads to a feeling of connection, and a genuine friendship. When you need to talk about more serious issues or need help with something, you will have natural allies. These connections will keep you from feeling too lonely, and give you a sense of connection to and belonging within the college. You will most likely find doing this with professors much easier than with your peers.

2. The second most important thing I can bestow on you in order to be able to succeed in college is to accept that you are different. Don't waste all your time comparing yourself to others. Know that you may appear different, talk different, walk different, have different interests, yada yada. It's not worth beating yourself up over. You've known this for a long time, it's old news. If you choose the right college, the student body won't care that you're different. Look for smaller, quirky colleges with a more welcoming student body. At my college, I was quite self conscious my first couple of years, but eventually grew into myself and didn't care that I appeared different. Instead, I reveled in it. This gave me more confidence when interacting with my peers and helped me to make friends.

3. Take classes in what you are truly interested in, not what other people tell you to. Boredom is the most surefire way to fail academically. Follow your passions. Make the material your own. When you are assigned a project or a paper, think to yourself, "What do I want to say about the world, or myself? What do I want to find out about the world or myself? How I can express this in this paper in a meaningful way?" Find something that engages you, and you will excel academically and really get something out of the process in the meantime. At my college, I really enjoyed when we got to do portfolios in my psychology classes. We were allowed to express our learning of the material in any way we wished: through essays, song lyrics, paintings, research papers, or whatever we liked. I was able to really explore myself and the world around me while doing these portfolios.

4. Work around sensory concerns. College can be a sensory nightmare, but only if you let it. If noise is a problem while you are taking tests, ask to take tests in a separate room or the learning center. If

you have a problem with perfumes, have the teacher ask the class not to wear any. If you tend to get overwhelmed while being out and about on a busy college campus, get a Walkman to listen to while you walk around. This will soothe you and give you something to concentrate on. Figure out the way you relax best and work time into your schedule to do it. Find a nice, quiet place on campus that you can retreat to when you need to. For me, that was the basement of my school library. I personally had trouble going to sleep at night when I could hear any noise at all coming from any of the other dorm rooms. So I scheduled late classes and made a point to stay up until two or three in the morning when I was sure everyone else had gone to sleep. Unorthodox, yes, but it worked throughout the time I was at my college.

5. Find something you enjoy, and do it regularly. Make you sure you leave time to relax. Don't stress out if you don't have anyone to do it with. There is no law stating you can't go out to dinner by yourself or to a movie alone. Sometimes, it is even more enjoyable that way. Take yourself out on the town. I used smoothies as rewards for difficult tasks, and regularly went into town by myself. I wandered around and forgot about school for a while.

6. Organization. Knowing yourself and your patterns, and having a routine, is key to succeeding. What time of day do you work best? Morning or night, before dinner or after? Do you work best under the pressure of deadlines or do you need to break tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks? Do you need an area with no distractions to work in, or does some amount of activity stimulate your thinking process? These are all important things to know about yourself. Have a schedule of when you will do all your work, and stick to it. Invest in binders and keep work neatly labeled where you can find it. Try to work around the same time every day.

7. Finally, and this is very important, ask for help if you need it. Most colleges have learning centers where you can get extra tutoring or other accommodations. Don't be afraid to be a pest when asking teachers to clarify assignments - it's better than getting a bad grade. Utilize email to ask questions of professors if talking to face to face is too difficult. Make sure you have a source of support. The counseling center in your school can be very useful to help you deal with the myriad stresses of a college career. Make sure you have someone to talk to, whether that person be a friend, a professor, family member, or whoever.

If you follow all of those tips, I think that you will find you really enjoy your college experience. Your college years are particularly notable because not only are you learning a ton of stuff academically, but you are also growing so much as a person. You're learning how to live on your own, how to interact with others, how to discipline yourself and stay motivated. You're learning about things you are interested in, and new ways to express yourself. You're building an identity for yourself. I wish you all the luck as you travel down this important path!