

Autistic Experiences During the Shift from Adolescence to Early Adulthood

Overview

For my Va-LEND leadership project, I interviewed four autistic individuals about their transition from high school to postsecondary life, focusing on: (1) the shift to college, (2) supports and coping strategies, (3) identity, and (4) advice for future autistic individuals and practitioners.

Key Challenges

Life Skills Gap & New Independence

- Budgeting, cooking, feeding self, managing schedules, chores, health

Social & Identity Stress

- Pressure to socialize (or mismatch with peers)
- Navigating: queer identity, gender identity, cultural/racial identity shifts

Academic & Structural Mismatch

- College: less structured than needed or not intellectually challenging
- Large environments → less support

Big Picture Findings

- Excitement + Hope
 - “Ready to leave” / fresh start
 - Freedom, independence, identity exploration
- But also...
 - Overwhelm, exhaustion, uncertainty
 - Mismatch between expectations vs. reality
- Common Pattern:
 - Excitement before transition
 - Drop after arrival (stress, burnout, confusion)

Disability & Health

- Undiagnosed autism, chronic illness, fatigue, burnout
- Sensory overload, lack of accommodations

Loss or Shift of Support

- Leaving home = losing structure/support
- Family support inconsistent or absent
- Hard to access help from college

Positive Experiences

Identity Growth

- Coming out as queer/trans
- Moving away from restrictive environments
- Becoming more authentic

Exposure to New Perspectives

- Diversity of people, ideas, cultures, politics

Independence & Freedom

- Control over schedule, environment
- Distance from harmful home situations

Moments of Connection

- Freshman cohorts, clubs, niche communities
- Online communities (e.g., social media)

What support is often missing?

- Life skills training
- Food & financial support
- Mental health support
- Autism-informed accommodations
- Structured social support
- Guidance & mentorship

Coping Strategies

Adaptive Strategies

- Creating routines & prioritizing needs
- Joining clubs to find connection
- Journaling, alone time, creative outlets
- Self-advocacy (asking for space, accommodations)

Maladaptive Strategies

- Overloading schedules (burnout cycle)
- Substance use to manage social anxiety
- Codependent relationships

Growth Over Time

- Better pacing & energy awareness
- Valuing rest and sensory regulation
- Shifting toward self-acceptance

Intersectionality

Race, class, gender, sexuality, religion all shape the Autistic experience

- Being Black at a PWI vs HBCU
- Working-class vs wealthy
- Religious upbringing → identity conflict

Autism is only one part of the story

Advice for Autistic Youth

- Go at your own pace
- College is not the only path
- You don't have to follow a "template" for life
- Prioritize basic needs (food, rest, health)
- Explore identity beyond expectations
- Try new things, but also listen to your body
- Seek community, but not at the cost of yourself

Advice for Practitioners

- Emphasize life skills training
- Help with prioritization & energy management
- Understand cultural + identity context (i.e. an intersectional lens is key)
- Validate Autistic experiences and never dismiss them
- Support self-determination, not compliance
- Accept that college may not be the right path and that there is no single "successful" post-high school experience

Concluding Thoughts

- There is no single way to move into adulthood.
- Autistic young people need support that is flexible, affirming, and rooted in real-life needs.
- Autistic people can thrive with the right support and understanding

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