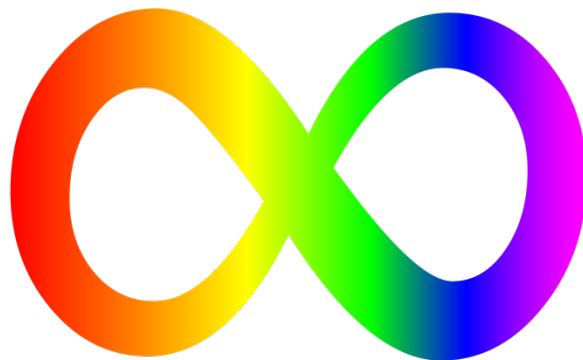




“I Can’t Thank You Enough”

A Contemporary Guide for Peer Mentors
Hoping to Make a Difference in the Lives
of Autistic College Students



By Sylvia Cusack Johnson



Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we introduce and share the ‘Contemporary Guide for Peer Mentors Hoping to Make a Difference in the Lives of Autistic College Students’. We hope that you will find it to be an informative and entertaining guide for new mentors in the field of neurodiversity. CUNY has been fortunate to be a recipient of a grant from the FAR Fund to enhance the university’s capacity to support its growing population of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and to provide training and resources to faculty and staff about autism. We are eternally grateful to Dr. Shirlee Taylor, Executive Director of the FAR Fund for her endless support, confidence, and encouragement.

Under the leadership of Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Inclusion Initiatives, Dr. Christopher Rosa, five pilot campuses were designated to develop best practices to share with the university and interested stakeholders. Our campus Project REACH directors, Dr. Kristen Gillespie of College of Staten Island, Valerie Stewart Lovell of Brooklyn College, Dr. Regina Varin-Mignano of LaGuardia Community College, Dr. Stella Woodroffe of Kingsborough Community College and Marcos Gonzalez of Borough of Manhattan Community College worked tirelessly to create and develop inclusive initiatives, mentor programming and universal design practices for faculty and staff. A huge thanks to Jenna Lamm, who is responsible for the development, programming, creativity, and success of our annual CUNY Neurodiversity Conference.

As the program and the population of autistic students at CUNY have both grown considerably, we have seen greater academic success, co-curricular participation, and career outcomes. With this growth we felt the need develop a manual of best practices and resources to share with our campuses and stakeholders throughout the autism community.

One main goal of the project was to offer a guide created for and by an autistic individual. Fortunately, we met Sylvia Cusack Johnson, MSW who enthusiastically took on the challenge. Sylvia’s insight, experience and intelligence are reflected in her writing. The illustrations are created by Jin Delos Santos, a talented artist and CUNY graduate who is also autistic.

We are so proud of the amazing inclusive community at CUNY and are pleased to share this resource with the wider neurodiversity community.

Best regards,

Barbara Bookman
University Director, Disability Programs
The City University of New York

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3-4
	a. Overview.....	3-4
	b. Identity-First Language.....	4
II.	The Basics.....	5-28
	a. What is a Peer Mentor?.....	5
	i. What Can I Do As A Peer Mentor?.....	6-11
	• Executive Functioning Assistance.....	6-11
	• Schedule Examples.....	7-8
	• SMART Goals.....	9
	• SMART Goals Planning Worksheet.....	10
	ii. Appendix A: Sample Executive Functioning Mentor Meeting.....	11
	iii. Social Support.....	12
	iv. Disclosure.....	12-13
	b. What is Autism?.....	14-20
	i. Commonly Recognized Autistic Traits Infographic.....	16
	ii. Reflections.....	17
	iii. Recently/Rarely Recognized Autism Traits Infographic.....	18
	iv. Reflections Revisited.....	19
	v. Newly Reported Autistic Traits.....	20-21
	c. Project REACH and Affiliated Programs.....	21-22
	d. Value of the Strengths-Based Perspective.....	23-24
	e. Need for Autistic Spaces/Leadership.....	24-25
	f. Information About Additional Stress.....	25-27
	g. Peer Mentoring Quotes.....	27-30
	i. Quote Takeaways.....	30
III.	The Breakdown.....	31-37
	a. What is Digital Peer Mentoring?.....	31-37
	b. Appendix B: The Importance of Reporting.....	38
	c. Appendix C: Peer Mentoring of a JRC Survivor & Autistic College Student..	39-40
	d. What are Peer Mentor Contracts?.....	40-43
	The Peer Mentor Contract.....	40-42
	i. The Confidentiality Agreement.....	42
	ii. Contracts' Conclusion/Templates.....	42
	iii. Sample Mentor Log.....	43
IV.	Conclusion.....	44
V.	Glossary.....	44-49
VI.	References.....	50-58
	a. Hyperlinks Handout.....	54-55
	b. Resources for Autistic Communities.....	55-58

I. Introduction

Overview

My name is Sylvia, nice to (sort of) meet you! I'm the Project REACH Specialist for the City University of New York (CUNY), and, as an Autistic adult and social worker, supporting Autistic people is kind of my thing, so I'm honored to write this manual. That said, why did I write this manual? Simple! I worked with a bunch of students going through a lot of different things, Autistic or not. I wrote this manual because you have the potential to change someone's life, including only helping someone graduate and having a better college experience, with or without a certificate, and I want to help! That said, I want to acknowledge that I wrote this manual during COVID-19 pandemic—when education started looking more like this:



Autistic students, as I will discuss later, already have trouble coping with their anxiety. Therefore, your mentees may need more support than usual while having additional reasons to be anxious, among other things that we get into later. This especially applies to those of you who are reading this around the time this was written and are Autistic or otherwise neurodivergent (check glossary for definition) and soon to be/are a mentor of one or more Autistic students while multiply-marginalized (neurodivergent people of color, neurodivergent women and girls, neurodivergent LGBT+ people, etc.).

While reading this manual you'll find insight on everything from what autism really is, and what autistic people experience, to how to support your students (digitally or not), and more in a neurodiversity affirming and embracing as well as an inclusive, and intersectional way. Among other things, that starts with making this manual accessible for everyone. If you're reading this on a screen reader, then please refer to the hyperlinks handout (titled "hyperlinks") starting on

page 54 for a list of sources I link to in this manual with brief descriptions about each in footnotes at the bottom of that page. Meanwhile, for a list of resources for Autistic people who may need them please refer to the handout starting on page 55.

During this stressful time we learned more about the value of in-person and virtual meetings while making our programs as inclusive as possible. When our system moved entirely online for the first time in CUNY's history, especially our program at Project REACH, it became clear how vital online programming, and embracing the above, can be with an emphasis on autism acceptance and autistic pride. That's why I used that rainbow infinity symbol on the cover page. For those who don't know, it's actually the Autistic pride symbol. I'll also be talking about how we can better promote leadership among Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students as mentors, presenters, speakers, staff, and, ultimately, in positions like mine: writing the literal manual on how to mentor Autistic college students, among other positions. This includes leadership inside and outside of autistic spaces, and the importance of these spaces as well with discussion on inclusivity and intersectionality in your work. You can make a difference, and it starts with you reading this manual. It is meant to be a reference guide; if you don't finish it all in one sitting you can come back to it as needed.

Identity-First Language

As a sign of respect to international Autistic communities, I will use identity-first language (words like autistic, autistic people) when talking about, well, autistic people, unless otherwise specified/preferred. That said, you might want to learn about what research and other information exists on identity-first language. How popular is it? And why is it often preferred? While there are and have been many [polls on social media](#)¹ that ask this (autismandtourettes, 2016) along with many autistic people I've met or known who again identify as autistic, Kenny and colleagues researched this in the UK. Their study in 2015 found that 61% of Autistic adults actually want to be called autistic (Kenny et al. 2015)-- while the poll I linked to said it was almost 92% for the same question answered also by autistic people (autismandtourettes, 2016). Perfect or not, both indicate how often autistic people prefer to be called autistic. However, it's ok if your students identify in different ways. To learn more about why many of us use [identity-first language](#)² check out the linked articles here or in the handout on page 54.

¹ This is a link to a Tumblr poll asking Autistic people if they prefer to be called Autistic or a person with autism.

² These links (one in identity-first, the other in language) are Lydia X. Z. Brown's vital understanding on the importance of identity-first language for Autistic people.

II. The Basics

What is a Peer Mentor?

A peer mentor is a student, regardless of educational level, that provides executive functioning, social, and other supports (e.g. emotional) as needed, to a neurodivergent or otherwise disabled student (and especially to an autistic student). This can be done individually, mentor to mentee, or in a group setting. You can serve as a helper under the instruction of your supervisor either with structures of any kind, stricter/laxer, or without any structures at all— instead taking it as it comes and using your best judgement and insight from the student and your supervisor.

Your role is to ensure that your students excel in their classes; open themselves up to new friends, relationships, and experiences if wanted; and that they feel supported for who they are through individual and/or group meetings. The individual meetings can be as little as 15 minutes (for a check-in) and as much, at most, as an hour depending on the needs of your students on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis. You'd often start out with more time every week, agreed upon by you and the student, and whittle it down if they seem more independent and they've demonstrated they no longer need your support. If you take away your support too soon it can backfire, so be mindful when making that decision.

Through these meetings, you'd also make sure they have the support they need outside of you when you are unqualified to assist any further. Anything outside of the above responsibilities is something to be addressed by a clinician or another professional, which could include outside clinicians and/or family members as well as potential aides or others. Remember to learn the difference between emotional and therapeutic support or ask your supervisor.

Meanwhile, remember:

- Anyone can be autistic, regardless of race, gender, or other disability status*
- Autistic people are capable of doing things neurotypical (NT) folks can do*
- Different autistic people may need different kinds of support depending on the person*
- Not every autistic person has the same traits (which we get into later); while functioning labels (i.e. high-/low-functioning) are a myth that risk invalidating autistic experiences at the very least*
- We **don't** want to be cured and there's always more to know--including the value of the strengths-based perspective for Autistic people*

What Can I Do As A Peer Mentor?

Your support could look like a lot of different things. Like I said earlier, it could look like helping a student stay on top of their schoolwork; feel less isolated; and figure out how to disclose their disabilities—if at all. I talk about all of this below, enjoy:

Executive Functioning Assistance

The largest responsibility you'll have as a peer mentor, without a doubt, is ensuring your students manage and keep track of every assignment, class, and exam/test while doing what you can to make sure they keep themselves otherwise organized. The first thought you may have may be "Oh! I'll just make a schedule for my student!" I ask you to think deeper.

What *kind* of schedule will your student need to succeed? And wouldn't you make the schedule *with* your student instead of *for* them? After all, you need their collaboration and input to make that schedule. While everyone has their own needs, through my work with students and my own experience, there are at least *four* ways an autistic student could benefit from your help with organization:

Strict schedules plan every hour of your student's day (fixed sleep times, controlled breaks and assignment completion times, class times, appointments, etc.)

Tailored schedules plan for only the *busy* parts of your student's day, with built-in breaks to give them free time, with the student being trusted to then get their work done in the free time slots you organize with them.

Loose scheduling involves not a schedule per se, but a formal action-based commitment for when the student should complete an assignment (after dinner, before bed, after their next/last class, etc.) followed by you *checking in* on that student around when they said they are doing said thing and asking how they're doing on the assignment/task. Before that, however, your student should set an alarm for a specific day and time (Saturday at 2pm) with you setting one for five minutes later. Make sure *your* phone is on and charged for the alarm, or that you remember to check- in otherwise, and encourage the same in your student while playing it by ear.

Visual schedules illustrate the tasks your student needs to complete in a series of pictures they can make sense of. Do they need to read for their history class? Use a picture of a book, or maybe something they'd remember from the class. The National Autistic Society (2019) expressed that visual supports, like these schedules, could structure autistic people, such as your students, in beneficial ways.

Schedule Examples

Figure 1. Strict Schedule Example³

Notice that almost all of this student’s time is strictly scheduled to ensure their success. This type of schedule could serve a student who may need extra structure to get by.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	
7:00 AM								
7:30 AM								
8:00 AM		Breakfast	Workout	Breakfast	Workout	Breakfast	Breakfast	
8:30 AM			Breakfast		Breakfast			
9:00 AM		Gym	Study	Gym	Study	Admissions events	Church	
9:30 AM								
10:00 AM			Linear algebra		Linear algebra			
10:30 AM								
11:00 AM	Brunch	Lunch		Lunch		Lunch		
11:30 AM								
12:00 PM			Lunch		Lunch	RVPA meeting	Lunch	
12:30 PM			TA mtg			Teaching assistant		
1:00 PM		Lab	Study	Lab	Study		Grocery shopping	
1:30 PM								
2:00 PM	Study		Biochem lab		Biochem lab	J board	Laundry/ study	
2:30 PM								
3:00 PM								
3:30 PM		Study		Study	Study			
4:00 PM								
4:30 PM		Study	Africans studies	Study	Study			
5:00 PM		Design I		Design I	E board	Study	Study	
5:30 PM					mtg/dinner			
6:00 PM	Practice							
6:30 PM		Dance practice	Dinner	Dinner	Dance practice	Dinner	Dinner	
7:00 PM								
7:30 PM	Dinner/TV							
8:00 PM		Dinner						
8:30 PM								
9:00 PM								
9:30 PM	Study	Study	Study	Study	Study			
10:00 PM								
10:30 PM								
11:00 PM								
11:30 PM								
12:00 AM								

Figure 2. Tailored Scheduling⁴

Note that this student’s courses are listed in the schedule, but the rest of their time is left available to be filled independently. This type of schedule serves a student who can take initiative and has a good grasp on their executive functioning.

Fall 2011	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
8:00							
8:30							
9:00			International Business Lecture			Physics 1 Tutorial	
9:30							
10:00							
10:30		Applied Math Lecture	Physics 1 Lecture				
11:00							
11:30				Applied Math Lecture	Physics 1 Lecture		
12:00							
12:30							
1:00			Biotatistics Lecture		Biotatistics Tutorial	Biotatistics Lecture	
1:30							
2:00			Applied Math Lecture	Intro to Physiology Lecture			
2:30							
3:00							
3:30							
4:00							
4:30		Intro to Physiology Lab			Physics 1 Practical		
5:00							
5:30							
6:00							
6:30							

³ Schedule sourced from unigo.com

⁴ Schedule sourced from nationalgriefawarenessday.com

Regardless of what your student needs, scheduling can assure your student manages their executive functions and succeed in and beyond school. Nonetheless, you need to learn about your students. How do they handle time commitments? Can they switch tasks and focus on assignments long enough without a heavy structure to complete them without losing track of time? Or do they *need* that heavy structure to succeed? Or something else? What's their learning style? Are they a visual learner, or something else? And more!⁵

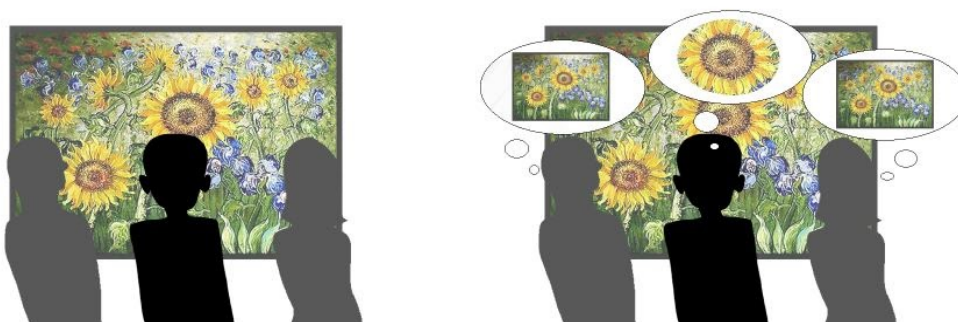
Sometimes, you may need to offer an emergency session. That could look like last minute executive functioning tutoring, such as helping your student finish an essay the night it's due because, for example, their working memory issues led to them forgetting they even *had* a paper. Executive functioning issues may also create a tendency for last-minute assignment completion, by the way, which may be a barrier at times. However, while I encourage you to offer these sessions in the beginning, please note that eventually, when the student starts to show more signs of academic self-reliance and success, you'll have to pull this and other supports away and let them manage on their own while checking in with them and your supervisor on their academic progress. This way, they learn to be more self-sufficient and you can provide that support to another student who may need it.

Scheduling could involve helping them: set alarms to wake up/start getting ready for bed so they're ready for the day to come; prepare a daily readiness to-do list/flow chart (example from Zoe Gross on page 56 of the Navigating College handbook) (ASAN, 2014) so they know what they may need before, during, and after they leave for the day as tailored to *their* needs; download the Identifor Companion app at the least for the features with information on dressing for the weather and paying restaurant bills/med management, among other features, if wanted; and pursuing student leadership roles (if wanted by the student) while keeping your supervisor in the loop.

⁵ The iOS app ViziNote could help with an introduction into *visual scheduling* by letting you and your student set reminders for needed tasks with the ability to choose photos from your library for the present task.

SMART Goals

When working with students on executive functioning, the schedule is directly connected to your student's goals. The goals you help your student with should be *SMART Goals*. This stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant/reasonable, and Timely. This ensures that the goals you set with your students are as strategic and achievable as possible. Overall, they can be used to make sure the goal-setting process is efficient and detailed enough that your student doesn't miss the big picture. Take the below image for example:



The autistic person in this photo is a little like me, as it turns out. They notice tiny details at times and focus in on them. Sometimes, for me, this has meant I lost track of the *goal* of the work I'm doing, in or out of school, and get lost in tiny details that weren't as important. I later realized I wasn't setting SMART Goals to do my work, and, instead, was more or less *winging it*. While this can work for some, I risked not completing my work efficiently and with the *right* attention to detail.

However, sometimes we need a heavy attention to detail to get our work done—and planning to alter that with SMART Goals could, for some, actually disrupt the student's success though we'd want to help. Remember, always plan the support you provide by situation. Even the same student won't need the same support for the same *type* of situation. That said, helping your students make SMART Goals may sound challenging, but with the sample worksheet you have a great template to get started either individually or in groups. The blank worksheet is available to download as a pdf from the Manual Worksheets document. Then, review the appendix on the page following it for what the process of filling it out could look like for you and your student.

SMART Goals Planning Worksheet

You may need help planning SMART Goals to keep your student organized as well as you yourself. These goals and this worksheet can make sure the goal is as specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely as possible for the best outcome for your student.

Starting Goal

Write the initial goal your student has in the space below.

I want to get into a coding class.

Next, with your student, write in how you both will collaborate to make sure the goal fits our approach to SMART Goals at Project REACH.

Specific	I want to get into a coding class at general assembly.
Measurable	I would like to complete my four main prerequisites so that I get the interview for the class.
Achievable	I have a coding background, and am doing well at knowing what I have to know to complete the prerequisites.
Relevant	I want a job in the IT field, and this could give me the skills I need to get a better job.
Timely	I will finish part two on Monday by 9pm. I will finish parts three and four by Wednesday at 9pm.

Appendix A: Sample Executive Functioning Mentor Meeting

You're in a video chat with your student, J., over Zoom or Google Meet. After checking in with them briefly, they tell you they've got two weeks to do their first assignment and stay on top of their assignments, **and they've said** they want your help. What do you do?

If you haven't already, you should ask what doing assignments generally has been like for them. What works? What doesn't? What serves as a barrier to them? Next, I would ask how long they often need to *complete* the assignment in question. An hour? Two hours? More? Afterwards, make sure they've submitted all their syllabi to you if not by that meeting, then the one after it, and then email their class times to your supervisor so they know when your student is available if they don't already. For the record, this would be ideally done after your very first meeting with your student, or by the second in some cases, because without this you won't know what baseline you're operating from and some meetings with your student may run unfortunately short without the right structure. After you have the information you need to get started, introduce the idea of the above sheet to your student and ask what they feel about filling it out. If they say yes, then you can get started. Otherwise, remember to organize your student using other scheduling methods.

Moving on, you'd start by drafting a goal: I want to complete this assignment. It's important that the goal be considered a SMART Goal as described above. Is the sample goal SMART? Yes! It is, it's a specific goal, that can be measured (when it's completed), it's definitely possible, relevant to the student's education and may seem reasonable to complete (but does it *feel* reasonable?). Also, it would need to have a due date (which this one does). Then you plan.

J. later tells you they did the assignment. You congratulate them on their hard work and tell them you look forward to hearing about the grade, thinking everything's fine. However, what if J. hadn't done the assignment and, instead, maybe spent that night in a discord streaming marathon with their friends? Well, J. made a decision and, right or wrong, they have to make up for it. Please, more than anything else, ask your students how they're going to effectively maintain the SMART Goal completion process and then complete it as well as what you can do to help. That said, please refer to the GROW model on as described on page 24. Afterwards, listen to your student and take the situation as it comes. Through a process like this, you could help guarantee that your student has the support they need to set SMART Goals. This could be a great help in collaborating with your student in a partnership to organize the mentor-mentee dynamic and make sure they do well during and after school. Now, before we move on, is there anything I left out? What's missing? What else can affect your student's ability to set SMART goals?

Social Support

Executive functioning may come up in your work as a peer mentor, but there's more to academia than, well, academia. For your example, your student *may* want to make more friends, to have more support and feel less alone. However, not every Autistic person may want that. The first thing you should do, no matter what, is make *sure* your student needs help. Then, before providing it, you should *ask* if they're comfortable working with you on this. Many autistic people I've met or interacted with on and offline are socially isolated and could use (more/a) good friend(s) but not everyone wants one, even though many do. If they say they want your help though, then you can practice conversations (what they *could* say, how they *could* say it but as *suggestions* not *commands*); help them find their interests on- and off- campus; where to meet people; how to tell who is *willing* to be talked to, and more. This is especially the case if you're in a support group setting, as these, among other topic could be very helpful for your students.

Meanwhile, you could also help them find campus/local events to go out to depending on their needs, interests, safety concerns, etc. Otherwise, you could allow your students 20 minutes of venting time, which a former intern at a college in the UK recommended in a manual the National Autistic Society (2011) published. That said, some students may want a response from you as their peer mentor, but some may not, play it by ear! Remember: you can make a difference, but don't overextend yourself.

Disclosure

Disclosure is the act of someone telling someone if you're Autistic, neurodivergent, and/or otherwise disabled. Your students may want your help figuring out whether or not to disclose that they're autistic or otherwise disabled. For some, it could be a matter of pride in their identity or something similar. For others, it could be what makes or breaks a job interview or keeps them safe. In other words, some may want friends or partners, a job, meaningful independence, or interdependence, etc., but the people in their lives may not be too accepting of autistic people. This has been shown to lead to neurotypicals shying away from autistic people (Sasson, Faso, Nugent, Lovell, Kennedy, & Grossman 2017). If you're not sure what to do: Maybe you can start by asking your supervisor if they've shared their feelings about being autistic at this time, or anything else, and go from there while providing your full support.

That said, you *could* start a disclosure discussion within your program if your mentees want that for themselves but whether or not you *do* that depends on your students

especially. Who would be made uncomfortable by the meeting's topic? Who is ready to speak generally, but can't speak in a group setting? How do you include everyone in the group while not forcing participation in ways that make mentees uncomfortable? How do you keep group members engaged while including *everyone*, and *do you include everyone in every activity in the same way*? To the last point, not always! Maybe sometimes you can, but you may have to get creative at times.

One group work professor I had said any member of a group in the room during a meeting, about disclosure or not, *has* to be involved in some way, even in keeping times, but, sometimes, an Autistic group member may just need to relax and do what I call *socializing by proxy*—where watching the people around you socialize ends up being socially fulfilling for at least some of us at Autistic people. It's like being a sponge in a bowl of water, except you're a person *soaking up the vibes* if you will. Anyway, these, and other points, can make or break any group work you might do with this or other programs. Remember: we may be here for your students, but we're here for you too. That said, after all this, you may be wondering: "Ok, but what is autism exactly?"

What is Autism?

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network's (n.d.) autism acceptance month project defines autism as "a natural difference in the human mind where the brain develops and functions unusually, producing unusual ways of thinking and moving, and unusual ways of processing sensory input, language, and other information" (para. 1). All this means is that the way the autistic brain develops, and functions could lead to someone being a little different than you'd expect them to be, or a lot, or something in between/outside that thought process. I've seen autism described as a *neurodevelopmental disability*. This means that Autistic people's brains, and the way we grow up or *develop* over time, are said to be markedly different than that of our peers.

However, a lot of things can affect development. Like what kind of family someone was raised in, if they were brought up with a religious or spiritual practice, and so much more. Plus, a lot of what people *know* about autism is the ways different autistic people experience barriers to socializing as well as in executive functioning maintenance and emotional regulation, among *many* other experiences I'll discuss later. Now, there may be a *lot* of ways to *classify* autism but, in a way, doing so is tricky because it assumes that there isn't a better way to describe autism that we already have. You can say autism is a *neurocognitive disability*, similarly to the SSA (n.d.), for example, but should you? Better

yet: Could you just say neurodivergent/neurodivergence instead? Why/why not?

On that note, many people, regardless of if they're autistic, otherwise neurodivergent, or neurotypical, are still learning what autism, what being autistic, *really is*. I wanted to provide simplified examples, but still give some needed detail to the complex nature of autistic traits, so please find my lists of these traits split into two parts.

First, I list traits that are more commonly recognized in autistic people. Then, I list examples of more recently/rarely recognized traits. For the record, this doesn't mean that as autistic people, *we* aren't talking about these traits with each other, through various means, more so than others do. Or that the people who *recognize* these traits often do so in a way that is always helpful to autistic people—or that as many people as is necessary *deeply* understand how we may be affected by these traits. It just refers to how often they are discussed, in whatever way they may be discussed, by a larger amount of people, while accounting for my own observations of these discussions as an Autistic social worker.

Some of the traits on the first list weren't just adapted and reworded from the APA's (2013) DSM-5. Instead, as a CUNY professional serving Autistic students, as an Autistic adult, I wanted to center some of the narratives, the stories, I've heard or seen with help from academia. Therefore, some of the traits may be *familiar* to you, and some may not. Some of the ones you may or may not *recognize* as Autistic traits, for the record, include: infodumping (Abramowski, 2018); pain sensitivities (Gu et al., 2018; Failla, Moana-Filho, Essick, Baranek; Rogers, & Cascio, 2017); empathy (Brewer & Murphy 2016) as well as scripting (Schaber, 2014) and sensory gating (Lagasse, Manning, Crasta & Gavin, 2019) among others. Some common co-occurrences Autistic people may have, but not all, will be listed. After that, I'll share some reflections about the traits, and how culture, race, and more play a part.

Please note that not every autistic person has every trait, and some of us have described completely unlisted traits. And again, the co-occurrences list is *not*, in *any* way, exhaustive/complete. One example of a trait I heard described more recently will be included at the end of the second list, while I propose another myself, and sources for each co-occurrence (Croen et al. 2015; Glidden, Bouman, Jones, & Arcelus, 2016; Ronald, 2016; Chen et al., 2016; National Down Syndrome Society, 2017; Haruvi-Lamdan, Horesh, & Golan, 2018; Lai et al., 2019; & CDC, 2020) will be in the references list. That said, please find the first set of traits in the infographic below, with special thanks to Amethyst Schaber for letting us use an original image for this manual.

COMMONLY RECOGNIZED AUTISTIC TRAITS

A Project REACH Infographic

1 SOCIAL DIFFERENCES



A common need for direct and straightforward communication over metaphors, sarcasm, body language, etc. Speaking too loudly/quietly (with exceptions), being distressed/hurt by eye contact, and needing routines, etc.

2 SENSORY SENSITIVITIES



Sensitivities (over/under) to any possible senses. Often comes with difficulty filtering out background noise, lights, etc., in any given environment, which is called *sensory gating*. Stimming is common.

3 COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES



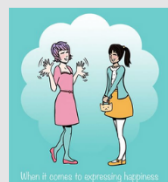
Being nonspeaking, speaking with their mouths, or communicating in a different way with or without (much) fluctuation. Some *script* to save energy and communicate effectively.

4 DIFFICULTY WITH TRANSITIONS



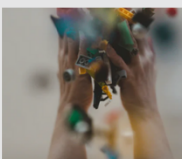
Difficulty moving between rooms and situations which involve a transition. An autistic person who struggles with transition might refuse to leave a room/situation or struggle to do so.

5 INTENSE INTERESTS



Often called *special* interests, these are one or more *intense* interests in a variety of subjects (whether or not they're science/math related). They often involve *infodumping*, or sharing large amounts of information at once.

6 CO-OCCURENCES



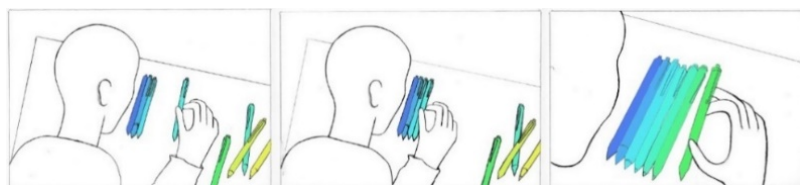
Autistic people are more likely to have: IDs; Down syndrome; ADD/ADHD; dyspraxia; sleep disorders; epilepsy; GI issues; anxiety; OCD; bipolar depression; PTSD; an ehlers danlos syndrome (EDS); diabetes; and others.

Reflections

You may read over the list and think “wait, so there are *other* traits?! How many co-occurrences *are* there?! And what do the ones I *just read* mean for *me* as a peer mentor?” To answer your questions, yes, there are more (traits and co- occurrences), and all I’m asking is that you be aware of what your students *might* experience so you can look out for it. How they show up for your students can vary even by the day or situation.

That said, some of your students may need direct, clear, and plain (non-academic) language, and some may not. Some may need accommodations when arranging meetings because of sensory sensitivities, etc., and some may not. Some *may not* respond very well to rapid pace schedules and transitions, as well as the broken routines; that come with or in addition to the college experience, but some of your students might be able to adjust—or even like the structure college gives them, speaking from personal experience. It’s important to be mindful of what *could* happen so that when you begin your work as a peer mentor you’re ready for what *does* happen.

The image below represents *stimming*:



Now, this isn’t the only way your student may stim. *Lining up objects* is just one of *many* examples. From the subtle leg shake a lot of us do, autistic or not, to something like rocking, twirling, and a lot more, stimming can be, well, just about anything as long as it blocks out the things or *input* the person is *sensing* in their daily environment. Even gaming, being on your phone, etc. can be a stim, it depends on what your student is doing to replace that input. Plus, there are *more traits* than are listed here.

Approaching your student with a judgement free mindset full of autism acceptance is undeniably helpful as they navigate college. Autistic people are at risk of not just ableism, the system of oppression that targets disabled people, but any system of oppression depending on their other identities. With discrimination being increasingly noticed in the United States, your acceptance and person-centered support could be life-changing for a student struggling to accept being autistic, especially at the intersections of other systems of oppression. That said, please find the second image on Autistic traits below:

Recently/Rarely Recognized Autistic Traits

A Project BEACH Infographic by Sylvia Cusack Johnson

Fun Fact!

There are observed and reported autistic traits that aren't recognized in the DSM-5.

Empathy



Autistic people feel empathy.



Autistic people often report *hyperempathy*, or intense, *affective* empathy with (physical) pain that comes with feeling others' emotions when they're hurting.



One study found Autistic people only have less empathy if they had *alexithymia*, a condition causing difficulty processing, identifying, and expressing emotions.

Interoception

Autistic people often feel our bodies' signals differently than others.



Interoception includes hunger; thirst; all physical/sexual feelings (including pain and all touch, [tickling]); feeling your own heartbeat and pulse (in my experience); if you're blushing; and if you're aware you're hot/cold; nauseous; tired; sick; and/or on your period.



74% of reported autistic adults struggle with interoception, so the numbers could be higher.



Pain Sensitivities

Autistic people feel pain differently.



Some are *more* sensitive to it, *especially* kids, but more research is needed.



Some recover from pain *faster*, but findings are preliminary with small samples.



Some are *more* sensitive to the pain they *anticipate* feeling, whether or not they end up feeling it.

Conclusion

There's more to being autistic than meets the eye, I'm still learning about it myself!

Autistic people feel empathy, our bodies, and pain in ways that might be unexpected, but that doesn't make them less real or valid.



Reflections Revisited

Returning to an earlier point, autistic communities don't just all look one way and live similar lives. There are Autistic people of color just as there are Autistic trans people and those in every community. Take me for example. I'm Autistic, a white Jewish person, and a transgender and non-binary adult. My perspective as a white person is one of privilege, even if and when my experience as an Autistic Jewish transfeminine non-binary person isn't. That said, not everyone is like me. Your autistic students of color, for example, may have cultures, families, communities, and experiences that may change their relationships to themselves as autistic people *in addition* to their other identities. This includes the fact that ongoing histories of racism and white supremacy as well as colonialism and imperialism, could be, and often are very, in any combination of ways, *painful* and, among *many* other potentially *traumatic* impacts, emotionally overwhelming/toxic for your mentees of color.

Plus, any present cultural differences could change their relationship to their autisms, and vice versa. Akechi et al. (2013), for example, asked East Asians and westerners to make eye contact with someone and recorded their interpretations. The East Asian folks they studied were found to be more likely to perceive someone's face as *angrier* if they made eye contact with them (Akechi et al., 2013). All this means is that asking an autistic person, who may already be overwhelmed or *in pain* making eye contact, may also have cultural reasons for not wanting eye contact. That said, friends of mine who are Latinx have said similar things about their cultures.

They've told me that in their cultures eye contact with an authority figure, especially one who is yelling at/lecturing you, is *incredibly* disrespectful because, in that moment, you would be *defying their authority* when you should be *ashamed* for having disrespected them. That said, sometimes eye contact is just weird. It doesn't always have to be about culture, and there's more to consider here and otherwise, but sometimes it can be about culture/race, and all I ask is that you be mindful of your mentees' identities and cultures. Case and point: Your work *must* be mindful of how culture(s), history/ies, politics, and the race(s) as well as any and all other identities/experiences of your mentees as well as any systems of oppression they may face, *intersect* with their autistic identity in order to be effective. Otherwise, you don't have the full picture.

Remember that Autistic people can be of any other identity and could have gone through *anything* before you met them. Christian (2017) for example, published her account in an anthology edited by Brown, Ashkenazy, & Giwa Onaiwu entitled "*All the*

Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism.” Christian describes growing up in the 70s while being bullied by white *and* Black students for being *weird* in ways that, to them, seemed *contradictory* to her identity as a Black girl. It wasn’t until *after* college, where this bullying persisted, where she found out she was Autistic with non-verbal learning disability (NVLD) the whole time. Your mentees may feel a struggle between their identities, especially when they’re *multiply-marginalized* like Christian was, and is, so again I ask you to be mindful and support your mentees in their journeys.

Meanwhile, De Vries et al., as cited by the Glidden, Bouman, Jones, and Arcelus (2016), found a 7.8 percent correlation between being autistic and being transgender as a child or adolescent. Meanwhile, the Williams Institute (2017) found a correlation rate of only .5 percent for adolescents aged 13-17 generally. Even with larger sample sizes and, potentially, different methods, there’s still a *strong* correlation there. Again, all that means is to consider that *anyone* can be your student—whether or not their identities are written here. Ideally, we want to make sure this manual helps you consider ways you can be more inclusive of your mentees in ways that incorporate autism acceptance, a neurodiversity rights approach, and an intersectional one. How can you best, as a peer mentor, *show up* for all your mentees? Again, the first thing you can do is finish the manual, and, next, do what you can to educate yourself in and out of class. Otherwise, keep reading for more information.

Newly Reported Autistic Traits

Understanding how autism can show up in different mentees in different ways could be a great way to help as a peer mentor, especially concerning autistic empathy. Autistic people may get autistic shutdown in a way that’s a little different—that includes us trying to *show* empathy. For example, in these situations, we may freeze and go nonverbal⁶ and start asking ourselves something like “What is the socially correct response to this situation?” For the record, this could mean we’re struggling with social cues more than usual, when in other situations we may have been perfectly able to respond to that exact scenario, or something like it. Additionally, what if we feel an urge to leave the space regardless of our relationship to it or the people in it? Then, we might also start showing signs of any overwhelming emotions, which vary in intensity and by situation even if they’re not visible,

⁶ When, especially an Autistic person, loses the ability to speak with an audible voice.

while also dissociating.⁷ Plus, the stress of all this could lead to an inability to communicate for longer than may be expected of us (especially when we often don't want this for ourselves). Lastly, what if we need to *stim* more than we otherwise would have had to? Would this be called an *autistic empathetic shutdown* (an *aim* pronounced "aim) or something else? If anger; irritation; etc., are involved, would this be an *autistic meltdown with emotional overload*? Or just *emotional overload* on its own? Would this be any different than a psychiatric diagnosis, or other terms used to describe sensory overload/emotional overwhelm? How, if at all?

Otherwise, there are traits that didn't make it to this list. This includes a trait my friend Irian in the UK experiences. When asking them about it, they said "A lot of autistic people are *literal* and take the face-value definition of something said to them. I'm *lateral*, so I get *every possible meaning* at once and may need more time to figure out what you said." On that note, I ask you think critically and learn about what your mentees' autistic traits; needs; abilities; and obstacles are in relation to their other identities/cultures/etc. and do your best to support them. Also, I strongly encourage you to watch some of these short videos from the [Autism Academy](#)⁸, among others, and some of these videos from the [Disability Intersectionality Summit](#)⁹ to learn more.

Project REACH and other CUNY Disability Programs

Project REACH, or Resources and Education on Autism as CUNY's Hallmark, is CUNY's growing initiative, and a wing of CUNY's Disability Programs, to enhance the university's capacity to support its growing population of Autistic college students in order to facilitate an inclusive and accessible college experience. Affiliated programs my colleagues and I work in and/or collaborate with include CUNY Unlimited, CUNY LEADS, and our Campus Disability Services Centers. Among other motivations, my colleagues and I are noticing that more and more Autistic people are starting to be *diagnosed* as Autistic. As Autistic communities have been saying all along, there are therefore more Autistic people out there than are currently recognized on lines of multiple marginalization (autistic people of color, autistic women and

⁷ The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (2020) defines this experience as disconnection between the person and, say, a memory; feeling; or experience that does not become incorporated into the person's life—among other things. Therefore, someone who dissociates have a more distant connection to reality and their memories; feelings; and experiences.

⁸ This is the YouTube channel for a short vide making organization educating the public about aspects of autistic traits people may not know as much about.

⁹ This is the YouTube channel for the Disability Intersectionality Summit, an annual conference centering disabled people who are also people of color, LGBTQ+, and otherwise marginalized

girls, autistic trans people, etc.). That said, lot goes into our work.

First, there's the trainings we conduct or reports/etc. we write, such as this manual, to better support the success of Autistic or otherwise neurodivergent college students by giving necessary knowledge and perspective to not only our students themselves but also the faculty that teach them, among others. Then, there's our annual Neurodiversity Conference¹⁰, which seeks to promote neurodiversity not just as a fact, and as a movement, but also as a *paradigm*, or way of thinking, and we provide mentoring programs on campuses like yours. We serve the entire university with pilot programs active on CUNY campuses for Autistic college students who may participate in the programs. As an example, I'll tell you more about the work that CSI's *Building Bridges Initiative* is doing for our students.

The Building Bridges Initiative is a neurodivergence-affirming college support program providing “academic, professional, social skills and self-advocacy training” to autistic college students at the College of Staten Island (Gillespie-Lynch, n.d., p. 4) through “carefully assessed” peer mentorship (Gillespie-Lynch, n.d., p. 4). This can happen 1:1 (1 to 1), or in groups. 1:1 meetings could look like a mentor, who can be Autistic, allistic (see page 45) but still neurodivergent, or neurotypical, meeting a student at an appropriate, pre-determined location to provide a variety of supports as mentioned on page five. Group mentoring, however, can involve anything from participating in a support group meeting your program holds to helping organize or even, with oversight from your supervisor, co-facilitating that support group.

At Project REACH we work to center Autistic narratives and perspectives while remembering that mentors can be Autistic and/or otherwise neurodivergent. That's why Autistic students' feedback is crucial to the existence of this program, and all our programs, so at Project REACH we do our best to collect feedback from our Autistic students about how our groups are and *should* be ran, and act accordingly. This includes asking our students why they got involved with us, and why they chose to stay. Check out what two of our students had to say:

“I wanted to understand more about my autism, to learn how other people coped with it, and to learn about the resources and methods that would personally work for me.”

“I choose to participate in project REACH because REACH's purpose is self-advocacy and i want to improve on self-advocacy by going to special events to construct my leadership and step out of my comfort zone.”

¹⁰ For the record, we unfortunately had to cancel this year given the risk the COVID-19 pandemic had on our communities—but we hope to return in 2021.

The process of *centering* our Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students, or ensuring we prioritize *their* knowledge about their autistic experiences and themselves, motivated us to empower our students to frequently serve as guest speakers and co-presenters at key events for our program. This includes our annual Neurodiversity Conference to help integrate aspects of the neurodiversity movement, such as autism acceptance and a promotion of inclusion and empowerment of neurodivergent students at CUNY, as well as other events. However, CSI's program is not the only program we have worth mentioning. Check out our website for more information on our campus programs at [Project REACH](#)¹¹.

As the scope of neurodivergence in higher education expands, we developed CUNY Unlimited, our inclusive higher education program for college students with intellectual disabilities (IDs). Accepted students can earn a credential outside of the traditional academic system that provides an inclusive, accessible education to students with IDs. For more information on [CUNY Unlimited](#)¹², check out the website using the hyperlink or in the hyperlinks handout.

CUNY LEADS is an academic success and work readiness program for CUNY students with disabilities to prepare them for success during and after college. 1:1 services as well as workshops are provided or held for our students on all CUNY's campuses. If your students need help with anything from disability inclusive and accessible academic advisement, resume support, job seeking/placement assistance, and, among other areas, getting support from ACCES-VR—which provides financial aid and career supports to college students with disabilities in the state of New York, then keep CUNY LEADS in mind. For more information about [CUNY LEADS](#)¹³ and [ACCES-VR's services](#)¹⁴ use the hyperlink or the hyperlinks handout.

Our Campus Disability Services Centers goal is to ensure all disabled students on CUNY campuses have access to the fullest accessibility they need to succeed during and after college. With an office serving every campus, our services centers work to ensure every student with a disability has an accessible experience with us at CUNY. From the community colleges, to the senior and graduate/honors colleges, every student has a venue for accommodations. If your student is looking for accommodations, from notetakers to accessible technology/software and much more. For more information on [CUNY Disability Services Centers](#)¹⁵, use the hyperlink or the handout at the end.

¹¹ This is the website for Project REACH's campus programs.

¹² This is the link to the CUNY Unlimited website.

¹³ This is the link to the CUNY LEADS website

¹⁴ This is the link to a description of ACCES-VR's services

¹⁵ This is the link to the CUNY Disability Services Centers list, with a phone number available for each office.

Value of the Strengths-Based Perspective

Dr. Kristen Gillespie-Lynch, who coordinates the Building Bridges Initiative at CSI, expressed what she's learned from the data and in her career on how much more valuable a strengths-based perspective often is for Autistic students. Basically, seeing the *good* things or *strengths* in your mentees, as one might expect, ends up working a lot better than, well, dismissing those strengths, or worse. A recent paper Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) wrote came out with six relevant recommendations for peer mentors of Autistic college students. Those are: 1) recognizing that each student is unique, 2) engaging students in dialogue to adapt instruction to student needs, 3) demonstrating that diversity is respected, 4) helping students plan ahead, 5) providing multiple ways to engage with course materials, and 6) encouraging students to actively co-construct their learning experiences" (p. 2). All this means is that you should always strive to respect and appreciate your mentees for their differences while helping them look toward the future; learn differently in ways that are accessible for them; and collaborate with your mentees as active learning partners. However, this doesn't mean that you can't acknowledge barriers to your students' success as well as any challenges in their life. It just means you should do it mindfully.

Dwyer (2018a) says that the risk here is *pathologizing* your students. This refers to someone, even accidentally, showing bias, discrimination, or worse, to your mentees on the basis of your/their autism or other neurodivergences/disabilities. This includes thinking autistic people need to be *fixed*, that there's a secret, *special* person behind the autistic person, or even the use of the words *deficit* and *disorder* to describe autism instead of the word *disability*, for example. In a follow-up piece (Dwyer 2018b) says *embracing neurodiversity* would be the best way to replace what's called the *pathology paradigm*, or the way of thinking that supports pathologizing people.

That said, this doesn't mean that neurodiversity would accept people so much that we wouldn't want them to get better if they're hurting and want help/are ready for help/can access help. It may sound weird to some, or unnecessary, but Dwyer (2018b) said that the neurodiversity paradigm shouldn't be used to stop people who *want* help and *need* it to stop hurting from getting it. Again, assuming that *help* is *consensual*. Instead, the *neurodiversity paradigm*, however, or the way of thinking that embraces neurodiversity, can be used to consider Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people in context. What's going on around us? Why could we be feeling the way we're feeling? And, among other things that *behavior is communication* and is to be thought of that way. After all, when

you're angry at someone—and you start talking or *behaving* in a different way, for example, aren't you trying to tell them something? The same goes for Autistic people! Just because it looks different when we do it doesn't mean we aren't talking too.

But, you might be wondering, how is that related to my role as a peer mentor?

Well, Alexander, Fine, and Whitmore, as cited by Mindtools (n.d.) made the [GROW Model](#)¹⁶ for this exact situation. It stands for: “**G**oal, current **R**eality, **O**ptions (or **O**bstacles), and **W** (or **W**ay Forward) and can be used to better guide your mentee through their situation. Let's say your mentee wants your help with a problem. Under the GROW Model, you'd first set a goal, particularly a SMART goal. SMART Goals are structured ways to organize one's goals, and, as an acronym, what it stands for slightly changes depending on who you're talking to, but, for our purposes, they can be understood as **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**chievable, **r**easonable/relevant, and **t**imely goals.

Moving on: You could, for example, set a skill to work on (i.e. studying for an exam). You can agree on a GROW Model/SMART Goals plan and, afterwards, tell your student you'll check in with them in, say, two to four weeks. After that, find time to ask how they've been doing on the agreed upon skill. Has there been success? Obstacles? What can you do to help? Of course, assuming they need it. This way, with this consideration, you're both accountable to the process. Now, after and while this is said and done, and being done, each meeting you hold with a student should contain some notes and reflections using the templates toward the end of the manual. Lastly, remember that being a peer mentor can be stressful, so you're entitled to support if you need it, just as your students are, so please feel free to reach out whenever you need to. You don't have to go it alone.

[Need for Autistic Spaces/Leadership](#)

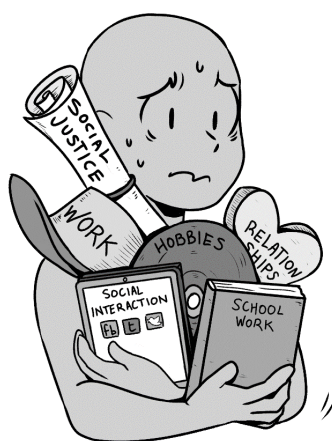
When I attended the Autism Campus Inclusion (ACI) Summer Leadership Academy, I wasn't sure what to expect outside of, well, the resources I would need to change the ways my undergraduate campus accommodated its students for the better. What I didn't expect was how much more at peace I felt with myself as an Autistic person surrounded entirely by other Autistic people for just a week. Our socializing was Autistic. Our learning was Autistic. Our *community* was Autistic. We got to *be* Autistic, and it was communicated

¹⁶ This resource explains the GROW Model to coaching and mentoring through an article and a close captioned video.

as a positive thing—not a shameful thing. We could stim if we wanted to, we could leave the room if we were stressed, we could not understand something and ask for clarification as many times as we needed, and, well, you get the idea. I can't speak for everyone, but, for me, that's when I learned how important Autistic spaces are. My relationship with myself changed forever in a significant way, and for the better. Therapy may be helpful for Autistic people, but sometimes we just need a community space to be ourselves. Creating these spaces for your mentees could improve their self-esteem and self-confidence, and, overall, change their lives for the better so, that way, life after college doesn't seem so scary.

Information about Additional Stress

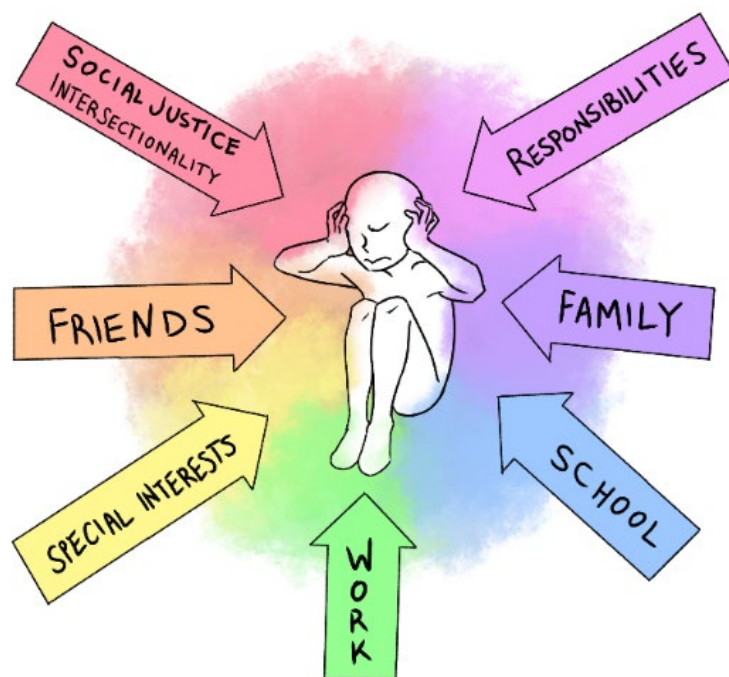
You may not always be working with students who are under great stress, but your mentees *may* be dealing with a lot—or at least more than usual. Take this graphic for example:



As shown in the graphic, everything from socializing, work and school to relationships and the fight for complete, intersectional social justice, as well as social *injustice/oppression*, among other things, could be huge stressors on your students. Otherwise, they could be at risk for overstimulation; sensory overload; autistic meltdown, shutdown, and/or burnout (which, yes, are different things, as defined in the glossary); self-injurious stims (skin-picking, hitting oneself, among others); and more.

This includes a higher risk of surviving bullying, abuse, and violence (Weiss & Fardella 2018; Baladerian, Coleman, & Stream 2012); and, therefore higher rates of PTSD (Haruvi-Lamdan, Horesh, & Golan 2018) along with *many possible* co-occurrences as mentioned earlier. Plus, given that Autistic people can be of any race, gender, sexuality, class, size, etc., they can be at risk of any possible amount and type of discrimination, or worse, whether or not its ableism, racism, etc. However, this doesn't mean each of your mentees will be in crisis or experience all these things all the time. Often, many of your mentees will be doing just fine, though it depends on the person. I encourage you to get to know your mentees, and what they need your, or other, support for/with.

However, that stress, even what would be minor for most people, can be particularly stressful for us as Autistic people because some of us have 20% fewer neurons in the amygdala in adulthood compared to NTs (Halladay, Avino, & Schumann 2018). This means that we're often less able to regulate our anxiety, and may feel it more severely than others do (Halladay, Avino, & Schumann 2018), whether or not it's about the pandemic we're facing at this time, which may lead to worse breakdowns and anxiety attacks in some autistic people. Plus, the more that we're dealing deal with, *on top* of the neurological aspect, the harder it can be to cope with all that stress—especially if we have less access to resources that can help. We may even start to look something like this:



You might be wondering “shouldn’t that have said social *injustice*?” Well, yes and no. Intersectionality covers that aspect, as it represents the different potential combinations of systems of oppression that someone, especially Black women, can be forced to endure (Crenshaw, 2016; 1989). The use of *social justice* in this graphic refers to how often social justice movements aren’t accessible to autistic, and otherwise neurodivergent/disabled people while the fight for that justice itself can be very draining for us. Please know that while you are encouraged to provide emotional support where you can, you can reach out to your supervisor if you need help with anything. They’re here to help.

You’ll find quotes from Autistic alumni/students on the next two pages, as well as some from people who have been or are peer mentors whether or not they’re Autistic, about what they want you to know about being a peer mentor—with hyperlinked resources (Kim, 2014a, b; Autism Academy, 2018) also listed in the references and in the Hyperlinks handout for those with printed copies of this manual. Enjoy! However, please find bullet points summarizing the quotes’ takeaways on page 30.

Peer Mentoring Quotes

If I had any advice for peer mentors of autistic college students, I'd tell them:

General Mentoring Advice

“You should lead by example first and foremost. You also don’t have to be autistic yourself but should understand effective communication and problem solving for autistic people. Also, I’d say you should be supportive and honest without being condescending, curt, or anything similar/worse. A lot of us think in different ways, so you should be open to that to help us get done what we need to get done in the way that works best for us given our way of thinking.”

-David (Purchase College)

“Peer mentors should be encouraging and kind, helpful, and a friend to us. All we need sometimes is someone we can talk to.”

-Simi (Sandwell College)

“If you notice someone who doesn't look comfortable, don't alienate them in front of others. Try to talk to them on your own time and introduce them to some people as well as keeping them involved. This will make them more comfortable with their surroundings, especially in a new environment. Another thing you should know is that you should treat the potential lack of eye contact is a normal thing. Think about it this way, many autistic folks understand things differently and function differently, just because they aren't looking at you doesn't mean they aren't listening. Try to be understanding of that.”

-Autistic Student at Baruch College

“It's vital to get to know your Autistic student as an individual. It will help build trust, this way they don't get caught up in feeling that they have to [mask](#)¹⁷ around you. It's important to have an individual approach because no two people with Autism are alike. You need to be able to develop your mentoring approach according to what works for them.”

-Shalese (Arcadia University)

“I always respected the peer mentors who went out of their way to help me, be it by checking something out at a bookstore or going to a new building with me, without feeling like I was burdening them. The whole thing about peer mentorship is that you and the people you're mentoring benefit from it, so that it's not one-sided, draining, etc., for either party. I especially appreciated the peer mentors who treated me less like a client and more like another friend. The best ones, however, were giving me genuinely helpful advice and *never* talked down to me as an autistic person. When I eventually *became* a peer mentor, I tried to instill the same confidence in my students, never making it seem like helping people was 'on the clock' for me, and just treating them like a lot of my past peer mentors would treat me. I look at peer mentorship as a kind of this invisible force field of sorts, that is strong when it needs to be strong, and protects an autistic person when they are in need, but overall acts invisibly in the form of a normal friendship between a mentor and a mentee.”

-Autistic Alumni/Former Peer Mentor (Purchase College)

“[As a mentor] I believe that being positive, approachable, and organized are important traits that a mentor should have. I hope to help the individual I work with be successful academically and socially. There are many opportunities to take advantage of at Brooklyn College and I aim to help my mentee get involved in areas that are of interest to [them]. I also understand that

¹⁷ This video describes *masking* and how it relates to Autistic people.

being organized and effective time management skills are a big part of academic success for students. I hope that by providing extra assistance in these areas, my mentee will find their college experience to be enjoyable and manageable.

- Graduate Student Mentor (Brooklyn College)

Social/Political Context Advice

“Try to find sources written by autistic adults so that if you’re one of the few peers an autistic student has to be open with about related issues, you’ll be better equipped to understand and support them. Also, remember that you may be an autistic student’s best resource to talk over more nuanced social rules on campus, since faculty are more removed from college life and give advice from a more theoretical place sometimes.”

-Michelle (Purchase College)

“I did not receive peer mentoring in college, nor was it offered, but I think that it may be beneficial for some autistic people. While there are many wonderful allistic/neurotypical allies, as a social work student I think there are also those who approach this opportunity with good intentions but assume they know what their student needs better than they themselves do. I also think that peer mentors should be careful to not accidentally discriminate, etc., against the autistic student. As trained interns, it would be helpful that you make sure you’re working to be as supportive of your students as you can while sharing your unique strengths and strategies (i.e. [executive functioning](#)¹⁸, [sensory regulation](#)¹⁹) which could serve as a great benefit to autistic students.”

-Caroline (UNC- Chapel Hill)

“My advice would be for them to understand the experiences and traumas of your students on the lines of intersectionality (race, gender, class, other disabilities, etc.). As a queer, autistic person of color who became working class during the Great Recession of 2008, has been dealing with chronic illness for the last few years, and was diagnosed as

¹⁸ This in-depth presentation provides a comprehensive overview of executive functioning and how it relates to Autistic people. Executive Functioning is the collection of tasks like attention and short-term memory among many others.

¹⁹ This video offers sensory regulation strategies some Autistic people may appreciate.

autistic after childhood: I definitely wish that I received a peer mentor during early adulthood, especially in transitioning through the highs and lows of the experience. I can understand that your students' experiences in college may be daunting, just like mine was, but a good peer mentor could've been a great support when I really needed it.

-Chris (University of Houston)

Quote Takeaways

- Lead by example
- Always be supportive; honest; positive; organized; approachable; understanding; and open minded without being condescending, curt, or anything similar/worse
- Be encouraging and kind, helpful, and a friend to your mentees
- Autistic people understand things differently and function differently
- Not making eye contact isn't the same as not listening
- Get to know your mentees individually to help build trust, so they don't get caught up in feeling that they have to mask around you or hide their true selves.
- Find a healthy balance between going out of your way to help a student and not overcommitting to a job you cannot complete.
- Peer mentoring benefits you and your students, and isn't draining if done correctly and with the right resources.
- Try to treat your mentees less like clients and more like friends, while maintaining professional boundaries of course.
- Instill confidence; strength; and protection in your students, and make them feel appreciated for who they are as opposed to a step to graduation.
- Also, treat your mentees the way *they* want to be treated as regulated by your program.
- Seek the work and writing of Autistic adults, and read what you can, because, as a *peer* mentor, you may be the best resource that student has on college life.
- Be careful not to discriminate against your students, among other things.
- Understanding intersectional oppression and how it can affect your students is crucial to better connecting and empathizing with your students, and can give you a fuller picture to operate from.

II. The Breakdown

What is Digital Peer Mentoring?



Digital Peer Mentoring involves all I've said you *could* do above as a peer mentor but over text, messaging apps/social media, and video chats. Communities around the world are devastated and struggling, to say the least, because, again at the time this was written, of the COVID-19 pandemic and, well, a *lot* more. I included this section because many of your mentees may be going through that much more stress, again, not just because of the above but also, among other things, because of the shifts in their routines. Maybe they don't have access to the routine foods that calm their anxiety or sensory overload, etc., or: *same foods*. Maybe they have places they once found very safe and calming that they now can't go to anymore and may feel more socially isolated as a result. And, among other things, now every student is in online school—and that doesn't work for all Autistic people, again, on top of all the outside and internal stress they could be facing. Moving on, some of us might thrive with technology, but some of us may need a little more support.

However, Dr. Lauren Greiner, a clinical psychologist for Autistic adults who started me on this journey in 2015 as a Peer Mentor, explained to me that many Autistic people she's worked with *prefer* technology to keeping paper documents. We agreed that, based in my own experiences as an Autistic adult and how they paired with her clients' experiences, it could be because of executive functioning struggles that may hinder our ability to track the order and maintenance of these documents. Plus, Dr. Kristen Gillespie-Lynch from CSI's program explained to me that many of her students happened to transition well to the online platform. However, this section aims to educate mentors who may serve those

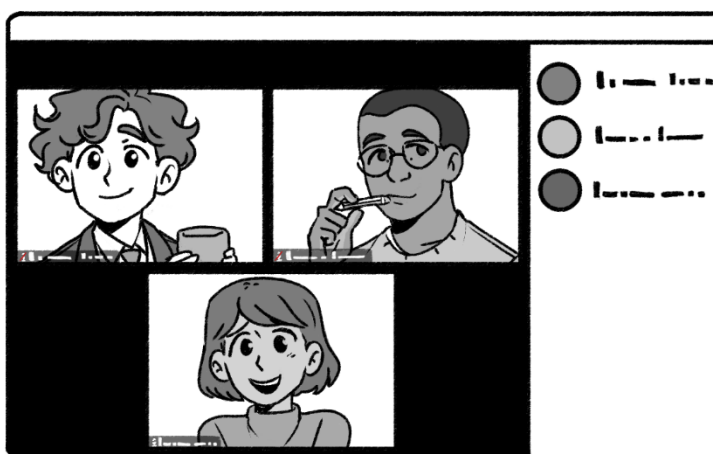
who, as I said earlier, may struggle to maintain an online education in the face of lost structures, physical routines, and more.

Five Ways to Support Mentees Online

1. Make sure your student remains structured and supported, whether or not that involves a schedule/scheduling process.

Using one of the scheduling options described above could really help your mentees stay focused on their studies during this pandemic. However, always think of what would work best for your student as needs may vary. Otherwise, please consider the additional stress your mentee may be experiencing, discussed in this manual or not, and be flexible if you can't meet by video every week. Your mentee may want someone to check-in with and talk to sometimes, but, especially to those of you reading this when it was originally written, there's that much more stress your mentees may be facing. That said, with no physical place to check-in to, some Autistic people, now moving entirely online, risk becoming more overwhelmed, confused, behind in their studies, and, again more isolated than usual—but your help could go a long way. After setting that meeting time, whatever it may be, be sure you remember to meet consistently when possible, to have your student's best interests at heart, and learn how they need you to support them during this stressful time, and act accordingly.

2. Start a group for socially isolated students over Zoom/Google Hangouts.



One of my good friends from social work school, Vikki, started a Zoom group for their friends to ensure people struggling with social isolation knew they weren't alone and had a sense of community in a time where we could really use one. This group has done *wonders* for Vikki and those who joined the group, and the same could be true for your mentees. That said, this can be analyzed in a more anti-racist way if you think about it. What do I mean? Following the very recent killing of [George Floyd](#)²⁰ by a white Minnesota police officer, and the protests and riots²¹ that have flared up across the nation as a result, along with the similar and also recent killing of a Black woman named [Breonna Taylor](#)²² (#SayHerName) by police, I encourage you to find a way to create a group like this. A group where your Black Autistic students, especially *now*, feel safe, loved, appreciated, and surrounded by people who care about them, like how the Black student in the picture above has their two friends, even if they're all online. Among generally there for emotional support, I encourage you to make this group embody what movements like #BlackLivesMatter are all about, doing what you can to support movements working to end intersectional racism that have always had Black women on the front lines. That said, talk to your supervisor, and the other peer mentors, about how you can set up a Zoom group for *your* program. As I said before, you can always start a conversation during the standard group now happening over platforms like Zoom with your mentees about ways they're staying connected to other people, or incorporate it into your 1:1 meetings. Remember: solidarity and friendship could mean the world to your mentees.

3. **Encourage your student to take breaks from screens *only* if there's a risk of *and signs* of harm.**

Now that many of us are more dependent on technology than we were before to get by, often our screens are necessary. In fact, most of the time, even if

²⁰ This article details the killing of George Floyd, and contains graphic details about how he died as well as the current state of protests across the country and the case for his justice. *Please* proceed with caution.

²¹ However, please note that one article (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/30/george-floyd-protests-riots-violent-outside-agitators-minnesota/5291658002/>) found most rioters in Minnesota as of May 30th "appeared to be white" anarchists despite popular belief.

²² This article details the killing of Breonna Taylor, and contains graphic details about how she died and tells similar stories of other Black women also killed by police as part of the #SayHerName movement. *Please* proceed with caution.

especially those of you reading this *during* the pandemic *want* to intervene, all you may be able to do is keep your supervisor updated and just be a good friend for your mentee while your student is, for example, gaming. That said, sometimes our relationships with gaming can lead to harm or addiction which, from what I found, some Autistic people may be more at risk for and, if there, could get in the way of self-care, academic work, or other things your students may have to do.

Mazurek & Engelhardt (2013) found an increased risk in Autistic boys of gaming addiction. However, Wei, Chen, Huang, and Bai (2012) found that girls had higher rates of social phobias/anxiety, and even depression-linked pain than boys did—which the Havenwood Academy (n.d.)¹² links to gaming addiction. Your student might need to socially isolate to stay healthy, and safe. Gaming could very well be what keeps your student well at times. Meanwhile, gaming has helped Autistic people I know with histories of depression; anxiety; social isolation, etc. cope with things that were overwhelming during a stressful time. For some, especially during the time this was written, gaming is one of the only safe options out there. If they're looking for new things to do, then you could suggest joining that video chat group or, depending on the person, make a distance-reading book group on Discord or another platform and/or go for a walk if they'd be safe to do so.

Ultimately, for those of you reading this *during* the pandemic, I encourage you to tell your mentees to stay inside where they can, and make sure that, if they do go outside, they wear a mask and gloves as long as they're outside; they wash their hands when they come back; remember to bring any inhalers or other routine medical supplies they would otherwise need with them; and not to touch anything, or get too close to anyone. That said, your mentee may want to make sure you're doing ok too, but make sure *not* to overshare. Regardless of when you read this, it's important to maintain a healthy dynamic with your mentee (which I discuss later).

4. **Learn more about web accessibility for autistic people, and work with your program/mentees to educate others who can make a difference for them.** I've seen posts about web accessibility for various groups of disabled people in my time on social media, and that includes one that led me to Pun's infographic, as cited by Digital Synopsis (n.d.), on the next page.

Designing for users on the autistic spectrum



Do...	Don't...
<p>use simple colours</p> 	<p>use bright contrasting colours</p> 
<p>write in plain English</p> <p>Do this.</p>	<p>use figures of speech and idioms</p> 
<p>use simple sentences and bullets</p> 	<p>create a wall of text</p> 
<p>make buttons descriptive</p> <p>Attach files</p>	<p>make buttons vague and unpredictable</p> <p>Click here!</p>
<p>build simple and consistent layouts</p> 	<p>build complex and cluttered layouts</p> 

Home Office Home Office Digital

For more information, contact: access@digital.homeoffice.gov.uk

Now that you've read about this infographic, can you think of some websites your mentees may need to use for their education that *might* not be fully accessible? Which ones can be improved? How? Meanwhile, where are the *good* websites, the accessible ones? How are *those* helping your mentees succeed? With this information in mind, and an active collaboration with your mentees and supervisor, again, you could make a difference.

5. **Provide any other support you can, whatever it may be, to quell your student's anxiety and stress.**

Among other things, ensuring your mentees have their accommodations, among other things, is more important now than ever. Be sure to check in regularly about this, and don't be afraid to help them send an email or write a phone call script if needed/wanted about this or, within reason, other areas of their life which you could provide support for. You may have to get creative, again within reason. One of my old mentees, who's a good friend now, was having trouble empathizing with a group of people he'd hurt without realizing it. To help him out, I asked if he'd be comfortable with a little perspective taking exercise, and he went for it. Then, I explained to him the impact he'd had on those people in his life; how they might be feeling in plain, direct language ("there's a good chance they feel x..."); and encouraged him to sit with the realization of that for a minute. Then, when I checked-in, and yes I timed him, he seemed to get it. He felt terrible, and he did start to relate better to others' experiences after that. That said, I wouldn't encourage you to do this too often and, more often than not, when in doubt ask your supervisor. Lastly, I encourage you to do listen to your mentees, and, if you *can* help, and *safely*, then you are encouraged to do so or, otherwise, reach out to your supervisor for help

Now, things are about to get a little intense. I'm about to tell two short stories about two of my undergrad mentees. The first story is about a mentee I had who I helped get out of an abusive relationship with his peer mentor. The second is about how I helped a JRC survivor earn his bachelor's degree. Therefore, I want to give those of you reading this with similar histories to the people in these stories the option to skip those pages. Therefore, if you want to stop reading them both then you can skip to page 39 until you can get back to these. I'm not accusing you of anything; I don't think you're a bad person; and I don't want you to be overwhelmed. I just want to make sure you read these so you know what to look for and how to best work with students who might be going through a lot. Thank you.

Appendix B: The Importance of Reporting

I want to discuss why reporting issues that come up is so important by telling you a story about a young man I once worked with. Before you continue reading, this sentence serves as a trigger warning for mentions of emotional and psychological abuse, and sexual violence against an autistic man by a woman and peer mentor.

When I first met with him he was *terrified* because he was being emotionally and psychologically abused by a peer mentor who had talked him into a romantic relationship. Now, I should've gone to my supervisor the *moment* he told me this. However, he said he wasn't ready to make the report, especially after he told me he was surviving sexual violence she was committing as well, so, while it was an utter *nightmare*, I respected his need to have some control. Once I understood his situation, I first made the mistake (Patrick, 2018) of saying he should break up with her, *now*. People surviving abusive relationships have many barriers to leaving, and I hadn't considered that back then when working with this young man. When he said he couldn't or didn't know how because he loved her and was afraid for his safety, his *barriers* to leaving, instead of *immediately going to my supervisor*, which again I should've done, I tried to work with and support him.

That meant giving him advice and emotional support without being a therapist, because even if I was trying to help I couldn't have done something I wasn't trained for. I tried my best to explain to them *both* that she can't do her job if she's impacting him like this. Ultimately, I told my supervisor because I clearly couldn't do this on my own. Now, this will not happen to every student you work with, you're not a rape crisis/intimate partner violence counselor now. That young man simply re-shared his story because: "I want to make sure that this never happens again." Some anti-abuse, anti-rape culture feminist she turned out to be (for the record, this is sarcastic).

Again: you shouldn't expect this to happen to all your students, but there are some cases where a peer mentor, or someone else, may abuse their/your mentee. My mentee didn't realize he was being, in his words, "taken advantage of", so he couldn't see the signs (Buddy T, 2020). Some of these signs include less or more sleep uncharacteristic to the person; being more afraid than usual, or more intensely than usual—especially when certain people are in the room; low self-esteem; and, among others, physical injuries not explained by anything else. This doesn't take into account identity-based signs of abuse, such as withholding medications/accessibility devices, among other things. If anything, let this serve as an introduction to the warning signs if they come up, so you know what to tell your supervisor.

Appendix C: My Peer Mentoring of a JRC Survivor & Autistic College Student

My undergraduate mentoring experiences with Autistic college students happened to be, well, *intense*, but this isn't the case for everyone. I guided people through some pretty tough times to be mild. One of my first clients, "Kyle," (2015-2016) for example, survived 12, yes 12, years in one of the most notoriously abusive institutions for disabled people in the United States of America: the Judge Rotenberg Center (JRC), which has a decades long history of, to be *incredibly* mild, *mistreating* the autistic people in their care—who were recently revealed to be mainly autistic people of color. Kyle, a cis white man in his 30s, clearly remembered being painfully shocked numerous times, and remembering it made him angry that anyone would put him through that (as anyone would). He even said being in that place made him feel like a monster, and constantly invalidated by the so-called *therapy* staff. However, for his sake and yours, please know that the FDA recently banned these shocks so no one will have to survive them again. That said, it wasn't until sometime *after* those 12 years that, when working with me, he started feeling comfortable talking to people he didn't know more often.

So, let's think about Kyle's situation a little bit. People at the JRC sure did think they were *helping* him. Do you blame Kyle for, say, demanding he be paid millions of dollars to be helped *again* years later? He likely felt he'd been *helped* enough, and just wanted to live his life. People were *paid*, ok, *paid*, to electrically shock not just this Autistic adult, but plenty of others. Most of whom, again, were/are people of color. Be patient with your mentees, you don't know what they've been through. Remember, just because your client is angry or standoffish to your help doesn't mean they're a bad person. They could be in pain. As one professor I had explained, anger is often a sign of a deeper emotion that was covered up by the anger to make it easier to process. Is anger sometimes *just* anger? Maybe. But, those other times, when your student is angry about *something*, I challenge you, to the best of your ability, to find out what it is if it's safe to do so.

Moving on, you may have to use *structured* and *unstructured* peer mentoring with your mentees, I did with Kyle. We met up at the same campus restaurant as frequently as we could, usually the same table and seats, but even if we were speaking on the phone instead, which happened, he could tell me anything he wanted. Anything. Doesn't matter what, and I'd respond as best I could—but I wasn't perfect. We got food, we spoke, and sometimes I gave advice—though I later learned to *ask* before giving advice to check if it was wanted (especially when he insisted I ask first, which I agreed to). It was pretty straightforward. Again, I wasn't perfect, but he did later thank me, and others, for helping

him earn his Bachelor's. *Unstructured* just means not to structure *every* student *too* much. Provide structure, but remember that different circumstances, sensory overload symptoms, stress/anxiety, etc. may mean your students need some breaks between meetings, or just looser guidance. Be open to conversation with your mentees and your supervisor to learn what you can do. With Kyle, that meant learning to accommodate him, not direct him or belittle him, etc. He'd been through enough of that. Anyway, he got to decide what we did. Knowing the difference in approaches to your mentorship can go a long way for your mentees, especially those who've survived the worst.

What are Peer Mentor Contracts?

A peer mentor contract is a document provided to you by your supervisor to ensure you follow the rules and meet and all expectations while doing your job as effectively, responsibly, and ethically as possible. The first one (The Peer Mentor Contract) spells out a list of rules you agree to follow inspired by a similar contract written by the National Autistic Society (NAS) and some of my own experiences in peer mentorship. The second details a simple agreement that you will keep confidentiality unless your student would be a danger to themselves or others. These contracts are vital because they set the tone for your role as a peer mentor and ensure your expectations are clearly provided to you so that everyone can operate from the same page from the start. Your contract, for example, could look a little something like this (blank template is in the Manual Worksheets):

The Peer Mentor Contract

Categories	I <i>will</i> ...	I <i>won't</i> ...
Accountability	Hold myself accountable to my mentees, and my supervisor. I will only serve as a figure of guidance, support, reassurance, kindness, etc., for my mentees.	Manipulate; assault; abuse; discriminate against; bully; stalk; date; and/or hook-up with, etc., my mentees; violate this contract; or do anything else in any way as defined by my supervisor and my mentees that would cause my mentees harm, fear, pain, or anything similar.

Attendance	Be present at meetings or trainings required by any appropriate party per the program's goals and ideal impact as often as possible.	Skip any meetings or trainings for any illegitimate reason (e.g. disinterest) or avoid open and honest communication.
Boundaries	Build and respect boundaries between myself and my mentees.	Attempt any role/profession except the one I was hired for and pursued.
Communication	Communicate with my mentees in ways that are affirming and accepting of, and accessible for them.	Speak to my mentees however I like with no consideration of their feelings/needs/wants for any reason.
Consistency	Do my best to inform my mentees of any changes to meeting times at least 24 hours before the original time and reschedule it for when I'm available while sending out appointment reminders when applicable.	Forget to remind mentees of their meetings, or not show up without saying why I can't make it at least 24 hours before the meeting unless it is an academic or personal emergency to the best of my ability as a peer mentor.
Participation	Take initiative to be in community with and talk to my mentees, and take other initiatives so they know that they are more than a step to graduation for me.	Invite friends to program events and ignore my mentees; be on my phone in non-emergencies instead of with my mentees, or otherwise ignore my responsibilities.
Record-Keeping	Maintain logs on the work I do, including my hours per person per meeting.	Refuse to keep records of my hours, and a log, because this may delay my graduation.
Reporting	Report anything I cannot help my mentees with to my supervisor or the appropriate parties depending on the circumstances, even if I may not want to, to make sure my mentees remain safe and supported.	Take on one or more of my mentees' crises or problems on my own and <i>never</i> tell anyone about this, especially for a <i>significant</i> period of time to make sure my mentees remain safe and supported.
Responsibility	Help setup and close program events and take initiative to otherwise create my own (lasting) impact on my mentees and program.	Neglect my responsibilities/mentees or make it so they set-up and clean-up more than me, or ever feel unsupported in any way for any reason.

Summary	Lastly, I will do only that which is in my mentees' best interests as defined by <i>them</i> , this contract, and my supervisor.	Lastly, I won't shirk my expectations and responsibilities for any reason or ignore this contract.
<p>As a Peer Mentor with (School Name), I (Mentor's Name) will follow this contract.</p> <p>Student's Signature: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Mentor's Signature: _____ Date: _____</p>		

The Confidentiality Agreement

I, (Full Name), promise to keep all communication between myself and my mentee confidential, discussing it only with my supervisor as needed. However, I understand that I, (Initials), may be asked or required to break confidentiality if my mentee becomes a danger to themselves or others.

I (Initials) understand this is in the best interests of my mentee and will follow this agreement.

Signature _____

Contracts' Conclusion / Templates

The contract/agreement included above, with the appendices in mind, can better enable you to have a needed structure to guide your role with us at Project REACH. While at least the first may seem unnecessary, as I said earlier, some of what I've included above *has* come up in my own peer mentorship. I wrote what I did to make sure you have the resources you need to best serve your mentees and your programs should your experiences resemble *mine* in *any* way.

That said, there's more that goes into peer mentorship than signing the contract on its own. You must get to know your mentees while, among other things, keeping track of your hours and work/progress with your mentees. After all, you have to start somewhere right? We have developed multiple templates: one to guide your first mentor meeting, a sample timesheet and mentor log. Below please find a sample log, but note that this is provided as a possibility—if you want a different template your supervisor could be a great resource. Otherwise, the sample here can serve as a structural guide to what your logs *can* look like. Again, all worksheets are available in the Manual Worksheets document.

Sample Mentor Log

Mentor's Name: Taylor Smith

Mentee's Name (first name and last initial): "Chris"

Date: 5/4/20

Location: CSA, Group Room 102A

One-on-one time in minutes: 60 mins

Description of Meeting: Chris and I met inside the CSA inside Group Room 102A. Chris seemed like his normal self, he was having an OK day he described. We discussed topics such as academics, personal interest, employment, and his family. As I take the focus off of academics each week, Chris seems more relaxed and engaged during the interviews.

Important topic(s) covered/concerns: Chris and I openly discussed, early during our meeting, his CORE 100 class. Chris expressed to me that the section for the CORE 100 on his Blackboard was empty, no assignments were there and he was upset about this and other classmates of Chris expressed the same sentiment. His professor from CORE 100 gave a contact for students of the class to contact regarding the issue. The problem to date is unresolved. Chris stated that he was doing well in his English class, but could not give a numerical or letter value for what "well" meant. We had a discussion regarding several of Chris' interests. Specifically, Chris and I extensively discussed his passion for NASCAR. He told me about his favorite drivers. We also discussed the experiences he had when he went to a couple of races with his family. Christopher also disclosed that he is aiming to take more classes during the spring semester and this can be seen as an example of self-advocacy.

Mentors questions and own goals for next meeting: During the next meeting I want to inquire if the CORE 100 class issues have been resolved and whether or not Chris self-advocated to try to get the professor to understand what the students of the class are going through. I would like to inquire about Chris' plans to Thanksgiving. I also would like to ask Chris if he plans to attend the Stress Free Zone.

Where and when next meeting will be: Thursday, November 21, 2013 at 1 pm inside the CSA Group Room 102A.

III. Conclusion

Your role as a peer mentor is to ensure your mentees succeed during and, of course, after their time with you and in college overall. This means: improved executive functioning; more healthy & fulfilling relationships (assuming any relationships are wanted); that they are connected to any needed resources on- or off-campus; and, among other things, they overall do well in college and feel supported by you and the program. Maybe some of your work will involve helping your mentees hand in their assignments on time; make schedules; pursue and get any needed/wanted accommodations; get help, if any is wanted, for any issues in their lives/co-occurrences (whatever they may be); and, among other things, doing your best to approach your work while promoting neurodiversity and inclusion in an intersectional way while doing your best to act mindfully to your mentees. This could mean supporting your mentees on the basis of any and all identities/realities they hold or are experiencing/enduring where you're able to while working with your supervisor.

I encourage you to embrace autism acceptance, the tenants of the neurodiversity and disability justice movements, as well as an intersectional, anti-racist, trans-inclusive, approach to peer mentoring. One that is actively anti-oppressive and, instead, chooses peace, justice, liberation and, as mentioned above, success during, and ideally after, college for your mentees. At the very least, help your student successfully graduate, have a good college experience, and give them a good head start. That way, they can go where they want to in life without causing harm to others. This approach could, therefore, make a huge difference for you—and your mentees. Plus, the pandemic provides its own challenges. Remember to do what you can to uplift your mentees, and do what you can to get them, and yourself, through these difficult, stressful, and, to say the least, ever-changing times.

Additionally, should your mentee experience a crisis, what's most important is not that you over-dedicate your time to serving this mentee alone, but that you again think critically of what you can do that you know how to do to get that mentee to a safer place. That means reporting any issue that could come up, whatever it may be, to your supervisor and keeping the mentee's best interests at heart while doing so. Be sure, if/when necessary, that the right person is reported to, and know you won't be punished for reporting anything, whatever it may be.

That said, part of prevention is education. While not exhaustive, our resources below can get you started. Please note that several terms in our glossary hold autistic community definitions with deep autistic histories. Stay safe, and good luck!

IV. Glossary

Ableism: The globalized oppression of disabled people through systematic ableist stereotyping, discrimination, bias, and prejudice.

Abuse: A method of dominating and controlling at least one other person through violence; manipulation; and power/control differences. Can happen between dating; long-term; or married partners (intimate partner violence), families (familial abuse); and in many other relationships while involving any and all systems of oppression.

Allistic: Someone who is not Autistic. This person could be neurotypical or otherwise neurodivergent.

Anti-Blackness: The globalized oppression of Black people through systematic anti-Black racist stereotyping, discrimination, bias, and prejudice.

Auditory Processing Disorder: A disability that involves the person physically hearing what's said to them but not being able to process, or make sense of, what's been said to them for a period of at least a few seconds, which can co-occur in autistic people.

Autistic: Someone with a neurodevelopmental/social/cognitive disability that broadly changes how they think, learn, move, communicate, and relate to other people in ways that, while sometimes overlapping with other autistic people, can be unique to them.

Autistic Burnout: A prolonged shutdown including (possibly) great extended periods and amounts of ability loss in the autistic person to any degree. This loss may also feel difficult or impossible to recover from depending on its length. Autistic Burnout can later lead to forgetting how to perform any skill/task, or any number of skills/tasks, such as using public transportation in your area despite how long you've been using it, when the burnout goes away. Then, an autistic person may not know how to relearn that information; feel in any way that they may be unable to; or can only learn up to a certain level of their former skillset. You might think an autistic person in burnout is regressing, but instead their shutdown has gotten worse with any affects potentially amplified. Warning signs include all signs of shutdown, but again amplified, as well as increased stress; feeling overwhelmed and/or having brain fog; increased difficulty in processing heard speech/sounds (check auditory processing disorder definition); a significant decrease in executive functioning; and more shutdowns, especially if closer together in onset and recovery, among others.

Autistic Meltdown: A fight or flight response an Autistic person might have to extreme

sensory/emotional overload and/or one or more overwhelming situations. Sometimes, this may result in throwing away loved objects/food, or hitting objects, themselves, or others as a last resort if no other methods of communication have been listened to or are known. These meltdowns can be triggered if the person's needs go unmet, especially if they last longer, and if they feel unsafe; anxious; greatly disrespected; hurt; or otherwise distressed. The general description of Autistic Meltdowns Schaber (2014) gave was that they feel like "an adrenaline rush, and a mental breakdown, and a panic attack all rolled into one" (3:47-3:55). The signs include increased stress (whether from good or bad situations), anxiety, and/or panic; feeling overwhelmed; dropping to the floor; increased anger/irritability; intense crying; pulling ones hair out; more often going non-verbal or being less able to speak or communicate in any way; having been or feeling like they've been lied to, hurt, and disrespected in any way in increasing or uncomfortably sustained amounts; being in pain of any kind, uncomfortable, and/or on their period with no way to communicate this and/or other stress to someone who can help; increased resistance towards and silence or yelling around/directly at one or more people—especially if the person feels they caused among other; and an increase in stimming where there may otherwise be less or maybe no stimming for some Autistic people." Schaber (2014) described the aftermath of an Autistic meltdown like [being] hit by a truck and [having] a flu [after running] a marathon." It's important those serving Autistic people know to be patient and considerate generally but especially after coming out of a meltdown, or something similar/else, while keeping yourself safe.

Autistic Shutdown(s): When an autistic person withdraws and loses at least some abilities, if not more of them—whatever they may be. Some may be hard to reach in this state, others may not be able to move or communicate or may struggle to, and some may struggle to learn; think; process information; and care for themselves and others. What used to be the simplest task for some autistic people may feel impossible or unbearable in a shutdown. Someone starting to shutdown may either run away to a place they know as isolated and safe or, in some, not all, cases collapse on the spot. Warning signs include increased self-isolation, especially by choice, that is not normal for that person; increased signs of depression/sadness; increased sensory sensitivities (formerly mild ones becoming very severe, etc.); a reduction in physical abilities (body feeling heavier than usual), and limits to/on communication in any way, among others.

Echolalia: A form of communication in which the person takes quotes from themselves, others they've seen/heard/read, or characters in media and uses them as their own communication. It's common in Autistic people, but not everyone does it. Click here (Gotter, 2016) for more information.

Executive Functioning: An umbrella term including cognitive processes from attention and working memory to problem solving abilities and being able to transition tasks among many others that help people, autistic or not, manage; control; and regulate their actions (Kim, 2014a).

Inclusivity: Ensuring that, in this case, all kinds of autistic people with all identity feel welcomed by you; on your campus; and in their communities.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality, as coined and defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016; 1989) is the interconnectedness of all systems of oppression (racism, ableism, sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, homophobia, etc.) while being sure to especially uplift Black women of those and other intersections as well as any marginalized/oppressed people. Its proponents, especially Kimberlé, ask for all oppressive systems to be taken down together so everyone, which of course includes your mentees, can be free of oppression.

Neurodivergent: Coined by neurodivergent advocate Kassiane Asasumasu pre-Tumblr, this word refers to someone whose brain is considered different in our society (having intellectual/developmental disabilities; learning disabilities [e.g. ADD/ADHD]; psychiatric disabilities/mental illnesses [e.g. bipolar depression]; and/or neurological disabilities [e.g. epilepsy]). When asking her about the history of this term, she reminded me that a minority in the autistic community attempted to redefine this term to only refer to us, autistic people, which she said led to her speaking out so the community knows neurodivergent, as a community term, refers to all neurotypes—not just some.

Neurodiverse: Someone with a brain of any kind, neurodivergent or neurotypical.

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity is a fact that all brains are different and can be neurotypical (the expected brain with no disabilities) or neurodivergent (a different brain with one or more mental disabilities of any kind, more on that later). Second, it is a movement fighting for the rights of people who are neurodivergent. Lastly, it is also a paradigm, or a way of thinking, that embraces the first and second aspects of neurodiversity.

Neurotype: Any type of brain that exists, whether its neurodivergent or neurotypical.

Neurotypical: Someone who's brain is considered typical in our society, or which has no mental disabilities of any kind.

Peer Mentor: For our purposes, a peer mentor is a student that guides, supports, and mentors an autistic adult through various means.

Peer Mentoring: The act of supporting, in this case, autistic college students in, ultimately, succeeding during and after college.

Racism: The globalized oppression of people of color through systematic racist stereotyping, discrimination, bias, and prejudice.

Scripting: The act of pre-selecting the words one is going to say for any given situation or set of situations and sticking to those words as a script. They could be original words or something from any other person or source of media. Check the definition of echolalia for related information.

Sensory Overload: A feeling of overwhelm when one or more of your senses is overloaded with input to make sense of. While common among autistic people, it is also common in people with PTSD (Watson 2018) and ADD/ADHD. It can be caused by any major sense and should be responded to with an immediate ending of the sensory input in question (loud noise, bright light, etc.) and whatever that person needs to stim or otherwise calm themselves.

Social Cue: A social rule or expectation people are expected to follow in a community; country; culture; society, etc. that may be difficult for autistic people to interpret and follow as they're often unspoken rules. For this reason, they're sometimes known as the hidden curriculum in some circles. They can include knowing when to speak in certain situations, and what to say/do, to oversimplify. Sometimes, communities the autistic person may not be a part of have their own set of social rules/cues and those may be hard to follow as well if they're not known. Be sure to guide your student as best you can in ways that meet their expressed needs to ensure their social success in college.

Stim: Stimming is when someone, autistic or not, uses output, such as humming, to block the processing of sensory input (such as a bright light, etc.). While everyone does it (ever play with/chew on a pen?), Autistic people often do it in unique ways (i.e. hand-flapping, rocking).

Task Overload: While not mentioned in the manual, task overload is a state of overwhelm resulting from having too many tasks to complete at one time. An Autistic person prone to task overload may feel more strongly that it is impossible to complete any tasks. This could lead to an autistic shutdown. An episode of task overload can lead to panic and anxiety attacks as well as a need for intensive structure/paced routine ("If I'm going to finish this then I must first finish x...then y...then z").

Transgender: Someone who identifies with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth (Trans Student Educational Resources n.d.), regardless of the presence or lack of gender

dysphoria (Drescher & Pula n.d.).

Transphobia: The globalized oppression of binary and non-binary trans people through systematic transphobic stereotyping, discrimination, bias, and prejudice.

White Supremacy: The globalized system of oppression that advantages white people over people of color, despite being the global minority, that relies on all systems of oppression, especially racism and anti-Blackness, among all others.

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Hyperlinks Handout

CUNY Disability Programs

CUNY Disability Services Centers

<https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/directory-to-services/>

CUNY LEADS

<https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/cuny-leads/>

CUNY Unlimited

<https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/tpsid-initiative/>

Project REACH

<https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/asd-project-reach/>

ACCES-VR : List of ACCES-VR Services

<http://www.acces.nysed.gov/vr/vocational-rehabilitation-services>

Advocate Resources

Autismandtourttes: Autistic or person with autism? Survey results.

<https://autismandtourttes.tumblr.com/post/139057744709/autistic-or-person-with-autism-survey-results>

Cynthia Kim: How sensory activities support autistic self-regulation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw4Bp1Uu9g8>

<https://musingsofanaspie.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/executive-function-musingsofanaspie.pdf>

Disability Intersectionality Summit: YouTube Channel, Video List

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCa50kgXSbbAxKlxqrdjxS4Q/videos>

Lydia X. Z. Brown: The significance of semantics: Person-first language: Why it matters.

<https://www.autistichoya.com/2011/08/significance-of-semantics-person-first.html>

Identity and hypocrisy: A second argument against person-first language

<https://www.autistichoya.com/2011/11/identity-and-hypocrisy-second-argument.html>

Autism Academy: Autism Academy's YouTube Channel, Videos Section

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVRcOnnNTSgl3Zjgutb--dQ/videos>

The GROW Model of Coaching and Mentoring: A Simple Process for Developing Your People

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_89.htm

Resources for Autistic Communities

You and/or your students may find it hard in today's times to get by, get through college, etc.

Below, please find resources I've selected that I feel, again as a social worker who is also Autistic, could help you and/or your students get support as needed. Please note that the resources aren't autistic-only because, in the spirit of Audre Lorde, we, as Autistic people, aren't *just* Autistic only. Thank you.

Neurodiversity Hub

This is an initiative between organizations and people in Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and the United States to provide as much support as possible for neurodivergent people around the world in their pursuits of education, employment, and overall improved quality of life.

<https://www.neurodiversityhub.org/>

Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)

ASAN is one of the USA's leading Autistic-led advocacy organizations for Autistic adults, and has been fighting for Autistic people's rights since 2006 through legislative and educational means among others, with a strong emphasis on Autistic culture and history. They are based in Washington, DC.

Autistic Women and Non-binary Network (AWN)

AWN serves as a leader in the Autistic rights movement's fight for the rights of Autistic women and binary/non-binary trans people, especially people of color, through community-based solutions to systematic problems led by the people they serve. They are based in Washington State.

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Foundations for Divergent Minds

Founded by Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people, this organization provides education to families of and therapists/other providers/etc. for Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people to improve their overall quality of life. They are based in Texas.

<http://www.divergentminds.org/>

AASPIRE Healthcare Toolkit

Produced by the research organization AASPIRE, whose researchers collaborate with Autistic people on vital research for Autistic communities, produced this toolkit to aid Autistic adults in getting healthcare-access they need to stay healthy. Check it out below.

<https://www.autismandhealth.org/>

Crisis Text Line (General):

A Crisis Hotline all over text. No phone calls needed to get crisis support. Text HOME to 741-741 in the USA, 85258 in the UK, or 686868 in Canada anytime to get started.

People of Color Crisis Text Line:

A collaboration between the Steve Fund and Crisis Text Line, this resource was set up for people of color between 18-24 especially who are in crisis and have nowhere to go. Text STEVE to 741-741

Therapy for Black Men

Proudly founded by our own CUNY Alumni Vladimire Calixte, now an applied psychologist pursuing her Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and Benjamin Calixte, a Life and Executive Coach, this organization provides sources, including a therapist directory, for Black men seeking mental healthcare.

<https://therapyforblackmen.org/find-a-therapist/>

Therapy for Black Girls

This organization's podcast & provider directory of (mostly) Black women therapists for Black women seeking therapy is dedicated to uplifting Black women seeking empowering mental

healthcare that centers them.

<https://therapyforblackgirls.com/>

Native American Disability Law Center

Were you or an Indigenous (Native American) disabled person you know refused accessibility/accommodations on the basis of their disability; abused/neglected; and/or unjustly refused a service of any kind? If you answers yes, find the number and website to this law center below for your records:

Toll-Free Number: 800) 862-7271

Latinx Therapy

Los-Angeles based EMDR Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist & Adriana Alejandre started Latinx therapy to provide Latinx communities bilingual English-Spanish therapy. The directory is available at the link below.

<https://latinxtherapy.com/therapist-search/>

A Resource Directory of Human Services for Asian Americans

While released in 2012, this resource provides referrals for human services providers for Asian Americans in metropolitan New York who in total speak at least 10 languages found across the Asian continent <http://www.aafederation.org/doc/HSDFINAL2011.pdf>

Trans Lifeline:

Given that a lot of Autistic people are transgender, including a good portion of their call center staff, an Autistic trans person looking for support is *strongly* encouraged to call if/when needed.

Call 877-565-8860 in the US or 877-330-6366 in Canada (toll-free)

RAINN National Sexual Assault Crisis Hotline

RAINN is one of the nation's leading anti-sexual violence organizations, and they go amazing work for survivors, including a referral service to your nearest rape crisis shelter if needed.

Call 800-656-HOPE (4673)

Safe Horizon's Rape, Sexual Assault & Incest Hotlines

As NYC's leading organization against violence and crime, Safe Horizon is dedicated to empowering and healing survivors of violence.

Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-621-HOPE (4673)

Crime Victims Hotline: 866-689-HELP (4357)

Rape, Sexual Assault & Incest Hotline: 212-227-3000

TDD phone number for all hotlines: 866-604-5350

Amala Muslim Youth Helpline

Started by Muslim college students, this is a helpline for Muslim college students in distress seeking community support from other Muslims who've been in similar situations.

Call 855-95-AMALA (26252)

The Anti-Violence Project

This organization is dedicated to ensuring LGBTQ and HIV-affected communities have the resources they need to thrive.

Call 1-212-714-1141 (Bilingual English and Spanish)

Resource Lists

Pioneering advocate, organizer, and writer Lydia X. Z. Brown's own recommendations on crisis care:

<https://autistichoya.net/resources/crisis-resource-list/>

A list of national resources for QTPOC (queer and/or trans people of color) communities in the United States:

<https://lgbtq.arizona.edu/qtpoc-national-resources>

NYC Affirmative Psychotherapy's list of largely NYC-based physical and mental healthcare resources for QTPOC communities:

<https://www.nycaffirmativepsychotherapy.com/>

the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity's mental health resource list for LGBT+ Muslims: <http://www.muslimalliance.org/resources>

A list of disability organizations in the United States:

<https://ncdj.org/resources/organizations/>