**Coping with University Life using Mindfulness and Sensory Strategies**

Going to university for the first time can be a very stressful time for anyone. However, it can be particularly demanding for students with Asperger’s syndrome (AS) and some may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety than other students. Mental health difficulties amongst students with AS can be exacerbated by limited coping strategies, low self-esteem and vulnerability to stressful events. They may have difficulty coping with the social aspects of university life and this may inhibit them from applying to university in the first place.

Additionally, they are continually bombarded by sensory input throughout the day that they may have difficulty processing. Most students can self-regulate by filtering out competing stimuli but some, especially those with AS, may struggle with sensory regulation. The university environment can lack the structure they require in order to cope. Most universities, and university staff, are unaware that sensory processing difficulties are an issue and do not provide a sensory-friendly learning environment or integrate sensory-based strategies into the curriculum.

In 2014, Monique Harte and Dr Greg Kelly, lecturers in occupational therapy (OT) at Ulster University, developed workshops for young men with AS to introduce them to mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques and sensory strategies to help reduce stress, develop resilience, increase confidence, and raise aspirations and participation.

In order to give them a true university experience they needed to be enrolled as students and so a new module, “Coping with University Life Using Mindfulness and Sensory Strategies” was developed. Thirteen young men with AS were offered fee-free places on this module. The module provided them with the opportunity to learn, participate in, and explore, a range of skills and university experiences designed to encourage them to feel confident about applying to a university programme and to transition success fully into higher education.

Outcomes from participation in the workshops were mostly positive. Students reported using mindfulness techniques and sensory strategies to deal with stress and anxiety in their everyday life. There was an increase in social interaction and a decrease in sensory problems. Parents observed similar changes at home.

Twelve young men successfully completed the first module and some of them are currently studying at university. For example, one has successfully completed his first year, and is about to enter his second year, of a Foundation Degree in Computer Studies at SERC Bangor campus and plans to apply to finish his degree at Ulster University. Another is going into his second year at the Ulster University’s, Design with Creative Practice course at Magee. Yet another has passed his A levels and has secured a place at Queens University to study Mathematics (his first choice). He reports that he still uses mindfulness techniques when he is facing unfamiliar situations. For example, he has recently travelled to and from Belfast on his own for the first time - a big achievement according to his mother who describes the module as “invaluable and even life changing!”

The module ran again this year and won the Ulster Team of the Year Award at the Ulster University Students Union Learning and Teaching Awards 2016.