

During the Class

Create a calming environment.

Get there early and play some calming music while the students are arriving. Turn on only half the lights at first to make it feel a bit cozier than a standard classroom. If possible, declutter or organize the space. Tidy the rows of desks if they have been moved or regrouped, put away supplies – or set them out – and give the space a once-over to see what distractions and visual stressors might be seen from the students' point of view.

Give them a break.

Give a 5-minute period halfway through the class to allow students to use the bathroom and stretch their legs, ask you a semi-private question, or to destress for a few minutes. It could be 5 minutes with their eyes closed and headphones on- whatever they need. Breaking up lectures and activities can also keep students from getting overwhelmed or distracted.

Rethink your definition of paying attention.

Someone writing notes, doodling, or staring off into space may well be listening, but they may need to practice gaze aversion, a reaction that allows students to concentrate on what they have heard and process it. This could also look like typing, fiddling with their phones, and fidgeting.

Provide variety in activities and assessments.

Students show their knowledge in different ways and mediums. If you are only assessing their learning in one way, such as a multiple-choice test or a paper, you may be restricting students to demonstrating their learning in a medium they are not proficient at.

Use time wisely.

Time limits can be very anxiety inducing, so saying that something “should only take x minutes” to complete or giving time limits for completing quizzes and assignments can make students feel as if they are struggling or singled out.

Use direct speech.

Craddock et al (2018) advise that many people with Autism Spectrum Disorder have trouble with small talk, nonverbal cues, and many of the digressions, metaphors, and ambiguous speech that makes up much of every-day conversation. Keep your language clear and direct, both spoken and in writing.

Offer multiple modalities for teaching and communicating.

Can you restructure your week so that on some days, students can tune in asynchronously? Dwyer et al (2023) recommend offering flexibility in modalities to “ensure accessibility of communication.” This gives students more control over their learning environment by giving them options to learn from home or in the classroom.



Make asking questions during class easy and confidential.

Have a “secret” way of students to ask questions that they aren’t comfortable asking in front of their peers. Could you have an anonymous form that all of your students could use to ask questions? A QR code to a chatbox? Then, set reminders to check it periodically throughout the class. Allowing students to do some reflective work can double as a time to check the questions forum and if needed, to check in with students discreetly.

