

Interview Tips & Decoding the Questions:

A Guide to Job Interviews for Students with Asperger's and ASD

One thing that everyone, including people with Asperger's or on the Autism Spectrum, often dreads is the job interview. So much of your life, of your future, is riding on that one little half hour or hour of your life. How can you not feel stressed out by it?

Not to worry though, because everyone feels nervous about job interviews. Adults with Asperger's have a few extra challenges, but there are ways to overcome these issues.

How Adults with Asperger's & ASD Can Succeed in Job Interviews

1. Be Prepared and Practice before the Interview

Whether this is a career advisor, friend or family member, students with Asperger's tend to need a little extra practice to fine tune their interviewing techniques. You will want to role-play an interview with someone, playing both the person being interviewed and the interviewer, to get a sense for how it works and to make you less nervous. Practice it from beginning to end, remembering to smile and shake the person's hand at the beginning. Say "Hello (person's name), it's nice to meet you. I'm (your name)". Also remember to shake their hand at the end of the interview and thank them for their time.

See the "Decoding the Questions" tips further down to get a feel for what types of questions you may be asked and practice giving your answers. Try not to go on for too long on a single topic, and try not to repeat yourself too much. Having a list of your personal attributes and strengths and preparing how to relate these to job-related situations can also help you feel confident about yourself. You may feel uncomfortable or like you're bragging, but job interviews are all about showcasing your accomplishments and what makes you great so it's okay to brag a little – just make sure you're being polite and attentive.

An important part of being prepared means knowing where to go and how to get there so that you are on time for your interview. Practice driving or taking transit to the interview location beforehand so you aren't as nervous when trying to find it. Aim to get there no more than 15 minutes before your interview. If you get there too early, you may unknowingly put pressure on the interviewer to rush what they were doing beforehand and cause them to be stressed.

2. Pay Attention to How You Talk

Adults with Asperger's and ASD have to think more than most people about their nonverbal language. Often, they aren't used to thinking about how they come across to others.

Here are a few things that you might need to think about:

- Pay attention to your body. How are you sitting? You want to sit up straight and not be slouching. Your feet should be firmly on the floor.
- You should be looking ahead at the interviewer. Eye contact can feel uncomfortable but is very important. Try to look at least in the general area of the interviewer. Looking at their forehead or eyebrows instead of directly into their eyes may help.

- What to do with your hands? Take care to make sure you're not fidgeting. A safe bet is to rest your hands in your lap.
- Try to consciously relax your body so you're not throwing off signs of stress. Make sure your shoulders are relaxed and not hunched up.
- What is your face doing? Try to take a deep breath before you come in, put a moderate smile on your face (don't go over the top), and keep it there.
- Try to answer all questions in an even, calm tone of voice. If something flusters you, take a breath, wait a few seconds and then respond.

It may seem like an awful lot of work, but other people respond instantly to the cues they think we are sending them. If they see someone with body language that suggests stress or anxiety, it makes them feel stress or anxiety. As a result, it makes them have less confidence in you.

It's not always easy, but during the interview try to focus on what your body is doing and saying. Relax, and try to approach interviews as if they're just a conversation.

3. Be Mindful of Your Appearance

Another thing that adults with Asperger's don't pay as much attention to is what they're wearing. Due to sensory issues, you may prefer to wear loose fitting, soft and comfortable clothing. This may not be an issue most of the time, but work environments often tend to be more formal.

Although it may not be as comfortable as you are used to, never dress casually to a job interview. Make sure your clothes are clean and not wrinkled. Men should at least wear a button-down shirt and tie with slacks (not jeans!) and dress shoes. For an office job, a suit jacket should be worn as well. For women, a pair of dress pants and a nice blouse will do, with the option of adding a blazer for a more formal environment.

Hygiene is also an important factor in making a good first impression. Make sure you shower the morning of the interview, wear deodorant and brush your teeth. Many workplaces are scent-free because of employees who are sensitive to smell, so skip the cologne and perfume. Men should get a haircut a day or so before the interview and ladies' hair should be neatly styled. If in doubt, get a second opinion from a friend or family member about whether or not your outfit is interview appropriate.

4. Learn About the Company

This should play to strengths of most students with Asperger's - research the company ahead of time. Find out as much as you can about it. Familiarize yourself with the structure of the company, with their products, etc. Learn what its values and history are. What has the company achieved in their industry? What is the reputation of the company like?

Mention these in the interview if you can, particularly at the end when they ask if you have any questions. You can work your research into your question by asking things like, "When doing my research on the company I was really interested in (name of project or initiative). Would there be an opportunity for me to contribute to that in this position?" Researching the company can help make you stand out from the other interviewees because it shows you are taking the job possibility seriously and that you really care about the company.

Researching the person interviewing you can also be advantageous in making casual conversation with them. Often, when you arrive for your interview the interviewer meets you in the lobby and you may have to make small talk with them for the time it takes to get to the interview room. Look them up on LinkedIn or on the company website and see what projects they're involved in or where they went to university. Don't stalk them on Facebook and find out personal details – "How is your daughter Claire enjoying her ballet class?" is going to come off as downright creepy. Instead, something like "I noticed on your LinkedIn profile that you went to Dalhousie. How was it living out east?" would be much more appropriate.

5. Be Aware of How Much You Talk and What You Say

Students with Asperger's & ASD very often like to talk about what they know. This is good when you are in a situation in which you want to show your enthusiasm, but there is such thing as too much. If you talk on and on without stopping you will be overwhelming to the other person.

To avoid this, practice doing little sound bites. Condense what you know into one or two sentences that you can throw out here and there. In general, when you are asked a question, first stop to think to yourself, "How can I answer this question in just a few sentences?" If you're worried that you will get nervous and ramble, use the [STAR technique](#) to help structure your answers.

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If you are someone who is very shy and doesn't like to talk much, the opposite applies. You need to be sure that you are *not* just answering with a yes or no, and that you are actually answering in full sentences to show you're interested. Aim for speaking for 30 seconds to two minutes per answer, and more complex questions require longer answers. Be enthusiastic!

It's also important to be aware of what you say and how it could be interpreted by others. A common mistake made by job hunters is going in to interviews with the attitude of "What's in it for me?" when it should be the other way around – your job is to convince the employer of why hiring you would be good for the company. Also, try not to over-share. Don't reveal too much of your personal life and only include relevant details about scenarios in the past. Finally, do not ask about salary or benefits during the interview. This can make it look like you only care about the job because of the money and this can be a real turn-off for employers. Wait for them to address compensation later in the hiring process.

6. Visualize and Use Positive Self-talk Before the Interview

All of us, but particularly adults with Asperger's & ASD, are affected by stress. Visualize yourself being confident and doing well when you go into the interview. Know that it can take a few interviews before you get good at it, so look at your first few interviews as practice.

Don't put too much pressure on yourself or else you'll just end up really stressed out. There are always other opportunities (even if it sometimes doesn't seem like it at the time!).

7. Disclose that you have Asperger's or ASD

Although you have the right not to disclose if you do not need accommodations to do the job, in most cases honesty is the best policy. You are better to tell the person interviewing you because they can make allowances for your disorder and may be more open-minded if you typically exhibit "obvious" behaviours of Asperger's or ASD. For instance, if you have trouble maintaining eye contact they may assume you are rude or uninterested instead of attributing it to your communication difficulties and not taking it personally. If you decide not to disclose your Asperger's or ASD, you may end up standing out as different and still come to the attention of your employer. Use the information on the [disclosure page \(*include link*\)](#) to help you decide what to say and when should you decide to disclose.

Decoding the Questions

A great way to prepare for your interview is to anticipate questions that you will be asked and practice your answers. Unfortunately, not all interview questions are straightforward and it can be difficult to gauge what the interviewer is *really* asking. Here are the most common interview questions and how to decode them:

1. Tell Me About Yourself

Translation: Summarize your relevant skills and experience.

This question is often asked early in an interview, and it is not an invitation to share your life story. A good answer summarizes, in five to six sentences, the skills and experience that make you a good fit for the job. Mention your most relevant general and job-specific skills, as well as personal characteristics that are important for the position. An accountant could summarize experience in basic accounting principles, discuss proficiency with computer spreadsheets, and give examples of accuracy and attention to detail.

A bit of humour, if you are comfortable using it, can relieve nervousness and get the interview off to a good start, but don't overdo it. One or two bits of humour per interview are enough. You want to project friendliness, not goofiness. You are not interviewing to be a company comedian.

Avoid long, rambling responses that contain irrelevant details: where you grew up, a list of classes you took to earn your degree, or your parent's recent divorce. Don't mention achievements from high school and earlier, unless they are truly significant. Earning the designation of Eagle Scout, for example, requires personal characteristics that include persistence, leadership, and teamwork. These are valuable in any job.

2. Why Did You Choose This Field?

Translation: What excites you about this work or this industry?

A strong response highlights aptitudes and abilities that are related to the job in question. For example, "Engineering appeals to me because I enjoy applying mathematical principles to solve real-world problems. During college, I did a project..."

A weak response focuses on your personal preferences instead of what you can do for the employer, “I like computers,” “There are lots of jobs,” or, “It pays well.”

3. What Are Your Greatest Strengths?

Translation: What makes you good at this work? (Be ready with three examples.)

It is not boastful to discuss your abilities and accomplishments at a job interview. This is your chance to describe knowledge and personal attributes that enable you to achieve results for the organization. Choose strong points that demonstrate your ability to perform the job well. An engineer might say, “I can form detailed pictures in my mind and see how design changes will impact product performance.”

Empty, self-serving answers offer no benefit to the employer, “I’m a fantastic writer,” “I’m a genius at math,” or, “I live to write code!” – Always keep in mind how your answer relates to the requirements of the job and demonstrate why you would excel in this position.

4. What is Your Greatest Weakness?

Translation: Do you have insight into your limitations and have you learned from your mistakes?

This is a tricky question. Everyone has weaknesses of some kind, so saying that you don’t have any is clearly not true. On the other hand, being too honest can disqualify you as a candidate. Instead, think about a limitation that you have overcome. An accountant could say, “I can be a perfectionist, however this has helped me in accounting because my work is accurate. And, it is always delivered on time.” This answer works because accuracy is important in this line of work, and Aaron added a sentence to let the employer know that his thoroughness would not get in the way of meeting deadlines.

Unacceptable responses are those that communicate a fatal flaw. This refers to an attribute that makes you unqualified for the position. Describing yourself as introverted and a little shy at first would be a fatal flaw for a salesperson, who meets with new prospects. It would not be a fatal flaw for someone, like an accountant, who works mostly with information. Some answers are fatal flaws for any job. Fatal flaw answers include, “I’m not a team player,” “My self-confidence is low,” and, “I don’t like taking the ideas or direction of others.” Even if these may be true, focus on something that you have put in effort to improve to demonstrate how you overcome personal challenges.

5. Describe Your Worst Boss

Translation: What type of manager have you disliked working with (and am I that type of manager)?

This question is not as simple as it may first sound. Let’s begin with the wrong answer, since it is the one that many choose. First, avoid agitation when describing a former manager. For example, “He wouldn’t give me clear instructions, and then blamed me for everything that went wrong. Once I asked to take a Friday off before a holiday weekend. He was so mean, he said no, but then let one of the other associates take Friday off.”

It's possible that you may have a story or two about an unreasonable, rude boss. However, sharing these anecdotes at an interview makes you look bad. Blaming problems on someone else, or making negative judgments about a person's character, makes you sound like a complainer, and an employee who is difficult to work with. Companies do not want employees who are difficult. Avoid comments like, "He didn't listen to me," "She criticized my work," and, "He was disrespectful and yelled a lot."

When a hiring manager asks this question, they want to know whether you will be comfortable with their management style. A manager who gives staff members a lot of autonomy would be concerned if you describe this style as difficult. Obviously, you cannot know a manager's preferences in advance. If your styles are different to the point of incompatibility, it really means the job is not the right fit, and it's unlikely that you're going to get hired.

The right response to this question focuses on professional (not personal) characteristics, and frames negatives as differences in preference or style. For example, "My last supervisor preferred group brainstorming sessions. This was a challenge sometimes because I like to think about a problem on my own, then present my ideas to the group. We worked it out so I could contribute my ideas the next day."

Sources: [Wrong Planet](#), [The Complete Guide to Getting a Job for People with Asperger's Syndrome](#)