

Participant Information Leaflet

We would like to invite you to take part in an investigative project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand what the project is for, and what you will be asked to do. Please read through the following information and do not hesitate to ask any questions about anything that might not be clear to you. The study will be conducted for both evaluation and educational purposes. Feel free to talk to others about the project before deciding if you would like to take part or not. Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation.

Project Title: 'Men in the Moment'

Background and Purpose

Going to university for the first time can be a very stressful time for anyone. However, according to the National Autistic Society some students with ASD/Asperger Syndrome (AS)/High Functioning Autism (HFA) may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety than other students.

Furthermore, for young men with ASD/AS/HFA there may also be difficulties with sensory processing and they can get overwhelmed by too much sensory information. For example, they may feel uncomfortable among large groups of students and too much sensory information can prevent them from processing what they are being taught. They may struggle with certain aspects of university life and so may need more support than other students in order to achieve their academic potential. The learning and teaching methods used by many universities can be challenging for young men with ASD/AS/HFA: self-directed learning and group discussions may be particularly daunting and they may need particular support with this.

Young men with ASD/AS/HFA may also have difficulty coping with the social aspects of university life and managing the demands of being away from home. They may find it hard to look after themselves for the first time or to know how to manage their budget and this may affect the way they cope with lectures and tutorials.

Nevertheless, for many students with ASD/AS/HFA, coming to university can be, for the first time in their lives, an environment where they are not ostracised. There may be other students that share their interests and who will accept them for who they are. Young men with ASD/AS/HFA have many skills and strengths which should not be overlooked. These unique qualities and different way of thinking and experiencing the world brings diversity to the University culture and enriches the student population. For example, enthusiasm, punctuality, determination and reliability are among the many qualities that students with ASD/AS/HFA might bring. It is important that students with ASD/AS/HFA are respected and valued for their skills and positive attributes as well as being supported in the areas they struggle with.

This project will introduce participants to studying at Ulster University in a safe, supportive environment along with a small group of other young men with ASD/AS/HFA who are also thinking about going to University. They will have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the University environment. Participants will work alongside an existing occupational therapist student peer group to reduce perceived barriers into higher education and create tailored support mechanisms in line with the Access to Success strategy. The project will build on existing links with social partners AutismNI to target young men with ASD/AS/HFA who have demonstrated some academic potential.

This project incorporates a Continuing Professional Development module at no cost to participants and successful completion will result in a certificate that can be used to add credit if applying to the University for a full time course.

Participants will also be introduced to mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques to help reduce stress, develop resilience, increase confidence, and raise aspirations and participation. Mindfulness has been defined as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.

Four full day workshops will be delivered fortnightly over an eight week period. Each session will include group work, practical activities and meditation practice to test out techniques and develop competencies. Participants will engage with homework tasks and the completion of a mindfulness diary to further promote skill acquisition.

Why have I been approached to take part?

Ulster University has approached you to take part in this study in accordance with the study criteria, which you meet:

- You are 17 years old or older
- You have a diagnosis of ASD/AS/HFA
- You are interested in applying to University

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, therefore it is up to you to decide if you would like to take part or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information leaflet and will be asked to sign a consent form. You can also change your mind about participating in the study, and withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason.

Can I withdraw from the study?

You can change your mind about participating in the study and are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you are willing to participate.

You will then be asked to complete a questionnaire. This will take about X minutes to complete and will help us to determine how best we can meet your needs.

The first session will provide participants with a warm welcome and ice breaker activities to allow them to feel orientated and comfortable in a small group. It will also define what mindfulness is and how it can be used as a positive coping strategy for feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious.

Session 2 will allow time to explore the simple homework tasks and sample further mindfulness activities and ideas; as well as getting to know a few of the recent occupational therapy students who have all studied at Ulster University.

Session 3 will focus on thinking patterns and how to manage difficult thoughts or worries. This will be explored in a creative and fun way and will not require participants to share personal information they wish to remain private. Session 4 will allow further mindfulness practice in relation to managing attending university or living away from home. Recent occupational therapy students will lead a range of engaging group work tailored to the participants needs and life skills.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All data and information collected from the study will remain confidential and will be securely held within Ulster University, throughout the duration of the study. Following completion of the study, all data and information will be securely held in Ulster's University catalogued archives.

At no time will you be identifiable from the data and information that we collect, as personal information such as names and addresses will be removed.

Will I be told the outcome of the study?

You will not receive an individual report based on the questionnaires you have completed, however once the study has been completed, a summary of the study findings will be made available for you, if you request.

Who can I contact to find out more about this study?

If you have any questions please contact:

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Once again, thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in this study and for reading this information leaflet.