

Virtual Learning

Excerpt from *Adulthood in the Time of COVID* by Amanda Backer

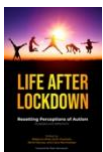
Many autistic adults struggle with anxiety, especially in social situations like job interviews, work, or college. Matthew is one such student. He had just started college and was having a difficult time. Matthew struggles with extreme social anxiety and he found himself “freezing up” when asked a question during class, or during presentations and group projects. He didn’t know anyone on campus and desperately wanted friends, but he didn’t know how to initiate conversations with others.

The pandemic, although stressful in many ways, provided a surprising new opportunity for dealing with anxiety. Autistic individuals were allowed to work or attend school virtually, which relieved the immediacy of stressful in-person interactions. As Mark learned skills for work and school in this new online environment, his stress lessened. He was able to learn skills in a less threatening environment, and was able to practice them virtually until he felt comfortable having conversations, answering questions, and collaborating with others.

“We worked diligently with Matthew to get him adjusted to this “new version” of school and familiarized him with the differing expectations and responsibilities involving virtual interaction. To his surprise, he realized that it was much easier for him to stay organized, ask questions (via the chat box), follow instructions, and learn new concepts when he participated in classes this way. With the social pressure removed, it was easier for him to focus and learn. Eventually, he found that he even felt more socially confident on camera than he usually does during face-to-face interaction. He explained that during virtual interactions, he could just turn off the camera or say he was having technical difficulties if he needed to take a break.”

Sometimes autistic individuals need a less threatening setting in which to learn skills. By having less social pressure and sensory overwhelm, they are able to practice skills, engage with others, and have an easy way “out” when they need a break. Eventually, they can begin to try out their skills in person. Virtual learning and work may be occurring less frequently, but can still be used as a learning tool.

“Matthew’s grades improved dramatically and he even began to form acquaintances through his virtual classes. We found ways to observe these social interactions and coached him through them from the sidelines, so he was able to practice his social skills in a very real way. Matthew has now established relationships with his peers (because of his beaming online personality) and feels prepared to meet them in person now that most of his anxiety about interacting with them has subsided.”



<https://www.amazon.com/Life-After-Lockdown-Resetting-Perceptions/dp/1956110038>