



# LIFE SKILLS

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## Finances

Many people have a hard time managing money, but for people on the spectrum it can be harder due to higher dysregulation and impulsivity. This is something to keep in mind when you enroll at a post-secondary institution, as there are a number of expenses involved that you want to ensure both you and your family can cover.

### These include:

- University tuition
- Books
- Rent
- Transportation
- Food
- Clothing
- Entertainment

### Some costs are fixed (out of your control), while some costs are variable (within your control).

- University tuition is usually a fixed cost, although bursaries, scholarships and student loans can help
- Books, study guides, laptops and possibly software programs are likely all necessary for you to purchase and be expensive. Look into second hand books if possible, refurbished laptops and bursaries from the disability services offices for specialized equipment or software that you may require
- Rent is usually a fixed price, but having a roommate or two can help reduce costs if you don't mind sharing your living space with other people
- Transportation costs are usually fixed (e.g., bus fare and parking rates) but can vary depending on the frequency and distance of your commute. See if riding your bike or walking is an option – it's healthy too!
- Food costs can vary depending on whether you want to make your own meals, pack a lunch from home or eat out on campus. Eating out can be expensive, especially for healthier food options so consider bringing your own food to eat on campus if you can
- Clothing costs can range from very little to a lot if you want to wear the latest fashions. On campus you will see people wearing a wide variety of clothes. Comfort might matter more to you than fashion. Thrifting (buying second hand clothes at a thrift shop) is also trendy!
- Entertainment costs can range from a lot to a little depending on what you like to do in your spare time (e.g., video games, concerts, hobbies and other leisure activities like attending sporting events or playing on a team). Often there are reduced ticket prices for students to attend events on campus (e.g., a home game for your school's football team or a play put on by drama students at your school)

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## Budgeting

Knowing what expenses are necessities and which are not is one key component of budgeting and can be difficult for many people. It can be tempting to spend money when you should be saving it and the thrill of an extravagant purchase can quickly give way to the financial consequences that follow if you aren't in a position to buy it.



### Some helpful advice:

- Create a budget before you apply for post-secondary school just to make sure you can cover all your expenses
- Sit down with your parents or someone with financial expertise and go through some potential budgeting scenarios to prepare for your future costs (you can find information about budget planning online via school, bank and government websites)
- Track your spending using a budgeting program or a spending app. Given how popular smartphones are these days, this may be the most convenient option for you.
- Budgeting and banking apps allow you to input your rent, food, transportation and other expenses and keep track of your spending in certain areas, letting you know when you are exceeding your set limits

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## Laundry

Many apartments and residences have shared laundry facilities, or you might have to bring clothes to an off-site laundromat for cleaning.

- Loads usually take 1.5-2 hours to cycle through both washer and dryer. It is good etiquette to move them through promptly, so that others are not blocked from using the machines; this also reduces the risk of your clothes being stolen
- Use of laundry facilities may be restricted to daytime only. Even if they are not restricted, it may still be courteous to use in daylight hours so as to avoid making noise while people are trying to sleep
- You may find it useful to do some reconnaissance to figure out when other people use shared laundry facilities, so that you can choose a time when few people will be around
- There are often clothes cleaning services that will do laundry for you for extra expense. This may be a good periodic option if you are overwhelmed and this has stopped you from completing your laundry
- Clothes come with tags that explain how they should be washed
- Most clothes can go through the laundry machine, but some fancy fabrics cannot
- Warm water is usually fine, but some clothes need cold water. Water temperature can be adjusted using the laundry machine controls
- Many people wash coloured and white clothes together for convenience, but sometimes colours can bleed off and affect white fabrics, so other people wash coloured and white clothes separately. This sort of bleeding will be especially likely if you use warm water, but cold water might not be as effective in getting things clean

## Laundry Supplies

- Laundry machines may require a small payment (perhaps with coins, perhaps by credit or debit card)
- You may need to bring your own laundry detergent. Even if you can buy detergent at the laundromat, your own will likely be cheaper
- Dryer balls or dryer sheets can be helpful to eliminate static on your clothes
- Most laundry machines should have some pictograms with basic instructions on how they should be used. Make sure to examine these. If you find the instructions already



on the machine confusing or incomplete, consider asking for assistance or doing some research and creating your own instructions list

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## Transportation

### Driving

Research suggests autistic teenagers are less likely to learn to drive than neurotypical teenagers. I - the autistic author of this section - do know how to drive, and I have passed every road test I took in more than one country. However, I do find driving somewhat anxiety-provoking, due to the demands of controlling a large vehicle in fast-changing environments, and so I tend to avoid it whenever I possibly can. It is common for autistic people to experience sensory overload, so many choose alternatives to driving.

Nevertheless, in North America, public transportation infrastructure is often slow and inefficient compared to driving. Moreover, having the ability to drive gives you some added flexibility. For example, it might allow you to work in jobs that would otherwise be inaccessible, or it might be useful when pandemics or other unforeseen disruptions make public transportation difficult or dangerous to access. For these reasons, I'm glad I know how to drive.

It might be difficult to find the time to learn to drive when you are working on your postsecondary studies. This could be a reason to learn in high school. However, if you are already in postsecondary and have not yet had a chance to learn to drive, you might still find it useful to learn. It could give you added options after you are finished school and looking for work. If you or your parents have the money, I certainly recommend taking formal driving lessons. That is what I did and the formal approach helped with my anxiety.



### Public Transportation

If you do not want to drive, it is often still possible to get where you want to go using public transportation. Although it takes longer to get places using public transportation than it does to drive to places, you might be able to read or study while you are taking public transit, so you might not actually "lose" time. Many if not most universities will actually include a public transportation pass in your tuition fees, so that you can use your student ID card as a bus pass.

- When taking an unfamiliar route using public transportation, start by doing research
- Most public transportation agencies have an online tool that can automatically find a route between any two places in the system. Once you have found your route, write down key information like the stop(s) you will need to get off at, the stop(s) before the stops you will need to get off at, and the times that buses/trains will arrive. Some transportation agencies are better than others at following time-tables
- More and more buses these days come with systems that automatically announce bus stops. This is certainly an important accessibility measure, but you might still find some buses that don't have these, or buses where the announcements are hard to hear.



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For this reason, it is often useful to use the GPS and maps in your phone to track your current location relative to the stop you plan to get off at. Train stops are farther apart than bus stops, but train stops are usually announced more clearly than bus stops

- If you are nervous about being able to get off at the correct bus stop, you could try talking to the bus driver, explaining that you have a disability, and asking the driver to let you know when you arrive at a given stop. However, different individual bus drivers and different bus systems vary in the degree to which they are accommodating of disability
- It can also be helpful to explore bus stop locations, so that you know what they will look like. You could do this with tools like Google Street View. Furthermore, when you are touring prospective university campuses, visiting the bus stops and seeing which buses arrive where can be helpful
- Consider taking a bus earlier than the last bus available before your scheduled classes or appointments, in case there is any disruption in the bus system. This is an especially good idea when you are going to exams
- It is also helpful to have your bus pass or bus fare ready in hand before the bus approaches so you do not have to search for these things when you are entering a bus and people are waiting behind you

### Where to Sit or Stand on the Bus

There are some social etiquette “rules” about proper spacing out on the bus. In general, people aim to have the maximum possible space between themselves and strangers. On a crowded bus, you might all pack very closely together, but in a less crowded bus, try to sit in a way that gives everyone personal space.

If the bus is very crowded, standing people may have to obstruct the hallway, forcing people to squeeze past other bodies to reach the exits, but if the bus is less crowded, try to make sure the path to the exits is clear.

When you are sharing a space with strangers, there might be some safety risks. If you are nervous about this, consider sitting somewhere closer to the bus driver, so the bus driver can intervene in any incident. However, the seats closest to the driver are also priority seating for people with physical disabilities, so if you sit in one of them, be prepared to move. You also have the choice to leave a bus if you feel unsafe or are overwhelmed by the experience.

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### Other Options

Driving and public transportation aren't the only ways of going from point to point. Other options include:

#### Walking

This isn't much use if you live a substantial distance away from campus, but if you live on-campus, you may be able to get around fairly well on foot most of the time.

#### Biking

I currently live in a flat city with lots of bike paths. This makes it very easy to get from Point A



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to Point B on a bicycle. I personally find biking less stressful than driving, but others may disagree.

p.s. - If you bike, wear a helmet. This is important. I would be dead if I didn't wear a helmet. I'm not exaggerating!

### **App-based ride share**

Companies like Uber and Lyft sometimes have bad reputations for safety compared to traditional taxi services, but I haven't had a bad experience yet, and they are cheaper than taxis (albeit much, much more expensive than public transit). I also found the apps very user-friendly.

### **Taxis**

These are more professionally organized than app-based ride share, but also more expensive. You might have to use telephones to book taxis, and some autistic people find phone calls stressful. However, some jurisdictions have taxis but not app-based ride share.

### **Safe ride services**

Lots of colleges and universities have a safe ride and safe walk services which are advertised as an alternative to walking home alone at night. This may be restricted to on-campus destinations.

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## **Food**

There are many reasons why food could be particularly challenging for autistic people, but perhaps the most important reason is the sensory discomfort or distress many of us can experience - either directly in response to the food itself, or in response to noise and other stimuli in public eateries.

We can also run into some difficulties because of our desire for sameness and routine - which can make us eat the same things again and again - or our executive function difficulties, which might make cooking hard.

- One other potential issue is posed by eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia that can co-occur with autism. This section is NOT about managing eating disorders, and if you think you have one, please seek professional help
- Consider seeking help from a nutritionist or dietician in building a healthful diet and eating routine. Healthful eating is key to maintaining overall health that is needed to support your work and academic progress

**If you have your own kitchen** try to develop a routine around grocery shopping that ensures a balanced diet. Try to practice making some simple meals before you leave home so that you don't have to learn how to cook at the same time as trying to keep up with your studies.

**If you live in a residence and don't have your own kitchen**, you may have to eat from residence cafeterias or from food outlets on campus. It's important to do research and figure out your options – you might, at the beginning of the semester, have to pay for a meal plan for the entire semester, and it may or may not be possible to change it later!



It may not be possible to get accommodations for the sensory distress we can experience as autistic people, but it might still be worthwhile to ask whoever coordinates housing accommodations about the possibility of getting accommodations of sensory distress.

Dietary restrictions such as food allergies, gluten-free restrictions, or dietary religious observances are likely to be taken much more seriously, but make sure you communicate these ahead of time.

- If you pick non-busy times with no line, you might be able to go into the cafeteria quickly and take food back to your dorm, but you'll need to do research to figure out whether this is possible under your school's rules. A visit to explore how things work in person can be helpful if information from the website is insufficient
- Finally, whether you live on- or off-campus, you might want to sometimes purchase food from cafes and such on campus when you need a snack. It can be useful to spend some time investigating different campus eateries to see what foods are available, to see when eateries tend to be busy and when they tend to be quiet, and so on

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## Housing

When it comes to housing, there are a handful of options for post-secondary students to choose from. You can stay at home and commute to school every day, which is most convenient if your home is within a close enough distance to the campus. You can rent an apartment nearby the campus or live in one of the institution's residence buildings, either in a single room or with a roommate.

### **Here are some things to consider when making your choice:**

- Living at home is financially convenient, as is living in a dorm or residence building with financial aid. Conversely, apartments not sponsored by the university require you to pay rent and bills on any services and utilities you use
- Living in a dorm gives you way more social opportunities than you would have at home or even a non-university apartment. Since you are in a building with fellow students and maybe even fellow classmates, you'll have an abundance of people around you to make friends
- Living in a dorm room with a roommate may present some social difficulties in regards to compromise, interaction, personality clashes and a number of other social factors that can pop up. If you feel that it would be difficult to share a room with someone else, you should consider either getting a single dorm room or living off campus
- Living in a dorm or an apartment close to campus can be more convenient than living at home depending on how far away your home is
- Commuting by car or public transit can lead to being late or potentially missing classes depending on traffic as well as other potential issues
- Living in a dorm or an apartment requires you to have a number of independent skills you may not have at the moment. While reading about these skills helps, knowledge means nothing without experience. Ask your parents if they can bring you up to speed in areas such as finances, cleaning, laundry, and sit in and watch them do these things themselves; participating where you can to really get a concrete understanding of what to do and how

