

Autism Tips for First Responders

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Autism generally impacts:

- Communication
- Language processing
- Behavior
- Social interaction
- Sensory processing

When a person is non-speaking, they may communicate through their actions, expressions, or body language.

Behavior reflects an underlying need

As anxiety increases, the ability to process language decreases.

Behavior Differences

Some people may rely on routines or repetitive behaviors to self-regulate and calm down in anxiety-provoking situations.

These routines are better completed than interrupted. Interrupting self-regulating behaviors can cause further distress and anxiety.

Do not interpret unusual behavior as belligerent or aggressive.

In a tense situation, a person may cope by covering their ears or eyes, shaking or rocking, swinging their arms, or by humming, vocalizing, or repeating phrases.

De-escalation

- **Calm creates calm**
- **Identify the need:** "Help me understand"
- **Validate:** "Yes, I know you want..."
- **Reassure:** "Yes, I'm trying to help..."
- **Say what you want** - not what you don't want
- **Replace:** offer alternatives to meet need differently
- **Reduce fear:** try to avoid coercion
- **Allow time and space to defuse**

Be Patient

Interactions with people with autism may require more time

Listen attentively

Wait for the person to finish talking, typing, formulating thoughts and words

Limit the number of officers providing instructions

Keep in mind YOUR part in the communication exchange

- Use the word yes
- Speak calmly - use a normal tone of voice
- Use short, direct phrases
- Use non-threatening body language and avoid abrupt movements or actions

Understand the importance of routines and predictability

Allow the person to maintain routine if possible

Do not interrupt a compulsive routine if it is not dangerous (doing so may provoke **extreme distress**)

Use “first ___ then ___” statements to prepare for change or explain events

Recognize fear

We all react with a fight, flight, or freeze response

Instill calm / offer reassurance

Avoid crowding and maintain a safe distance (for the person, yourself, and for bystanders)

Impulse control may be significantly challenged, and the person may act quickly without considering or understanding the consequences

Reduce sources of overstimulation

Turn off sirens and flashing lights

Ask others to move away, or move the person to quieter surroundings

Keep canines in the law enforcement vehicle

Remember that covering ears or moving away may be an attempt to reduce stimulation

Communicate effectively

- Establish rapport—let the person know you are there to help and protect
- Use your name rather than your title
- Learn and use the person’s name
- Keep commands and comments short
- Say it and show it
- Check for understanding
- Explain your actions in advance
- Pause and wait for an answer

Be aware of different forms of communication

Some people may use speech, while others may use gestures or sign language

Some may type or write to communicate

Others may select picture icons on a speech generating device or may carry a book of communication icons

Use all available resources

- Speak to the person first (and as frequently as possible)
- Allow a family member, friend, or direct support staff to assist if necessary
- Look for medical alert bracelets or necklaces
- Look for medical identification tags on clothing, shoelaces, or belts
- Check 911-Address-Flagging database