

Interacting with Individuals with Autism During Emergencies

Know the signs of a person with ASD and how you can effectively respond to them.



When having a conversation with a student with autism spectrum disorder, it is important to remember that people with autism often struggle with seemingly basic interactions or communications.

By Cecilia H. Knight · July 21, 2015

Emergency situations are frightening and stressful for everyone involved, but they become even more complex when an individual with [autism](#) spectrum disorder (ASD) is present. In these situations, it is crucial for campus safety personnel and law enforcement to have proper training on how to identify, understand and interact with individuals with ASD because behaviors commonly associated with ASD can be easily

misinterpreted.

ASD is defined as a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by deficits in social communication and interaction, in addition to restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. The presentation and severity of symptoms vary for each individual with ASD. The disorder cannot be identified based on physical appearance, so close attention must be paid to behaviors. Individuals with ASD may struggle to communicate, make appropriate eye contact or respond to someone calling their name, which is why training for safety personnel is so important.

Educating first responders, campus security and police officers, and hospital personnel to recognize the signs of ASD and react accordingly is vital to minimize risk during emergency situations for all individuals involved. Parents and professionals agree that safety is a huge concern for this population, as individuals with ASD may be easily distracted, become lost or even elope from their surroundings. By increasing autism awareness, safety personnel will be more mindful of individuals with special needs during emergencies.

The information below is not meant to replace training on this topic but will help provide an overview of key points.

How to Identify Individuals with ASD

Individuals with ASD may present the following characteristics and behaviors. It is important to not immediately interpret these behaviors as a lack of cooperation.

- 1. May have limited or no eye contact or may actively avoid eye contact
- 2. May have difficulty following verbal instructions
- 3. May need extra response time to process what is being asked
- 4. May repeat sounds, words or phrases out of context in a repetitive manner
- 5. May be very sensitive to noises, lights or touch
- 6. May engage in repetitive motor behaviors, such as rocking, hand flapping, etc.
- 7. May be resistant to changes from normal routine

Be Prepared to Address Deficits in Communication

Individuals with ASD may have very limited verbal speech or may be completely non-vocal, relying on alternative forms of communication, such as an iPad, iconic communication book or sign language. They may also have difficulty understanding and processing verbal instructions.

For example, they may not understand concepts, such as “now,” “immediately,” “emergency,” “danger” or “illegal.” These deficits are shown in the following examples:

- When asked, “What’s your name?” Julie says, “Name.”
- When asked several questions in quick succession, “What’s your name? Do you know where your mom is? Where do you live, son?” James is not able to process the information fast enough to respond and begins to cry.
- Even though there is a scary scene all around, Jose continues to talk about prehistoric life on earth, seemingly unaware of the dangers.

Social Interaction May Pose Challenges

Individuals with ASD may have trouble initiating or appropriately responding to social interactions; struggle using or understanding facial expressions or body language; have difficulty identifying and regulating emotions; lack awareness of accepted or appropriate social norms, boundaries or rules; and have limited awareness of basic safety skills. Examples of social interaction deficits are shown in the following scenarios:

- When approached by another person, Nadia does not respond or acknowledge the person in any way.
- When told, “Look up here,” Jason looks down to the ground, shifting his eyes and avoiding eye contact.
- Michael approaches unfamiliar people and asks personal or inappropriate questions, such as, “What car do you drive?” or “Do you want to come to my house?”
- In the middle of an adult conversation, Maria interrupts and does not respond to requests to wait or leave.

Repetitive, Ritualistic Behaviors May Be Present

Individuals with ASD may repeat sounds, words or phrases out of context; repeat movements, such as tensing, touching, looking, etc. with no apparent purpose; be extremely rigid with routine and inflexible with any changes in schedule; have highly fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity, for

instance talking only about specific topics or hoarding particular objects. Examples of these deficits are:

- Ben has a tantrum when his mom takes an alternate route home due to road construction.
- Tyler refuses to get in the car with his mom because he usually takes the bus home from school.
- Connor runs across the street to touch the numbers on a license plate of a parked car.
- Kevin repeatedly waves his fingers in front of his eyes and pulls grass from the yard to rub between his fingers and wave in the air.
- Preston spends many hours studying and memorizing all the train lines, times and stops for the local transit system.
- Jessica begins to yell and refuses to leave when not allowed to watch her favorite movie in its entirety.

These observable behaviors are possible signs of ASD and may intensify with increased stress or anxiety. Knowing how to identify an individual with ASD is extremely important, but once identified, how should you react?

How to Work with Individuals with ASD

The 15 tips below will help guide interactions with individuals with ASD.

- 1. Be patient.
- 2. Maintain a calm demeanor.
- 3. Do not interpret behavior as being disrespectful, noncompliant or threatening.
- 4. Avoid presenting loud noises, bright lights, etc.
- 5. Present one question at a time.
- 6. Simplify verbal instructions (e.g., do not use too many words; use “first/then” language; use gestures, pictures and objects to communicate if needed).
- 7. Allow the individual time to process the information and attempt to respond.
- 8. If an individual does not respond or is agitated, try offering choices or redirect his or her attention to something the individual finds interesting.
- 9. Try to use restricted topics of interest to redirect and gain attention (e.g., trains, numbers, wheels, etc.).
- 10. Provide as much comfortable distance as safety allows.
- 11. Consider writing or typing instructions using a tablet or phone.
- 12. Do not assume that an individual understands body language, facial expressions, sarcasm, joking or other social cues.
- 13. Try to use phrases, such as “Use your words,” “Tell me,” or “I don’t understand that” to facilitate communication.
- 14. If not in imminent danger, consider allowing the individual to complete a routine or activity before asking him or her to follow an instruction.
- 15. If possible, allow a familiar person to redirect the individual rather than an unfamiliar person.

It is important for safety personnel to know that individuals with ASD may display tantrums or aggressive behaviors. These behaviors are often directly related to the individual’s inability to effectively communicate and/or unexpected stressful changes in routines. When interacting with individuals with

ASD, it is crucial for safety personnel and police officers to be patient, maintain a calm demeanor and attempt to deescalate behaviors by redirecting the individual's attention to something preferred.

Another aspect to keep in mind is that many individuals with ASD have difficulty with sensory input; this includes constantly manipulating or gazing at items and intolerance or avoidance of particular environmental sounds. Ordinary stimuli, including sounds, visuals and touches, may be experienced as painful or unpleasant to individuals with ASD. As such, safety personnel should try to avoid loud noises and bright lights, and try to give the individual some space when approaching and interacting. If relocating the individual is required, try to use redirection techniques. For instance, offer something for the individual to hold or come over to see. Offering choices is key!

It is important to know that an individual with ASD may not recognize the uniform of an authority figure, may not understand the role or recognize the authority of a professional, and may not understand rules or laws. To facilitate the interaction, safety personnel and law enforcement should use simple, clear language to identify themselves and their position, convey what the individual must do and why, and provide choices to the individual.

Cecilia H. Knight, MA, BCBA, the director of the Institute of Behavioral Training (IBT), has designed effective training programs for schools, first responders and various other groups on how they can effectively work with individuals with ASD. For more information, visit www.ibehavioraltraining.com.

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