



Responder Preparedness for Persons with Autism

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) most recent data indicate that as many as 1 in 68 children in the United States are now diagnosed with autism. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can vary in severity of symptoms, age of onset, and the presence of various features such as language and intellectual ability. The manifestations of ASD can differ considerably across individuals. There is no single behavior that is always present in every individual with ASD. The impact of a disaster may exacerbate existing behaviors and affect how an individual with ASD is able to cope with the situation. Learn what you can do to keep that person safe.

Behavior and Sensory

- If possible, turn off sirens, lights, and remove canine partners. Attempt to find a quiet location for the person, especially if you need to talk with them.
- Avoid touching the person and, if necessary, gesture or slowly guide the person.
- If the person is showing obsessive or repetitive behaviors, or is fixated on a topic or object, try to avoid stopping these behaviors or taking the object away from them, unless there is risk to self or others.
- Make sure that the person is away from potential hazards or dangers (busy streets, etc.) since they may not have a fear of danger.
- Be alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive, unexplained behavior. If the person is not harming themselves or others, wait until these behaviors diminish.

Social Interaction

- Approach the person in a calm manner. Try not to appear threatening.

- The person may not understand typical social rules, so they may be dressed oddly, prefer to be closer or farther away from you than expected, or not make eye contact. It's best not to try and point out or change these behaviors unless it's absolutely necessary.
- The person may also look at you at an odd angle, laugh or giggle inappropriately, or not seem to take the situation seriously. Do not interpret these behaviors as deceit or disrespect.
- Because of the lack of social understanding, persons with autism spectrum disorder may display behaviors that are misinterpreted as evidence of drug abuse or psychosis, defiance or belligerence. Don't make assumptions based on initial appearance.

Communication

- Speak calmly—use direct, concrete phrases with no more than one or two steps, or write brief instructions on a notepad or computer if the person can read.
- Allow extra time for the person to respond.
- The person may repeat what you have said, repeat the same phrase over and over, talk about topics unrelated to the situation, or have an unusual or monotone voice. This is their attempt to communicate, and is not meant to irritate you or be disrespectful.
- Avoid using phrases that have more than one meaning such as “spread eagle” “knock it off” or “cut it out”.
- Visually check to see if there is a wrist or arm tattoo or bracelet that identifies the person as having ASD.
- Some people with autism don't show indications of pain—check for injuries.

Source: Hawaii Emergency Preparedness System of Support Project, Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii (<http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/tips/>), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Easter Seals.

Developed by the Florida Department of Health Bureau of Preparedness and Response and the Florida State University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.