

# Trauma-Informed Sensory Positive Toolkit for Disaster Settings

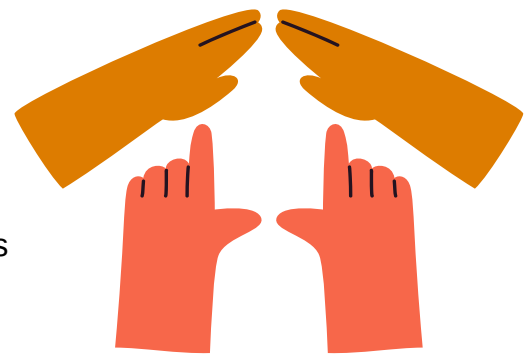
## *Shelter Staff and Volunteers*

*This trauma-informed sensory positive toolkit was developed in partnership with the PA Department of Human Services for the purpose of informing self-advocates, shelter staff/volunteers, families, caregivers, and Direct Support Professionals (DSP) on how to best support persons with sensory needs, including individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and/or Autism in a disaster shelter setting.*

*This document is part of a collection of resource guides focused on the needs specific to a disaster shelter. To access additional autism-related resources visit the AID in PA website: [aidinpa.org](http://aidinpa.org). There are also additional toolkits for [Self-Advocates](#) and [Families, Caregivers, and Direct Support Professionals](#).*

### Introduction

Any kind of emergency can be traumatic. Some people are affected by trauma as soon as the event happens. Some people may not feel the effects of trauma for days, weeks, or months. And, others, are affected immediately by trauma and can continue to be affected for days, weeks, or months. Trauma looks different for everyone, including people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and people with Intellectual Disabilities.



### Communication

People may experience significant challenges communicating, or getting their thoughts and needs across in a manner that others readily understand. It is important to understand that for some individuals their expressive and receptive language skills may vary. Never assume that an individual is not able to communicate because they don't use spoken language, and never assume a person is able to communicate because they speak. Presume competence and take the time to learn how to communicate with someone you support using their preferred methods. Your ability to learn about and accept how a person communicates and to provide necessary support is empowering.

Not all disabilities are visible and utilizing inclusive language and other communication techniques will support a shelter volunteer's ability to establish a good working relationship to support the individual's recovery from the emergency.

### What Can You Do:

- Familiarize yourself with the methods someone uses to communicate. Do they need to use different methods of communication in different settings or situations? Do they use multiple methods simultaneously?
- Never pressure or force a person who uses speech to "just say it." Instead, be patient and make sure they have the tools necessary to communicate in the way that works best for them.
- As a general rule of thumb, slow the pace of your speech and use concrete or concise language when communicating with someone you support. If the individual uses technology or devices (with or without spoken languages), follow the same principle of using concrete and concise language.

## Other Communication Tips

Communication tips and recommendations for engaging someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

### Attention

- Use the person's name at the beginning, so it's clear you are addressing them.
- Help the person feel comfortable by talking about a special interest or topic.
- Be aware of your environment. A noisy, crowded room may make communication difficult.

### Questions

- Give a longer window to respond to a question.
- Don't ask too many questions.
- Keep them short and close-ended.
- Offer options or choices.
- Be specific—e.g. "What did you order for lunch?" instead of "How was your lunch?"

### Body Language

- Don't rely on non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice.
- Many with ASD report eye contact as difficult and uncomfortable.

## Other Communication Tips (continued)

### Verbal Communication

- Use concise sentences to prevent word overload.
- Pause between ideas.
- Be literal. Avoid irony, sarcasm, figures of speech, or exaggerations.
- Explaining something complex? Write it out, make a visual, or number the topics. Allow the individual time to ask questions and process what is being said. After, check for understanding.

### Common Factors That May Affect Communication

- Sensory or environmental variables.
- Emotion or tone of situations.
- Social variables.
- Anxiety.
- Sleep or fatigue.

### Adjusting Your Communication

- Communicate purposefully and politely. Eliminate unimportant conversations that create awkward interactions. Some people may be uncomfortable with small talk.
- Include the individual in every interaction they should be included in.
- Use clear, concrete language (no idioms or vague abstract language, ex. “What’s Up?”)

### What Can You Do:

- Observe the individual and spend time with them to learn about their strengths, interests, and needs.
- Ask what they like and what they are good at.
- Ask caregivers about the individual’s strengths and needs.
- Discover the times when they seem content or at ease and note their activities at the time.

### Helpful Communication Resources:

- <https://paautism.org/resource/communication-works-both-ways/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/autism-interaction-communication/>
- [The Spectrum of Communication — PAAutism.org, an ASERT Autism Resource Guide](#)

## Sensory Differences

Many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have challenges in sensory areas that affect their daily lives. They can be hyper and/or hyposensitive to any of the senses. In an emergency situation, these challenges will be greater.

### Hyposensitive Examples (Under-Sensitive)

A person may seek sensory input by:

- Seeking sound: Banging objects loudly, turning up the volume.
- Constantly moving: spinning, rocking, etc.
- Mouthing: Showing a preference for spicy food or other strong flavors, putting things in their mouth.
- Smelling or sniffing objects.
- Excessive touching: Rubbing something with texture over and over again.

### Hypersensitive Examples (Over-Sensitive)

- Bothered by loud places, particular noises (e.g., squeaky doors), fluorescent lights, scented products, and certain fabrics or textures.
- Food sensitivities (strong flavors or certain textures) may lead to a limited diet.
- Interference with hygiene (hair brushing and/or teeth brushing may be painful).
- Sensitivity to touch.
- Fine motor difficulties (handwriting, buttons, shoelaces, etc.)
- Dislike of certain odors or smells.



### Signs of Sensory Overload

- Covering of ears/eyes.
- Putting head down.
- Wearing a hood, sunglasses, headphones, or hat indoors.
- Appears stressed or anxious.
- Appears to be in pain.
- A marked change from usual behavior.
- A change in communication style or routine.
- Elopement.

## What Can You Do:

- Ask about sensory concerns and complete the safety plan.
- When meeting individually and in groups, consider the space.
- Try to use windows, lamps, or indirect lighting instead of fluorescent lights.
- Consider a private room instead of a common area with background noise.
- Create a sensory tool kit. Provide “fidgets” for people to use during downtime (stress balls, fidget spinners, Koosh balls, etc.)

## Sensory Toolkit Suggestions

- Show pictures and create a sequence of steps for what the individual should expect to happen.
- Sunglasses to alleviate brightness.
- Lava lamps and slow-moving videos or projections.
- Essential oils or other pleasant smelling items (also have an item to put the scent on as appropriate including cotton ball, perfume strip, or other items.)
- Calming music.
- Notepad and pen to ask for and record the individual’s preferred calming smells and any overwhelming scents/smells.
- Have unscented soap options and unscented garbage/trash bags.
- Offer a variety of scented hand sanitizers.
- Noise-cancelling headphones.
- Visual supports or index cards with simple images to explain directions.
- Phone to play a preferred song or music on repeat for comfort.
- Have some snacks available (i.e., bread-based, starchy, or salty snacks.)
- Have cup and straw options available.
- Provide options for fidget toys with different textures such as rubbery, stretchy, smooth, plastic, beaded, etc.
- Stretch bands can be used as fidgets. Examples include:
  - Tie the band at the ends to make a circle and have the individual stretch the band as far as they can with their arms,
  - The band can be placed around the bottom of two front chair legs so the individual can kick against the band to get a gross motor workout without disturbing others.
  - Wrap the band around the door handle for pulling/stretching, etc.

## Sensory Toolkit Suggestions (*continued*)

- Chairs or large exercise balls that rock can be relaxing and calming (some individuals also prefer chairs that spin.)
- Provide a heavy or weighted blanket, bean bag chair, lap pad, or wrist/ankle weights to provide touch and pressure input to an individual's body to help calm an overreaction to movement.

## Helpful Sensory Resources:

- <https://paautism.org/resource/autism-interaction-communication/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/assist-toolkit/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/mental-health-emergency-situations/>

## Disruption in Routine

For people with autism, who often rely on predictability and routine to feel calm and safe, change can affect them differently. Adjusting to a new situation may be met with anxiety, fear, or resistance. They may become anxious because they don't know what to expect in new or different situations.

Emergency situations are new, different, and probably very far from their usual structure and routine. It's likely they've never been in an emergency situation and don't know what to expect. This can make an already stressful situation even worse. Being clear about what you want them to do and explaining what is going to happen, can be a helpful way of reducing their anxiety.

## What Can You Do:

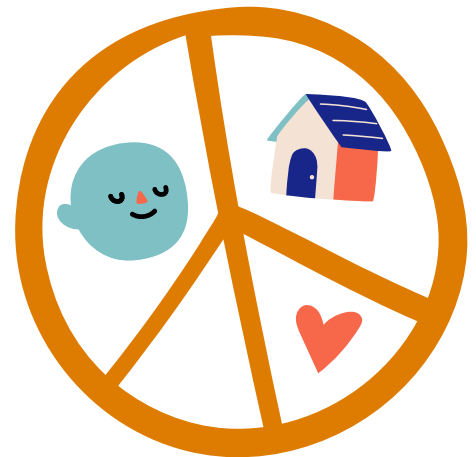
- Have a visual schedule of day-to-day activities.
- Try to give advance notice about new situations, if possible.
- Share details about the change and how it could affect the person.
- Discuss the positive outcomes of the new situation or change.
- Use visual tools to provide predictability and structure.
- Post a visual menu for meals that will be offered each day.

## What Can You Do (*continued*):

- Limit to one or two choices if the person appears overwhelmed.
- Give warning for transitioning from one activity to another.
- Keep sensory needs in mind.
- Plan ahead.
- Practice any change, if possible.
- Use a countdown calendar.
- Provide a social narrative (e.g. a written and/or illustrated guide to a specific social setting, such as how to use public restrooms safely.)

## Helpful Routine Resources:

- <https://paautism.org/resource/mental-health-emergency-situations/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/using-visual-schedules-social-story/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/adjusting-new-situations-environment-anxiety/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/create-a-social-story/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/visual-schedules/>



## Limited Diet

Some autistic individuals have difficulty with food. Some individuals may have limited foods they like, have ritualistic eating behaviors, or have sensory issues. Sensitivity to taste, textures, and smells may make providing those with a limited diet challenging in an emergency situation.

## What Can You Do:

- Understand that the limited diet is due to sensory challenges and that the individual is not trying to be difficult or “spoiled”.
- Find out from the individual or family members what is eaten at home.

## What Can You Do (*continued*):

- Post a visual schedule of the menu for the day.
- If possible, provide choices.
- Due to sensory challenges, it may help to have the individual eat alone or at a time when few others are dining.

## Helpful Diet/Eating Resources:

- <https://paautism.org/resource/assist-toolkit/>
- <https://paautism.org/resource/food-selectivity-diet-eating-feeding/>

## Creating a Sensory-Friendly Space

If possible, creating a sensory-friendly space could really alleviate some of the stress and trauma individuals with autism, intellectual disabilities, or others may face when they are feeling particularly overwhelmed. Having a designated sensory-friendly space makes it easier for individuals who have sensory sensitivities, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who are sensitive to things like noise, colors, sounds, and smells.



### Some Suggestions on How to Make a Sensory-Friendly Space

- An area where the lights could be dimmed or blinds/curtains closed.
- Creating a space that is free of clutter and debris.
- Providing access to coloring books, paper, crayons, and sensory/fidget toys.
- Marking the area on a visual map and having signs indicating the area is a sensory-friendly space.
- Providing headphones, earplugs, and sunglasses.

## Helpful Sensory-Friendly Resources:

- <https://paautism.org/resource/hosting-sensory-friendly-event/>