

ASERT FAQ Sheet

Providing Support to an Individual with Autism in Crisis



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ASERT is funded by the Bureau of Autism Services, PA Department of Human Services

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877-231-4244

This resource provides basic tips and information on how to support an individual with autism who may be experiencing a difficult situation or crisis. It is important to note that some individuals with autism engage in stereotypic or repetitive behaviors or self-injury, that can make the person “look” like they are in crisis when they are not. As in any situation, take cues from family members, friends or others who know the individual well to determine what, if any, action needs to be taken.

How to approach someone with autism in crisis:

- Approach the individual slowly and cautiously.
- Keep your voice quiet and calm and provide short, direct statements about what you are doing. When asking the individual to do something, be concrete and phrase statements in terms of what you would like the person to do, rather than not do. For example: “Keep your hands to yourself” rather than “Don’t hit”.
- Avoid placing your hands on the individual unless they or someone else is in imminent risk of harm. When individuals are experiencing a crisis their perceptions of personal space are altered and typically need additional space rather than less. Giving the individual adequate personal space conveys respect for that individual and can help them de-escalate.
- Scan the environment and determine if there are any obvious “triggers” that may be contributing to the situation. If triggers are identified, remove them if possible.
- Once the individual begins to de-escalate, ask them if they understand what you are saying by having them repeat instructions back to you.
- Provide praise and positive feedback as the individual begins to de-escalate.

How to NOT approach someone with autism in crisis:

- Give multiple demands or ask multiple questions as this can overwhelm the individual even more and potentially escalate their behavior.
- Use a loud tone of voice. This is often a natural reaction when someone is in crisis, however for individuals with autism who may have hypersensitivities to noise, it may make the situation worse.
- Put your hands on the person as this is something that often will escalate anyone in crisis.

This Frequently Asked Questions Sheet was developed by the Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT). For more information, please contact ASERT at 877-231-4244 or info@PAautism.org.