



Interacting with Individuals with Autism in Emergency Settings

Autism is a spectrum disorder with a wide range of signs and symptoms. Interacting with individuals with autism in emergency settings will also vary widely. This resource provides some general tips and suggestions for interacting with an individual with autism in emergency settings.

APPROACH

- Approach the person slowly and calmly
- Identify yourself and your role, (e.g., "I'm a police officer")
- Speak slowly. Use short statements and concrete language
- Avoid using touch as this may be unpleasant and cause anxiety

CALM

- If possible, have the individual move to a quiet, less stimulating place to interview or examine
- Limit the use of sirens and flashing lights, or when possible turn them off completely
- Avoid quick movements and loud voices
- Limit the number of unfamiliar people around the person
- Allow individuals to engage in self-stimulatory behaviors such as hand flapping, rocking, jumping, spinning, etc. These are often calming for individuals and as long as they are not hurting themselves or others, should be allowed to engage in these behaviors.



COMMUNICATE

- Do not insist on eye contact, this can be difficult for some individuals and may cause anxiety
- Individuals may not understand body language, facial expressions or tone of voice
- Individuals may respond better to visual instructions. Using pictures, gestures, writing instructions down or demonstrating what you would like them to do may work better than verbal instructions
- Some individuals may not have spoken language and use a communication device (e.g., iPad). Make sure they have access to their communication device or provide them with pictures/images to communicate
- Give them extra time to process questions or directions. If they don't appear to understand after giving them time to process, try to rephrase the question or direction
- Explain everything that needs to be done one step at a time
- Avoid vague terms, metaphors, and figures of speech



EXAMINE

- If you need to physically examine the individual or provide care, explain in simple and concrete terms what you will do, and what they might see or feel
- Ask permission prior to making physical contact
- If possible, demonstrate what needs to be done on another person first
- Monitor for signs of anxiety or distress. Slow down, take a break or stop the examination if the individual appears to be getting agitated or anxious