



Managing a Crisis with Individuals with ASD and Serious Mental Illness

Serious mental illnesses are mental health disorders that cause substantial impairment in a person's functioning. People with autism can also have a serious mental illness. People with autism and serious mental illness may experience manic behaviors, depression, anxiety, paranoia, or even hallucinations or delusions. The beliefs they express may seem very unusual and illogical. Often they will appear quite frightened and can be argumentative. People with serious mental illness may also experience suicidal ideation.

There may be a time where first responders are called upon to help an individual with autism who shows symptoms of serious mental illness. There are several tips that can help first responders manage a crisis. Though each situation may be different, there are some skills first responders should consider.

1. Know the signs of serious mental illness and autism

A basic understanding of these concepts will increase your effectiveness in managing emergencies with people who may have either or both. Further information about psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder, and autism can be found within the ASERT site, which will provide greater understanding of these.

Please see the following titles:

- Identifying Individuals with Autism in Emergency Settings
- What are Psychotic Disorders
- Assessing for Suicidal Thoughts

2. Look for signs of suicidal thoughts or harm

It is important to make sure that the safety of the person in a crisis, and others around them, is a priority. Look for signs that the person is trying to harm themselves or others or is making threats.

4. Identify and reduce sensory stimulation

Loud noises, flashing lights, and crowds can make a crisis worse for individuals with autism. Choose one person to interact with the individual and have others give space whenever possible. Touch can be especially distressing for individuals with autism and serious mental illness, so consider physical contact as a last option. Warn the person before touching them. Do not leave the person alone as they may wander off or move back into danger.

3. Provide reassurance

Be sure to listen to the individual carefully about what is going on and what is wrong. The ability to listen carefully shows compassion and understanding. Uniforms can be frightening. State who you are, why you are there, and reassure the individual that you are interested in helping them and keeping them safe. State what you are going to do before doing it, then speak and move slowly.

5. Provide care in a compassionate way

People experiencing a mental health crisis may not be aware of their surroundings, experience confusion, or may not respond as they typically would. People with autism are slower to process speech, both when listening and responding. Make sure to provide clear, easy-to-understand directions by using short and simple sentences. Realize you may need to repeat yourself, but do so calmly and without judgment. Do not maintain continuous eye contact or insist the individual make eye contact, as this can be difficult and uncomfortable for them.



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