Understanding Anxiety in Emergency Situations

Individuals with autism may become anxious when interacting with first responders. This resource will help identify some of the reasons they may become anxious and tips to help reduce their anxiety.

Uncertainty

People with autism like routine and structure. 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 interacted with a first responder before, and don't know what to expect in the situation. 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.

Fear of New People or Experiences

People with autism may not be comfortable with new people or experiences. They may refuse to interact with people they don’t know. Individuals with autism may not answer questions or talk, and this could be for a few reasons. They may be overwhelmed and have a hard time managing their anxiety, be overwhelmed by sensory input, or they may have little to no expressive language. Being patient and taking time to establish trust can help them open up. Positive statements that you’re there to help, and some small talk about the person’s interests may help to build trust and reduce anxiety.

Trouble Communicating

One of the main symptoms of autism is trouble communicating. A person who struggles to communicate may become anxious when they are asked to communicate a lot, which is likely to happen when first responders are needed. It’s important to avoid overwhelming the person if they're struggling to communicate. Asking fewer questions and keeping them as simple as possible can be helpful. If possible, get as much information as you can from other sources to help reduce their need to communicate. This should help to reduce anxiety.