

Autism Spectrum Disorders and Law Enforcement

Awareness and education of first responders about disabilities increases their ability to provide appropriate response. Recognizing behaviors associated with autism will allow you to best respond to the situation.



A person on the autism spectrum may:

1. Not respond to a uniform, badge, or other emergency response symbols. Autism may limit a person's ability to recognize and differentiate uniforms and other common symbols. Pointing out these items to allow the person to focus is helpful.

2. Not provide I.D. when asked. Be patient and speak slowly and calmly. Keep questions simple and allow time for answers. Repeat or rephrase. The person may not be able to speak. Check for ID jewelry, an ID card, or ID sewn into the individual's clothing.

3. Lack awareness of danger. Gently persuade or remove the person from the dangerous situation. Offer an alternative to the dangerous action. Be aware that if the person is anxious there is a risk they could bolt without warning.

4. Continue to do something after being told to stop. Demonstrative, non-threatening gestures may communicate more effectively than a verbal command. Demonstrate what you want the person to do. Repeat the behaviors and instructions. Use a communication board if possible and allow time for processing of information before responses are given. Draw a simple picture of what you'd like the person to do (i.e. picture of a stop sign).

5. Appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The actions of people with ASD can appear to be odd or inappropriate. When asked about drug use, the person may admit to having taken drugs if they take prescribed medications. Avoid making assumptions about alcohol or drug use.

6. Become self-injurious. Under stress an individual may become self-injurious. Use the least invasive technique possible to ensure the individual's safety.

7. Become aggressive. Restraints should only be used if the individual's or other's safety is at risk. Individuals with ASD may have a weaker torso. Positional asphyxia could occur so it is critical to ensure that a prone position is not used and the person is moved to a secure and quiet place away from distractions. Also, the individual may be hypo-sensitive and not feel pain the same as others. Therefore, typical indications of pain would not be evident. De-escalation techniques to calm or distract the individual are safer and more effective.

Important Safety Facts

- Individuals with autism often have a high tolerance for pain. They may not tell you that they are injured. If you suspect a possible injury contact EMS.
- If you need to restrain an individual with autism remember that due to underdevelopment trunk muscles he or she is at especially HIGH RISK for positional asphyxia.
- Many children and adults with autism have little or no understanding of common dangers. A missing child or adult with autism may quickly be in a life-threatening situation.
- If the individual with autism, or suspected of having autism, is arrested segregate the individual from the general population if at all possible.

