Autism & First Responders

CARD
CENTER FOR AUTISM & RELATED DISABILITIES
at The University of South Florida

A practical guide for first responders to meet the needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Emergencies are a part of life. When the emergency involves a person with autism prior knowledge of the communication, behavior and social differences in autism is important. This brochure is designed to provide facts about autism to law enforcement and other first responders. Learn how individuals may react in emergency situations, and tips for responding.

UNDERSTANDING AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play, and socially interact with others. The first signs of autism usually appear as developmental delays before age three.

If you are the first responder to a disturbance or life-threatening situation involving an individual with autism, the following information will help to guide your interactions:
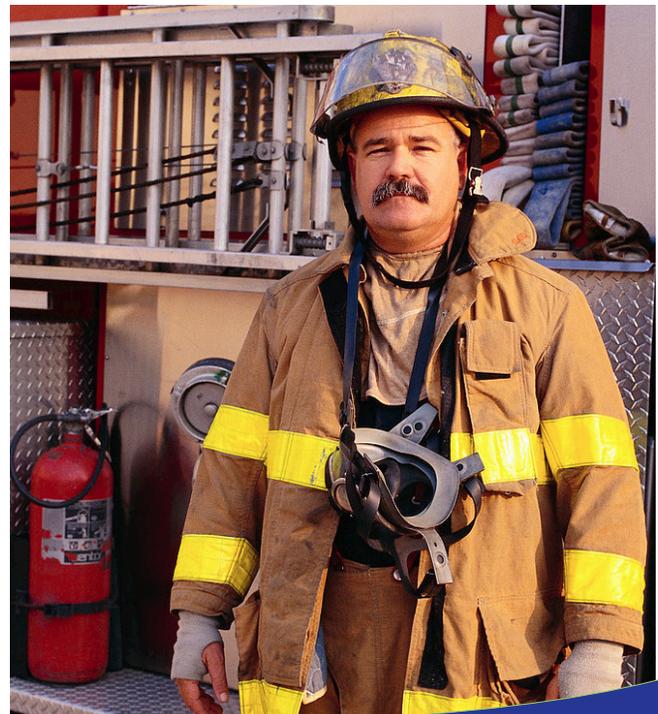
Communication

The person you are interacting with:

- May be non-verbal or have limited verbal skills
- May not respond to your commands or questions
- May repeat your words and phrases; your body language and emotional reactions
- May have difficulty expressing needs

Behavior

The person you are interacting with:

- May display tantrums or extreme distress for no apparent reason
- May laugh, giggle, or ignore your presence
- May be extremely sensitive to lights, sounds, or touch
- May display a lack of eye contact
- May have no fear of real danger
- May appear insensitive to pain
- May exhibit self-stimulating behavior: hand flapping, body rocking or attachment to objects

In Criminal Justice Situations

The person you are interacting with:

- May not understand rights or warnings

- May become anxious in new situations

- May not understand consequences of their actions

- If verbal, may produce false confession or misleading statement

- As with individuals with Alzheimer's disease, persons with autism may wander. Persons with autism may be attracted to water sources, roadways, or peer into and enter dwellings.

Tips for Interactions with Persons with Autism

- Display calming body language, give person extra personal space

- Use simple, concrete language

- Speak slowly, repeat and rephrase questions

- Use concrete terms and ideas; avoid metaphors and slang

- Give praise and encouragement

- Exercise caution during restraint

- Person may have seizure disorders and low muscle tone

- Avoid positional asphyxia. Keep airway clear. Turn person on side.

- Given time and space, person may deescalate their behavior

- Seek advice from others on the scene who know the person with autism

If individual is in custody, alert jail authorities. Consider initial isolation facility. Person would be at risk in general prison populations. REMEMBER: Each individual with autism is unique and may act or react differently. Please contact a professional who is familiar with autism.

Helpful websites and recommended reading:

- Dennis Debbaudt's *Autism Risk Management*. First responder autism training videos and materials along with resources for parents, educators, and people with autism. www.autismriskmanagement.com

- *Autism Society of America*, Information for Law Enforcement and other First Responders. http://www.autism-society.org

- Debbaudt, D. (2002). *Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Florida's First Choice for Autism Support

The Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) provides support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism and related disabilities.