

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

An information guide for first responders.



CENTRE de RESSOURCES et de FORMATION
RESOURCE and TRAINING CENTRE



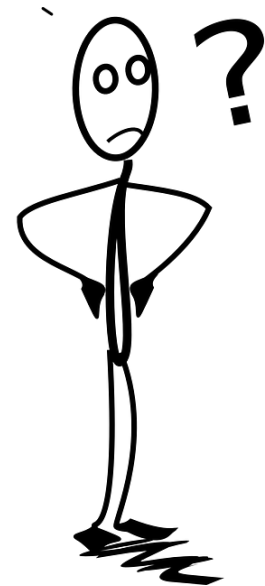
Why is Training Important?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (or ASD) is currently the most diagnosed neurological condition in Canada. It is a lifelong condition that occurs across all racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. People on the spectrum tend to be misunderstood and their behaviours misinterpreted. The likelihood that you will meet a person with ASD is high as this population is at an increased risk for an intervention involving first responders. They are often unknowingly targets for intimidation, bullying or abuse. As this manual will describe, people on the spectrum may also have difficulties understanding the notion of danger or safety regulations. They might appear to voluntarily place themselves in dangerous situation and refuse the help of a first responder.

This short manual will outline some of the behaviours that a first responder can recognize as indicative to an individual with autism. It will also describe some strategies and recommendations that may help first responders adapt or modify their approach to better support the individual with an ASD in an emergency situation. Along with the training videos, this manual will illustrate how adapting or modifying your approach can significantly impact an intervention.

What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological condition that affects communication, social interactions, sensory integration and behaviour. As autism is a spectrum disorder the range of abilities and challenges go from severe to gifted. While some may live completely, or nearly completely, independently others require fulltime care. While there are no physical indicators that identify autism, there are several behaviours and characteristics you might observe.



A person with an ASD may:

- Not respond when their name is called
- Not respond to verbal instructions
- Be nonverbal or have difficulties expressing themselves
- Avoid making eye contact
- Avoid physical contact
- Have difficulty understanding certain gestures
- Have difficulty understanding facial expressions
- Interpret humour and figures of speech literally
- Use irregular pitch or intonation when speaking
- Repeat a word or phrase (this is known as Echolalia)
- Have difficulty interpreting body language
- Engage in some form of repetitive behaviour (hand flapping, rocking, jumping, etc.)
- Demonstrate a strong preference or interest in a particular object or subject.
- Have strong responses to sensory input
- Be sensitive to sound, touch, taste, smell and or light
- Have an unusually high or low pain tolerance

Some individuals on the spectrum might carry some form of identification (ID card, ID wrist or ankle bracelet) with an alert decal or blue puzzle piece or ribbon. While some more verbal individuals might choose to disclose their autism to first responders others on the spectrum have said they can lose their ability to use language in a stressful situation.

Possible Autism Related 911 Calls

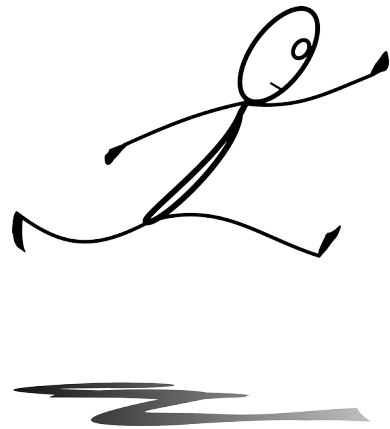
911 trends involving an individual with autism can range from minor to life threatening. They can at times be unpredictable or impulsive and their behaviours can result in a call for a first responder intervention. The following are frequently recorded 911 calls involving a person on the spectrum.

Misinterpreted behavior by a caregiver

Some less independent individuals will nearly always be accompanied by an aid. If a situation demands for it, the aid may have to use some form of physical intervention and the individual with autism might appear to be in great distress. Some people will misinterpret these actions as assault or abuse towards the individual.

Wandering

Some individuals with an ASD can wander away from their families or caregivers. It has been numerously reported that they tend to wander towards water and so might this may present a dangerous or even life-threatening situation. Others might simply wander away from their home or school and display unusual behaviors such as looking into a house or running into traffic. Some people on the spectrum have said that they will wander with a specific purpose in mind. They might in fact have a set location they are attempting to go to.



Unusual behavior in stores or shops

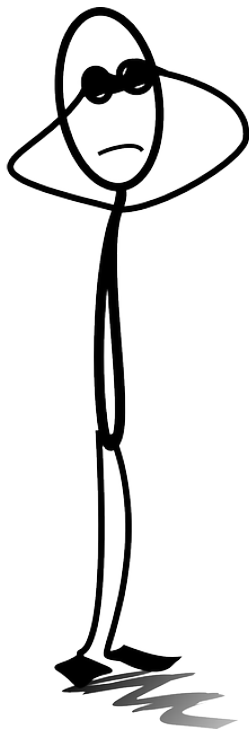
Some individuals with an ASD demonstrate strong desires to organize or arrange objects in their environment. They may also have a persistent longing to touch certain items. Some may attempt to do so in a store and might be perceived as a shoplifter or simply a suspicious person.

Other

As mentioned, some individuals on the spectrum may engage in some form of repetitive behavior or may appear to be talking to themselves. In a stressful situation where the person might feel disorganized or overwhelmed, a breakdown in communication can occur and amplify these repetitive behaviors. Some people might misinterpret this as having a mental health episode or even being under the influence of some form of methamphetamine.

Managing the Sensory Environment

Many individuals with autism have difficulties handling sensory information, or stimuli. These stimuli may in fact be felt as unpleasant or painful. Some might be hyposensitive to stimuli, meaning he/she might seek sensory input (gravitate towards shiny objects or particular textures) while others might be hypersensitive to stimuli and recoil from sensory input. Being aware of the sensory environment can help a first responder better adapt and manage an intervention in a safer and more efficient manner.



Lights and Sounds

Simply turning off any flashing or strobe lights as well as sirens or loud noises can alleviate the sensory overload and help reduce the anxiety that the individual might be feeling. Radios, flashlights, or people yelling may also be sensory influences in an emergency situation. Creating a calmer environment will affect the behaviour of the individual with autism.

Personal Space and crowds

Give the individual plenty of space and avoid crowding them. As many individuals with autism dislike being touched by unfamiliar people, it is important to inform them of the need for physical contact before doing so.

Leave the Area

You might need to leave the immediate area if the sensory information becomes too overwhelming for the person. Direct him/her away from the problem situation while instructing the person why you are doing so. People on the spectrum have said that information can sometimes be comforting. Be sure to provide clear instructions or information for the person to understand what is happening to them and their environment.

Communication Strategies

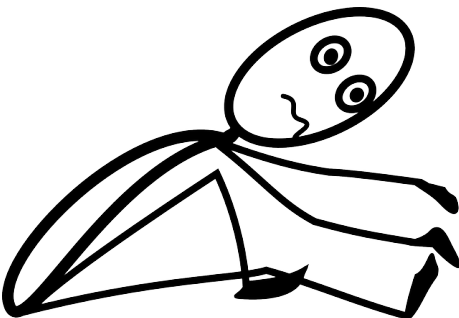
Communication difficulties vary greatly for individuals on the spectrum. Their body language or tone of voice may not necessarily communicate what they are thinking or feeling. In order to provide as many opportunities for yourself and the person with autism to understand each other, you will want to adapt or modify your methods of communication.

Communication Tips

- Speak slowly and calmly
- Use short and clear sentences
- Avoid the use of sarcasm or popular expressions
- Give the individual with autism step-by-step instructions
- Give them with plenty of time to respond
- Use gestures
- Model the instruction or behaviour you are expecting from the person
- Consider the use of pictures

People with autism have indicated that although they may not respond or make eye contact during a first responder intervention, this does not indicate that they are not listening or understanding what is being said. This is not a failure to cooperate. Increasing the amount of force in a demand could potentially escalate a situation. The key is to allow plenty of time for the individual to process the information and respond.

Deescalating a Situation



Escalating behaviours may present as forms of intense self-stimulating behaviours such as rocking, pacing or verbally repeating words or sounds. It is important to note, that the mere presence of the first responder may in fact escalate the level of anxiety of the person. Some individuals with an ASD have even indicated that the mere thought of an interaction with a first responder makes them feel intimidated and fearful.

Stay Calm

Remain calm and reassuring. Maintain a nonthreatening stance and remember the communication tips outlined above.

Give Space and Time

Do not crowd the person. Never interrupt the repetitive behaviours, as long it does not present a danger to themselves or to others. If possible, allow the time for the person to deescalate him/herself.

Manage the Sensory Environment

Remember that limiting the sensory input can help alleviate the anxiety felt by the person. Turn off strobe or flashing lights and limit the noise.

Aggression

Remember that an aggressive act by a person with autism may indicate extreme distress or a breakdown in communication - and not an intentional violent act.

Talk to the Caregiver

If an attendant or caregiver is with the individual with autism, it is important to speak to this person as they may contribute valuable information that may greatly help in an emergency situation.