

Coping With Challenging People

INFORMATION FOR THE POLICE (People on the Autistic Spectrum)

Understanding the public may not be that simple but it doesn't always have to be challenging. Better communication with and understanding of people that are on the Autistic Spectrum can be helpful. There could be many reasons why the public behave and react in a challenging way. They may be unaware of their own behaviours and they may not be aware that they are on the Spectrum if they do not have a diagnosis.

The information provided focuses on people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but it can also be helpful with other conditions including ADHD and learning difficulties. ASD is one of the major neuro-developmental conditions and can be genetically inherited. Asperger's Syndrome is a hidden disability and is not always obvious initially.

Neurodiversity Conditions are more common in boys / men but this does not mean that you should discount the possibility in girls / women too. It is less likely to be diagnosed in girls as they do better socially and cope better with life compared to boys. Girls also don't normally have the same level of behavioural problems and difficulties compared to boys.

ASD is a development disorder. Children don't grow out of it once they enter into adulthood, there is no "cure" and it is a lifelong condition. ASD is not a mental illness but people (whether diagnosed or not) will probably go through life experiencing difficulties as they encounter communication problems. ASD affects how they relate to other people and also how they see and make sense of the world around them, they are usually visual learners.

People who are on the Autistic Spectrum can be extremely sensitive to specific sensory stimuli. This varies depending on the individual. It is important to think about the senses when talking to the person. Adults with ASD may also have more than one form of Neurodiversity; they can overlap each other which may lead to other difficulties for them.

People can have sensitive vision and hearing and they can have a very high or low pain threshold and may demonstrate an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming, singing or taking clothes off. Some behaviours can help calm the individual so it is very important not to stop them unless necessary as this may lead to more challenging behaviour. They may also find certain touch painful, so do not touch the person, even to guide them somewhere.

A person with ASD can easily be overloaded with sensory information in busy places, such as the Reception area, where there are lots of people in close proximity. The way in which this sensory overload is dealt with depends on the individual. It can trigger a fight or flight reaction.

When a situation goes wrong for a person with ASD, it may be confusing for them as they're trying to make sense of what has happened and where it has gone wrong as they lack understanding of it. It can be helpful to retreat to a quieter area to talk through the situation with the person to help them make sense of the situation. Please note that not everyone with ASD may find direct confrontation difficult, so do remember to give them a choice.

Anxiety is a real difficulty for lots of people with ASD. It affects a person psychologically and physically. Anxiety may affect the mind and the body of a person with ASD. It can affect a person's day to day life. When they are stressed they take less information in as they may not be functioning well. Their brain just stops working to its full potential.

This can take a lot out of a person; it can be very tiring and draining and can take them two or three days to get back to normal. A person who struggles with anxiety can be affected differently to people who normally work well with understanding and rules.

Some people may experience a meltdown; this can have a big impact on their lives. The person may experience rumbling before a meltdown or a trigger (fight or flight). After a meltdown the person needs space and time to recover as it can take days or weeks to get better. The person that is recovering may find it hard to get out of bed in the morning as they have no energy, they may be withdrawn, want to hide away, lack confidence or be confused.

People that do have a diagnosis, no matter how intelligent they are, can still feel misunderstood and vulnerable. People can find it hard to fit in to society and be accepted - no matter how hard they try they seem to fail. Adults still get situations wrong and make mistakes. Every individual is different and they may well have never received any help or support for the ASD. Only some people with a diagnosis are on medication to help support their ASD.

This document is a guide only, everyone is different, difficulties vary from person to person, these guidelines are here to inform your judgment not replace it.

Debbie Marshall

Chair of Canada

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SOME HELPFUL TIPS

- DO** keep your language simple and direct, using the person's name to get their attention and then use short sentences e.g. Sam please sit down or Sam please get in the car.
- DO** explain to the person why they are there and what you are going to do as they may find it hard to understand what is going on. They may not recognise the police uniform, police car or understand what is expected of them.
- DO** use simple closed and direct questions. Use visual cues to increase understanding e.g. photos, symbols, writing, drawings, objects etc.
- DO** allow the person extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt them then they may have to start again or become overwhelmed.
- DO** check for understanding as they are unlikely to tell you that they do not understand. Be clear to minimise misunderstanding or misinterpretation. The person may not be able to read between the lines, be clear e.g. yes or no, black or white.
- DO** support them if they are left in custody, as self-harming behaviours can occur in times of stress and they are vulnerable around others due to their lack of social understanding. Some people with ASD may find direct confrontation difficult.
- DO** take into account medical issues e.g. people with ASD are at a higher risk of having seizures.
- DO** be clear of the outcome of seeing the person i.e. what is expected of them in the future, what they are meant to/not meant to do etc.
- DO** keep choices simple due to problems with understanding, repetitive questioning can occur whereas others might withdraw.
- DO** give them time to outline their concerns as they may need to make sense of what is happening and going to happen.
- DO** remember to let the person know if things change or don't happen as lack of warning may increase their anxiety levels.
- DO** Turn off fluorescent lights where possible or flashing stimuli and be wary when using flashing sirens. Limit the amount of noise in the room i.e. close windows as the person may place their fingers in their ears.
- DON'T** make the person wait in a crowded, noisy room. This may increase anxiety.
- DON'T** expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions. Be concrete in what you say.
- DON'T** use abstract ideas and phrases due to literal interpretation e.g. saying "jump in the car" may lead to the person physically jumping in the car.
- DON'T** take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt. It can be hard to process a lot of information as the face has a lot of detail.
- DON'T** attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing etc. behaviours unless it is essential, be understanding. Some may rock, tap objects, talk incessantly or pace.
- DON'T** invade their personal space unless necessary. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others.
- DON'T** ask several questions at once as you are likely to cause confusion.
- DON'T** assume that inappropriate behaviour is deliberate, it may be the only way that a person can cope with a stressful situation.
- DON'T** think they are deliberately being rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or on seemingly irrelevant topics. This is likely to increase in times of stress.
- DON'T** shout; use calm communication and allow them to calm down.

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