

Autism

First Responder Training Video Series—Information Sheet

Provided by the County
of San Diego Office of
Emergency Services

This document provides a brief summary of the information presented in the first responder training video relating to those members of our community with autism.

Understanding individuals with autism:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder is not a mental illness or psychological disorder. It is a developmental disorder that affects the brain.
- Individuals with autism may show “stimming,” a repetitive, non-typical behavior that is thought to be a way to calm them down.
- They may demonstrate fixation on certain objects (books, movies, games) or on specific topics.
- They may not have an awareness of what is or is not a dangerous situation.

How to approach an individual with autism:

- Approach an individual with autism in a calm manner with only as many people as necessary to safely secure them. Too many people may make them anxious and fearful.
- Minimize touching or holding—individuals with autism are often sensitive to touch.
- Observe the area to see if there are movies, books, electronics, or other items that may be of interest to them. These items can serve as calming mechanisms if they are becoming overwhelmed.

Understanding sensitivities associated with individuals with autism:

- Individuals with autism can get sensory overloaded by sounds and lights. Out of fear, they may try to run away or become aggressive when this happens.
- Because individuals with autism may have a sensitivity to touch, they may fight back if they are restrained.
- When an individual with autism is becoming overwhelmed, they may become physically restless or make sounds.

Best practices for communicating with individuals with autism:

- 50% of individuals with autism are non-verbal, but that doesn't mean they don't understand the spoken language.
- Speak slowly and in a calm fashion.
- Give clear directions—be explicit, concise, and do not use complex words.
- Allow for a delayed response to requests for action so they can process the information.
- Always explain what is going to happen next.

Special thanks to the following organizations for participating in this video:

Autism Society San Diego
San Diego Police Department

