During an emergency, individuals with autism may have difficulty distinguishing emergency responders or shelter staff from “strangers”. Responders and others attempting to assist may be confused or ill prepared by the responses (or lack of responses) they encounter while attempting to help, direct, shelter or communicate with individuals with autism.

During an emergency situation, the person with autism will most likely “shut down” or revert to self-stimulating behavior that is calming like rocking or repeating words. First responders should also know that individuals with autism might seek out items and locations that hold fascinations for them like water, trains, cars, etc and go to these places without realizing potential danger. In fire situations they have been known to hide in closets or under furniture to escape disturbing sights and sounds.

Offices, homes, schools or other environments housing individuals with autism must prepare their location with visual materials aimed at quickly educating emergency responders to identify the individuals with autism. Go to the Autism Society of America www.autism-society.org

Basic tips for interaction with individuals with autism

1. Use concrete terms
2. Speak slowly and allow time for responses
3. Do not attempt to physically block self-stimulatory behavior
4. Understand the basics of autism (see below)
5. Use visual communication tools / picture based instructions and alerts
   a. If you anticipate dealing with individuals with autism, plan ahead and prepare a visual communication tool to help communication.
6. Have “Autism Emergency Contact Forms” completed

Understanding autism

Autism Spectrum disorders, or ASDs, are developmental disabilities characterized by differences or deficits in social interaction, communication or behavior.

ASD affects individuals from all racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds.

Individuals with autism have common features which may include difficulties in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behavior. These characteristics can vary greatly by types, numbers and severity of symptoms from person to person. Some common indicators are:

**Communication:**

- Various levels of speech communication skills. 30% - 50% are non-verbal
- Communication with sign language, gestures or pictures/symbols

**Social Interaction:**

- May not perceive the threat of danger or may hide
- Have difficulty interacting with others
- May become upset when touched
- May not respond to commands or may repeat what is said to them or say “yes” or “no” to everything asked
- Often have difficulty using and understanding
  - eye contact
  - facial expressions
  - social rules (may not recognize uniforms, badges, etc.)
  - the interests and perspectives of others and appear isolated /misunderstood

Interests and Behavior:
- Some persons with autism may engage in repetitive behaviors like rocking, spinning or repeating.
- Have difficulty processing information from their senses
- Have sensitivity to new people, situations or places (lights, sounds, etc.)
- Have sensitivity or dislike the feel of certain fabrics, textures or foods
- Overactive with difficulty sleeping
- Aggressive or self-injury behavior
- Withdrawal

Additional resources:
- Autism Risk and Safety Management [www.autismriskmanagement.com](http://www.autismriskmanagement.com)
- FEMA [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)
- CDC [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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