



EUCAP THE EUROPEAN
COUNCIL OF AUTISTIC
PEOPLE



AUTISM
EUROPE

Supporting autistic people in crisis situations

BRIEF GUIDE

—What is autism?

Autism is a developmental condition manifesting as differences in thinking, learning, sensory perception and behaviour. Some autistic people may appear just a little different from others. However, many of them are disabled. They have a right to support and protection in crisis situations just like any other disabled people.

Some autistic people have an intellectual disability, but many have normal or high intelligence.

Autism is not just a children's condition, it is lifelong. If the existence of autistic teenagers and adults is not yet fully recognized in your country, they are at risk in a crisis. They are less likely to get access to the support they need.

—How do you know if someone is autistic?

Many autistic people act in unusual ways when facing crisis situations. They may:

- appear disoriented, restless or agitated for no obvious reason
- have a tendency to have 'meltdowns', for example shouting, screaming or breaking things when extremely distressed and unable to get out of the situation
- appear blank, emotionless and slow to react
- speak very little or not at all, or repeat phrases that do not seem to suit the situation
- become very anxious about seemingly minor matters, like loss of some part of their daily routine or some familiar item
- not react positively to ordinary social contact or small talk that others find comforting
- They may do repetitive movements like jumping, hand flapping, going around in circles, or others
- cover their ears or eyes, pull away from people into corners, or refuse food with unfamiliar texture or taste even when hungry, indicating sensitivity to a specific sensory experiences

Some autistic people react to extreme situations in unexpected ways, remaining very calm or even smiling. These are temporary, superficial reactions. They can still be shocked, concerned and traumatised.

Some autistic people have been assessed and diagnosed. They may tell you, or their family or friends may tell you about their autism.

Some of the autistic people you meet do not have diagnoses, and may not even know they are autistic. There may be stigma associated with the concept of autism in their society, so some may avoid saying that they are autistic. Many of them may have been considered odd, naive or vulnerable all their lives, and helped by others in ordinary matters of daily life.

An autistic person may have for example a slightly unusual voice, unusual posture or way of moving, and unusual combinations of skills and difficulties. Most autistic people have some difficulty with communication. They are often more reliant on familiar routines, items and surroundings than others. Some of them have very little sense of danger, and may tend to wander off or run away from carers.

–Medical emergencies and treatments

An autistic person may not show normal reactions to pain. They may not be able to ask for help when in pain. If they seem very agitated or passive, try to check for injuries or pain levels. Ask them to point at the part of their body where the pain is.

An autistic person may find ordinary touch and medical procedures painful or distressing because of sensory differences. Give them advance warning and allow them as much control as possible on the way examinations and treatments are done.

For autistic people who get very anxious when treatments are attempted, you can describe procedures in advance in words, pictures or by demonstrating them on another person. Break tasks down into small steps and prepare them for each, allowing breaks. Pressure or massage on areas of the body that need to be touched by others can reduce hypersensitive reactions to touch.

Certain medical conditions, such as epilepsy, gastro-intestinal disorders, allergies and sleep disorders are more common in autistic people than the general population. When treating an autistic person, be aware of these possibilities.

An autistic person may rely on regular medication for co-occurring neurological or psychiatric symptoms such as ADHD, depression, anxiety or aggression, or for their chronic physical conditions. Try to ensure there are no disruptions to their regular medication. An autistic person may have unusual reactions to ordinary medications. Try to find out from the person or their family or carers if this is the case before introducing any new medication.

.....

—How can you help an autistic person to remain calm?

Personal space - provide some distance and separation from crowds, for example a separate room, or a corner separated from a larger space by hanging up sheets or blankets. Allow the autistic person to always have the same designated seat, bed or area in a room if sharing space with many people.

Quiet - provide ear defenders, headphones or earplugs, or request people around the autistic person to be as quiet as possible.

Physical items to handle - offer art or craft materials, clay, blocks, beads, jigsaw puzzles, stim toys or similar that can be stacked, sorted, lined up, molded, spun or otherwise manipulated.

Electronic devices and games - offer devices that the person can use to engage in videos, music, games or other content that helps them to turn their attention away from stressful environments.

Deep pressure and weight - offer a weighted blanket or some equivalent that the person can lie under or wrap around their shoulders. If they accept hugs, a very tight hug may be calming.

Interaction with animals - even when distressed by contact with people, many autistic people find caring for animals or playing with them calming.

Using skills and interests - many autistic people may seem highly vulnerable, but they also often have significant strengths and skills. Ask them how they would like to help others, even if it seems unlikely to you that they could. Putting their skills to use will help them to remain calm.

Giving space to a person in acute distress - If an autistic person has lost control and is shouting, screaming, or breaking things, do not shout at them or try to reason with them. Back off, remain calm, keep language and demands to a minimum while ensuring everyone is physically safe. When they seem calmer, talk to them in brief sentences, taking deliberate pauses to wait for a response. Listen to any advice from people who know the autistic person.

Routine and stimming - repetitive movements such as rocking, flapping their hands or pacing back and forth may help autistic people to manage anxiety and deal with stress. As long as these do not harm the person or others, do not interfere with them. Similarly, it is good to allow or even encourage daily routines that provide a sense of security.

—How can you help an autistic person to communicate?

Some autistic people may speak very little, or not at all. Some lose their ability to speak when distressed, but may still be able to communicate by typing or writing. Any ordinary device, like a phone or tablet, a computer with a keyboard, or for some pen and paper, may help them express their needs.

Keep your tone **friendly but neutral**. ‘Baby talk’ does not usually help.

If an autistic person seems unable to speak, type or write, **provide images, symbols (pictograms) or items** that they can point at or grasp to express choices

If communication is difficult, try to provide a **small amount of information at a time**, and **take pauses** to allow the person to respond. Try to provide quiet environments for communication. Some autistic people may have difficulty hearing you through background noise that does not bother others.

If the person can read, **provide brief written instructions** whenever possible. Many autistic people have difficulty remembering long spoken instructions, or ones involving several steps, in unfamiliar circumstances.

Ask short, direct questions that require yes/no answers, such as “are you in pain”, “are you lost”, or “are you looking for someone”, if you suspect there is something wrong. Many autistic people have specific difficulty asking for help when in distress.

—Where can you find more information and support?

There are organisations run by families of autistic people, autism experts, or by autistic adults, in Ukraine, in the neighbouring countries, and in other parts of Europe. If you do not know how to support an autistic person, contact these organisations for advice or read their materials.

Some of them will also be able to help refugees arriving in their countries with access to housing, health care, schools, peer support, leisure activities and therapeutic services that suit autistic people’s needs.

You can find information and offers of help and support on these websites.

EUCAP

<https://eucap.eu/ukrainian-refugees>

Autism Europe

<https://bit.ly/autismUkr>