

Pathological Demand Avoidance

Law Enforcement Resource

What is PDA?

PDA or Pathological Demand Avoidance is a sub-type of autism characterized by an obsessive resistance to demands. The PDA individual experiences an anxiety-driven need to be in control. The person with PDA is not choosing to be defiant. Their brains are wired to perceive demands as a threat which triggers extreme anxiety. Individuals with PDA do not perceive social hierarchy and will likely not view law enforcement as an authority figure. This person may be unable to physiologically comply with the requests of law enforcement. De-escalation is the goal.

A **meltdown** for an individual with PDA is rooted in **anxiety** and is actually a **panic attack**. After recovery from a panic attack, one would not expect there to be a **consequence** for something happening at a **physiological level** (would a person with epilepsy have a consequence for a seizure?)

What are common traits of PDA?

While PDA is a sub-category of autism spectrum disorder, its characteristics are **very different** from autism. Typical characteristics of 'classic autism' can include: inappropriate social interaction, poor eye contact, compulsive behavior, impulsivity, repetitive movements, self-harm, or persistent repetition of words or actions.

Typical traits of individuals with PDA are:

- Resists the demands of ordinary life
- Using social strategies to avoid demands - distracting, giving excuses, negotiating
- Appearing social on the surface, but lacking depth in their understanding of social norms
- 'Obsessive' behavior often focuses on other people, either liking them or loathing them
- Being comfortable in role-play and pretending sometimes to an extreme extent
- Excessive mood swings and impulsivity
- Extreme meltdowns or panic attacks
- Anxiety can manifest in many forms: shutting down, verbal and/or physical attacks, and possible use of weapons
- Picking up on the emotions/moods/energy of another person to the point of mirroring them
- Having a default answer of "**No**". The individual may need more time to process what is being asked of them

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Consider the language you use with individuals with PDA

Use

- I wonder...
- Is it ok with you if...
- Do you mind...
- Would/could you...
- It would be helpful if...

Avoid

- You need to...
- You have to...
- You must...
- You cant...
- You...

How can law enforcement best interact with individuals with PDA?

Do

- Try to build a relationship with me and talk about the things I choose to talk about
- Speak to me as an equal
- Offer me choices
- Empathize with me
- Understand I want to do things, but my anxiety stops me
- Recognize the signs of my anxiety and pull back when you see them
- Be sensitive to my sensory issues (is it possible to dim your lights? Turn off the siren? Use directional emergency lights opposite of where I am?)

Avoid

- Speaking down to me or patronizing to me
- Giving me direct demands
- Stating the obvious
- Bombarding me with questions
- Insisting I respond or answer you

Written from direct quotes by Jane Sherwin, mother of Molly, a young adult with PDA

CONTACT US



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