

Understanding PDA

Pathological Demand Avoidance Explained



Discover how trauma affects demand avoidance and daily life for Autistic Adults.

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile within the autism spectrum where people strongly resist everyday tasks or requests due to an anxiety-driven need to stay in control. This resistance is more intense than typical avoidance behaviors. While PDA is often noticed in children, it can continue into adulthood, appearing differently due to life experiences, social pressures, or coping strategies. For adults with autism and a trauma background, PDA can be stronger or more complex, so understanding how trauma and PDA interact is important.

How PDA Manifests in Autistic Adults

- **Extreme Resistance to Demands:** Simple requests (e.g., attending meetings or replying to emails) can cause anxiety, leading to procrastination or refusal.
- **Social Withdrawal or Masking:** Adults may avoid social situations or hide discomfort by acting socially acceptable, which can be exhausting.
- **Control-Seeking Behaviours:** To reduce demands, adults may show perfectionism, stick to rigid routines, or struggle to delegate.
- **Emotional Dysregulation:** Demands can trigger intense emotions like frustration or panic, which may seem disproportionate.
- **Difficulty with Transitions:** Sudden changes or unexpected demands can cause distress or avoidance.
- **Creative Avoidance Strategies:** Adults may use distraction, negotiation, or humour to avoid demands, such as redirecting conversations.

The Role of Trauma in PDA and ASD

- For autistic adults with a trauma background, PDA can be intensified by past experiences, particularly childhood or ongoing stress, which heightens anxiety and makes demands feel overwhelming.
- Heightened Anxiety: Trauma increases PDA-related anxiety, making demands feel like threats, e.g., a task may trigger memories of past criticism, prompting avoidance.
- Hypervigilance and Control: Trauma causes hypervigilance, leading to a stronger need to control situations to avoid perceived danger, making demands intolerable.
- Emotional Triggers: Trauma triggers can worsen PDA behaviours, e.g., a demand from an authority figure may cause intense emotional reactions or shutdowns.
- Low Self-Esteem: Trauma can lead to shame or inadequacy, intensifying avoidance to protect against perceived failure or judgement.
- Difficulty Trusting: Trauma erodes trust, making it hard to accept help or follow instructions due to fears of manipulation or loss of control.

Coping Strategies and Support for Autistic Adults with PDA and Trauma

Managing PDA in autistic adults with trauma requires a compassionate, individualised approach. Below are key strategies:

Reducing Demands:

- Use indirect language, e.g., “Would you like to try this?”
- Offer choices, e.g., “Now or later?”
- Break tasks into small, manageable steps.

Building Trust:

- Create a safe, non-judgemental environment.
- Validate feelings and acknowledge trauma and PDA.
- Avoid confrontation to prevent anxiety escalation.

Trauma-Informed Support:

- Work with therapists trained in trauma and autism.
- Use adapted therapies like CBT or EMDR.
- Encourage mindfulness or grounding techniques.

Self-Advocacy:

- Help identify triggers and communicate needs.
- Develop personalised strategies, e.g., boundaries or visual schedules.

Sensory Regulation:

- Address sensory sensitivities that worsen PDA or trauma.
- Use sensory tools, e.g., weighted blankets or noise-cancelling headphones.

Key Considerations for Support



- **Individualised Approach:** Every autistic adult with PDA is unique. What works for one person may not work for another, so flexibility is key.
- **Avoid Punishment or Pressure:** Punitive approaches can worsen anxiety and avoidance, particularly in those with a trauma background.
- **Collaborate with Professionals:** Work with psychologists, occupational therapists, or autism specialists who understand both PDA and trauma to create a tailored support plan.
- **Self-Care for Caregivers:** Supporting someone with PDA and trauma can be challenging. Caregivers should prioritise their own wellbeing to maintain patience and empathy.

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PDA in autistic adults, especially those with a trauma background, can significantly impact daily life, relationships, and emotional wellbeing. By understanding the interplay between PDA, autism, and trauma, you can better navigate challenges and find strategies that promote autonomy and reduce distress. With the right support, individuals can develop tools to manage demands and build a sense of safety and control in their lives.