

HELPING YOU TO RESCUE ME

The rescue of people with ASD: guidelines for firefighters

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Introduction. Rescuing a person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder in a dangerous situation (i.e. collapsed or burning buildings) could be a challenge both for the person herself, who lives an unexpected critical situation, and for rescuers who are not aware of the person's characteristics and cannot understand his unusual behaviors. Firefighters and other emergency response agencies need specific knowledge about ASD and the best strategies to relate to people affected, in order to assure them help and assistance in dangerous situations.

Method. An analysis of criticisms about standard safe operations was done, considering those characteristics of people on the spectrum which may impede rescue procedures:

✓ Lack of social and psychological intuition:

- « I do not know what it will happen»
- «I do not know what I have to do»
- «I do not know what you are going to do»

✓ Language and communication impairments:

- I cannot ask: «What will happen?»
- «What do I have to do?»
- «What are you going to do?»

✓ Sensory issues:

- «This hurts me»
- «I do not tolerate that noise»

✓ Unexpected events:

- «I do not like unexpected events»

Afterwards, experiences, problems and needs of firefighters about rescuing people with ASD were collected:

- “Does he understand me?”
- “How can I help him to understand me?”
- “Does this scare him?”
- “Does this hurt him?”

Considering the needs of people with ASD and the lack of information and training on ASD of rescuers, a partnership was built with the local fire department in order to adapt usual safe operations to ASD people.

Results. This collaboration ended to the design of some guidelines and operational instruction with the purpose of organizing actions, expertise and knowledge of people involved. Operative guidelines suggest firefighters how to manage emergency if a persons with ASD is involved helping them to attain the person's collaboration and to avoid crisis.

References.

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The guidelines

The guidelines include actions towards the firefighters:

- ✓ Knowledge about ASD characteristics
 - ✓ Knowledge about strategies to adopt
- And actions towards people on the autism spectrum
- ✓ Knowledge about emergency scenarios
 - ✓ Knowledge about the rescuers (uniforms, vehicles)
 - ✓ Training on the rescue procedures

Actions towards the firefighters consist in a training on ASD characteristics with the aim of making the fireman able to identify a person on the autism spectrum from his/her behaviour, to manage the possible reactions of the person in the emergency and to adopt the adequate strategies to avoid or to solve a possible crisis. Here is an extract of the guidelines for firefighters:

GUIDELINES – social and psychological intuition	
Features	Strategies
<p>People with ASD may not understand new situations. This causes their stress level to increase</p> <p>People with ASD may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not recognize the functions of emergency vehicles and the uniforms of rescuers • Not understand what is expected of them • Get scared and react by running away, shouting or attacking themselves or others 	<p>Adopt a reassuring expression, speak little, slowly and with a calm tone of voice. Avoid glances or facial grimacing that are normally used, for example with children, to defuse a situation.</p> <p>Anticipate what you are going to do and any changes of venue using, if necessary, even gestures, visual aids for communication or modelling (show the operations to be performed on himself or on another person).</p> <p>Where possible, remove elements which can generate anxiety from the environment.</p> <p>Always limit waiting times. Try to predict waiting times by counting aloud and with your fingers to a predetermined number.</p>

Actions towards people on the autism spectrum consist in a specific training with the aim of illustrating the uniforms of the rescuers, their vehicles and their actions, with the purpose of make the situation as familiar as possible. Training on rescue procedures in order to learn how to respond to the requests of the rescuers is also provided. Here is an example of a fire drill.



Conclusions. Considering the peculiarities of ASD and the importance of assuring adequate protection to each person, there is a need of a collaboration between professionals experts at ASD and professionals experts at rescue people from dangerous situations in order to develop protocols based on the specific characteristics of ASD people.