



Neuropsychology
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Checklist for Self-Identifying Signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in Adults

By Dr. Huffman, Neurodivergent Neuropsychologist and Fellow PDA'er

This checklist can help adults recognize potential signs of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in themselves. This checklist is not a diagnostic tool but can provide insights that may warrant further evaluation by a neurodiversity-affirming healthcare professional.

Attention and Executive Functioning

- Difficulty sustaining attention on tasks that are not of your choosing or interest.
- Frequently feel distracted or disengaged during activities or conversations.
- Struggle with planning, organizing, and time management.
- Find it challenging to follow multi-step instructions.
- Have difficulty managing emotions and self-regulation.
- Difficulty with praxis; they might struggle with planning and doing movements or actions. It is not that they do not want to do things; their brain has a harder time figuring out *how* to do them. They are often left feeling like they know it but cannot access it or do it without executive functioning supports. This often impacts their occupational ability in high demand settings.

Sensory Issues

- Over-sensitive or under-sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or other sensory inputs.
- Easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, leading to feelings of anxiety or the need to withdraw.
- Seek out or avoid certain sensory experiences (e.g., loud noises, bright lights).
- Difficulty with understanding or avoiding body cues (hunger, fatigue etc.) referred to as interoception.

Anxiety and Demand Avoidance

- Exhibit extreme avoidance of everyday demands and expectations.
- Experience high levels of anxiety, especially repetitive obsessive anxiety, particularly when faced with demands.

- Have meltdowns or shutdowns when feeling overwhelmed or pressured.
- Use strategies to avoid demands, such as distraction, negotiation, or withdrawal.

Communication Issues

- Difficulty expressing needs or understanding social cues.
- Struggle with both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Miscommunications often lead to frustration and increased anxiety.
- May communicate more comfortably in a virtual context than in a face-to-face context.

Learning Issues

- Have an uneven learning profile, excelling in some areas while struggling in others.
- Resist traditional learning methods and standardized approaches.
- Engage more readily in hands-on, experiential learning activities.
- Prefer tasks and activities that align with your strengths and interests.

Processing Issues

- Difficulty with problem solving in new situations especially when pressured or around others.
- Often process information more slowly despite strong cognitive abilities.
- Process information “off-line” meaning that they need more time to think about and understand information before they can respond or act.
- Typically need extended time on tasks to complete the task to their best ability.
- When feeling pressured or anxious, they often lose their ability to process, learn, or retrieve new information.
- They consistently think “out of the box.”

Social Interaction and Preferred Interests

- Have intense interests or passions that dominate conversations and activities.
- Difficulty engaging in social interactions that do not involve your preferred interests.
- Use preferred interests to connect with others.
- May appear socially adept in areas of interest but struggle in other social contexts.

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Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

- High levels of emotional sensitivity and reactivity.
- Difficulty identifying and expressing emotions.
- Frequent mood swings or emotional outbursts.
- Use coping mechanisms such as rocking, spinning, or other repetitive behaviors.

Safety and Trauma-Informed Concerns

- Display heightened sensitivity to stress and changes in routine.
- Require a predictable and consistent environment to feel safe.
- Exhibit signs of trauma or heightened anxiety in response to stressors.
- Benefit from a calm, patient, and empathetic approach from others.

Additional Concerns

- Difficulty making and maintaining friendships.
- Often feel misunderstood or different from peers.
- Show signs of demand avoidance in various settings (e.g., work, social situations).
- Experience physical symptoms related to anxiety (e.g., stomachaches, headaches).
- These challenges did not start in adulthood, they were often noticeable in childhood although they may have been exacerbated by the demands of adulthood.
- There may have been a history of failure to launch toward independence; many are working below their true ability due to overwhelm and challenges in working in high demand settings.

Next Steps for Self-Identification

If you check multiple items on this list and have concerns about your behavior, consider the following steps:

1. Self-Reflection:

- Spend time reflecting on your experiences and behaviors. Consider keeping a journal to document your thoughts and feelings.

2. Seek Professional Guidance:

- Consult with a healthcare professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, who has experience with autism spectrum conditions and PDA.
- Request a comprehensive evaluation that includes assessments of attention, executive functioning, sensory processing, anxiety, communication, and learning.

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3. Explore Neurodiversity-Affirming Assessments:

- Find providers who conduct assessments using a neurodiversity-affirming approach, such as the MIGDAS-2 (Monteiro Interview Guidelines for Diagnosing the Autism Spectrum, Second Edition). Additionally, measures of alexithymia, repetitive behaviors, burnout, sensory issues, interoception, executive functioning, learning, processing speed, and overall psychological health should be measured. Given the common occurrence of attention and learning differences, an evaluation of this area will help you find appropriate accommodations or supports at home, school, and work. Finally, your internal experience should be a focus of the evaluation, as the internal experience is often difficult for others to understand.

4. Educate Yourself:

- Read books and articles by experts in the field. Start with PDA Society of North America and PDA Society of UK for the most updated lists.
- Follow PDA experts on social media or on their websites: Dr. Elizabeth Newson; Ruth Fidler; Margaret Duncan; Dr. Judy Eaton; Diane Gould; Dr. Wenn Larson; Dr. Judith Gould; and Dr. Luke Beardon.
- Explore online resources and research papers to stay updated on the latest findings.

5. Join Support Networks:

- Participate in online forums and support groups for adults with PDA or autism spectrum conditions.
- Connect with local or national organizations dedicated to autism and PDA for additional resources and support.

6. Implement Coping Strategies:

- Use relaxation techniques and mindfulness activities to help manage anxiety.
- Create a sensory-friendly environment at home and work. Allow the use of sensory tools (e.g., noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys).

7. Focus on Preferred Interests:

- Incorporate your preferred interests into daily activities and routines. Use these interests to connect with others and build rapport.

8. Adopt a Trauma-Informed Approach:

- Recognize that you may have experienced trauma or have heightened sensitivity to stress and demands due to being an unidentified PDA'er. Approach self-care with sensitivity, avoiding punitive measures and focusing on positive reinforcement. Connect with other PDA'ers!

9. Seek Accommodations:

- If applicable, seek accommodations at work or in educational settings to support your needs. This may include flexible schedules, modified tasks, or additional support.

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