



A Brief Guide for General Professionals Supporting PDA Individuals (Pathological Demand Avoidance)

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is characterized by extreme anxiety around demands, leading to avoidance and distress. PDA individuals often struggle with direct instructions and need a flexible, collaborative, or sometimes fun approach. For PDA people, seeing professionals can be a stressful experience as it can feel like a big demand and threat to their nervous system. We've compiled some tips to help you have an enjoyable and connecting experience. Professionals that are PDA-knowledgeable and affirming are true treasures!

Key Principles for professionals

Tip: Keep in mind the age of the client and adjust supports accordingly.

Recognize A Fundamental Need for Control and a sensitive nervous system as the Root Cause for Avoidance/Stress Responses

- Understand that refusal or avoidance is not about defiance or willful opposition but stems from an overwhelming anxiety response in a setting where they don't have much control.

Minimize Demands

- Reframe requests in a way that provides the individual with a sense of autonomy.
- Offer choices rather than directives (e.g., "Would you like to sit in this chair or that one?" instead of "Sit here.").

Use Indirect/Declarative Language

- Present actions as invitations or suggestions rather than requirements.
- Use phrases like "I wonder if..." or "It might be helpful if..."

Recognize that Rewards and even praise can add pressure and stress

- Often in clinical practices, rewards are offered for a "job well done" but traditional reward-based approaches often increase anxiety and resistance in PDA individuals.
- Offering incentives or consequences may be perceived as pressure, leading to further avoidance or distress.
- Instead, focus on building trust, reducing demands, and providing the opportunity for collaboration in interactions.



Be Flexible

- Allow extra time for cooperation and processing.
- Be willing to adjust your approach based on the individual's response.
- If in a medical setting, is collecting all vitals a must-have? Can something be skipped to provide some autonomy?

Reduce Perceived Pressure

- Avoid overly structured or time-sensitive interactions.
- Offer telehealth sessions when possible.
- Provide breaks or alternative ways to engage with necessary procedures.
- Allow them to end the appointment if they need to escape. Don't try to convince them to stay.

Build Trust Through Connection

- Follow the client's lead in what seems to bring them comfort (i.e. do they seem to want to chat and connect, or do they seem anxious to get any expected tasks done quickly)
- Build trust
- Get consent before acting
- Collaborate as equal partners
- Engage in light conversation or shared interests before introducing medical procedures.
- Validate their feelings and acknowledge their autonomy.
- Talk about their interests

Offer Predictability & Control to Minimize Anxiety Driven Stress Responses

- Provide a clear outline of what will happen but allow for flexibility.
- Let the individual decide aspects of the interaction, such as the order of steps in a medical exam. (For children this could look like - "Should I take your temperature or your blood pressure first?")

Use Distraction & Playfulness

- Don't be afraid to use humor or storytelling to make interactions less stressful.
- Offer sensory-friendly tools like fidget toys if appropriate.



Respect Communication Differences

- Some PDA individuals may struggle with verbal communication under stress.
- Offer alternative communication methods such as writing or gesture-based options.
- If a person says that they don't know how they feel, recognize that they are telling the truth. This could be the same for what they want or what they need.
- Ask the child's or teen's permission to speak to their parents about them.

Prepare for Meltdowns or Shutdowns

- Allow PDA individual to retreat to a low-stimulation space available if needed.
- Avoid escalating situations by maintaining a calm and reassuring demeanor.
- If a meltdown occurs, prioritize emotional regulation over completing medical tasks.
- Give space but do not leave the dysregulated person alone.

Practical Adjustments in a Professional Setting

- **Sensory Considerations:** Offer adjustments such as dim lighting or quiet spaces.
- **Flexible Scheduling:** Allow for extended appointment times or less structured visits.
- **Familiarity & Consistency:** Where possible, have the same clinician or staff member engage with the patient across visits.
- **Visual Supports:** Use visual schedules written cooperatively to prepare for medical procedures if the child agrees..
- **Collaboration with Caregivers:** Engage caregivers as allies who can help mediate interactions.

Conclusion

Supporting a PDA individual in a professional setting requires patience, creativity, and flexibility. By prioritizing collaboration, reducing pressure, and focusing on relationship-building, professionals can foster trust and cooperation while ensuring necessary care/support is delivered in a way that feels safe and manageable for the individual.