

Supporting Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) During Emergencies: Calming Tips for Stressful Situations

A Resource for: Shelter volunteers, volunteer coordinators, volunteer trainers and shift leaders

When you become aware that a person with IDD is at your shelter...

Step 1: Ask for Health Passport, Info Sheet, or Crisis Plan

Your first step is to find out if the person has a health passport, info sheet, or brief crisis plan. These documents can help you learn basic support strategies which will help that person feel safe and secure in a new, temporary environment is to ask if they have any of these documents is.

Step 2: Gather Information

Your second step is to gather some information about the person, their preferences/interests and circumstances. This can be helpful when supportively calming the person during stressful situations.

Find a quiet space to meet (dim lights, soothing items and a familiar person if possible)	Build connection-- ask about where they're from, what they do during the day, what their favorite activities are
Provide reassurance: "You are safe right now," "I am here to help you."	Use simple, ordinary language; give feedback in a gentle, concerned way
Try to find out if there are stressors other than the major one that brought the person to the shelter that may be impacting them	Ask (the person and support persons, if available) if there are strategies that have worked in the past to help the person manage their stress
Stay in tune to the way the person expresses themselves and how they take in information (receptive communication)	What are the person's immediate needs? Call for advice from clinicians if needed by finding your shelter's resource list.
If possible, get a sense of the medical issues the person may be experiencing and any medications they are taking.	Clue into possible caregiver/supporter fatigue as a contributing factor for stress. Brief periods of respite may be very helpful in stabilizing a possible crisis.

If a person is experiencing behavioral challenges, they may be attempting to "tell" you something

Step 3: Identify Calming Techniques and Activities

Next, use the information gathered to identify which calming techniques and activities the person might respond positively to.

Non-Verbal Techniques	Verbal Techniques
Tone: <i>calm</i> ; Posture: <i>relaxed</i> ; Facial expressions: <i>inviting, supportive</i> Listen not only to the person's words but to the emotions they're expressing. Validate both.	Reassurance: " <i>You are safe</i> "; Use: distraction, humor, understanding Reassure caregivers as well
Redirection to another activity and access to preferred items	Ask the person about what they like and what they are good at. Get to know them. This will help you
Take the person's lead when it comes to eye contact. Some people with IDD may avoid direct eye contact and this is ok. Don't force it.	Avoid extra words and limit steps or directives given at one time. It is a good rule to start with 2 and then increase/decrease based on how the person responds.
Avoid touching the person until you are sure they can tolerate this. Sometimes touch can increase stress for a variety of reasons.	Provide details (when possible) on what is going to happen and when.

The development of this resource was supported by the National CSS Emergency Management Committee at the Center for START Services, a program of the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability/UCED

Calming Activities

Taking a walk	Mindfulness practices
Grounding exercises (see below)	Bubbles, sidewalk chalk
Sensory activities	Movement

Calm Kits

If possible, create calm kits, which may include:

- Coloring books, crayons, colored pencils
- Art books
- Sensory items (no noise or blinking lights)
- Weighted lap pad
- Blanket
- Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs



Grounding Techniques

Stay Grounded Using Your 5 Senses

Relax Your Body, Take a Few Deep Breaths and Focus on the Following...

- 5** Things You Can See 
- 4** Things You Can Feel 
- 3** Things You Can Hear 
- 2** Things You Can Smell 
- 1** Thing You Can Taste 

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5-4-3-2-1 Senses

Ask the person to identify the following things.

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you hear
- 3 things you smell
- 2 things you can touch
- 1 thing you taste

5-4-3-2-1 Sights

If noticing each sense is tough, try an exercise just with sights. Create categories and have the person name what they see. Here is an example:

- 5 colors I see
- 4 shapes I see
- 3 soft things I see
- 2 people I see
- 1 book I see

A-B-C Around the Room

This exercise will get people connected with the place where they are right now. Have the person look around the room and name something they see that starts with A, then B, then C and so forth. See how far they can get through the alphabet and then check-in to see how they're feeling once they reach the end.

Download Source: The Pragmatic Parent LLC <https://www.thepragmaticparent.com/grounding-techniques-for-anxiety-kids/>

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Power Hug

Firm pressure is great for grounding. Help the person create an affirming statement to use for this exercise. It could be something like, "I am in control," or "I am safe in this moment." Practice placing the left hand on the right shoulder for a tap and then the right hand on the left shoulder for another tap. Then squeeze into a hug and say the affirmation. Tap, tap, squeeze, affirm. Tap, tap, squeeze, affirm. Repeat this as many times as needed!

Object Focus

Keep some unique items on hand with different textures and colors. These could be sensory items, colorful rocks, snow globes or something else. The person can hold an item in their hands and tune in all of their focus to the item. Notice the colors. Notice the textures. How does it feel in my hand? How does it feel when I squeeze it? What colors do I see? Just notice everything there is to notice about the item!

Stomp Stomp Blow

For an active grounding exercise, have the person stomp the left foot, stomp the right foot and then exhale deeply. Continue this pattern of stomp, stomp, blow, stomp, stomp, blow, stomp, stomp, blow. Feel the connection of feet with the floor. Blow away anxious thoughts.

There are also a number of very helpful relaxation activities that can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxX9ftbLerF8P6QQF_Af8HQ

**This document was developed by the National START Emergency Management Committee. START works to strengthen efficiencies and service outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and behavioral health needs in the community. These tips are effective when supporting a person with IDD and are also generalizable to everyone experiencing stress during emergency situations.*