Demand Avoidance

Some autistic people can present with a demand avoidant profile. This may have been highlighted as part of their diagnosis assessment for Autism.

A person who presents with a demand avoidance profile may display responses such as:

- difficulty in responding to demands and requests even those demands placed on the person from themselves
- a strong need to be in control
- strong focus on people over things
- differences in controlling and regulating emotions

A person's profile can vary considerably depending on their strengths and difficulties. Demand avoidance is very often caused by / accompanied by high levels of anxiety.

Our top tips on supporting a person with a demand avoidant profile include:

- Understand the feelings behind the behaviours: The first and most important starting point is to find out and understand the reasons for the person's response. As mentioned, a big part of a demand avoidance profile can be anxiety. Look at what is causing this anxiety and ways to decrease this anxiety first.

- Consider the language you are using: A person may have good verbal language but be unable to process verbal communication such as non-specific questions and instructions. Also look at the words you use, do you use words such as "no", "you need to" or "you can't do that?" If so, try and remove these words as they can be a trigger. Using words that appear non-negotiable can make a person feel as though they are not in control.

- Where possible remove time frames and plan ahead to build in extra time: Time is an additional demand and we will often give a person time frames to complete something by.

- Ask the person for help: If there are several parts to a task working together with the person to complete it may help. Also telling the person that you don't know or can't remember how to do something can make a demand seem less direct.

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- Reward systems: Rewards can create an additional demand on top of the demand itself and if the person doesn't do what has been asked of them then a reward isn't earned. This can increase anxiety and may affect the person's self-esteem. For a lot of people with a demand avoidance profile completely removing reward systems is more beneficial.

- Turn the task into a game / challenge: Can you turn the task of putting clothes on for example into a game of who can do this the quickest? Please note this may not work for everyone and may become overwhelming, consider whether your person can cope with the challenge.

- Consider choice: There are times when certain things cannot be avoided such as self-care routines. By offering limited choices or negotiated choices the person is still able to have some control. For example, instead of telling a person when bath time is you might ask the person what time they would prefer to have a bath. Using terms such as "how would you feel if we" also allows some room for choice. Consider whether your person can cope with choice first.

- Adjust your expectations: When working with a person with a demand avoidant profile, suggested strategies and tools may not work. Consider the person as an individual and only use strategies and tools that work for them. Accepting that some things just may not work for that person can also be helpful in moving forward. Their behaviour is an incapacity not a choice.

- Be flexible: Use creative and adaptable approaches.

- Try and stay away from using inflexible set rules and routines.

- Use prompts: Visuals, alarms or text messages can be a less direct way of giving demands.

- Consider whether the person is in burnout: High demand avoidance is often presented in autistic burnout, which can bring its own unique set of issues. Strategies include complete demand withdrawal, reduction in social interactions and focusing on sensory regulation.