What to Do During a Traffic Stop

It’s OK To Feel Anxious
Pull Over Slowly

- Look for safe space to pull over
- Indicate you are pulling over with your turn signal

Pull Over Slowly

- Slowly pull over to a safe spot on the side of the road
Pulling Over in Traffic

• Sometimes it’s hard to find a place to pull over.

Visor Card

Traffic Stop Instructions

• Keep your hands on the steering wheel
• Do not get out of your car (unless the officer tells you to)
• Tell the officer about your diagnosis
• Answer the officer’s questions
• Do not leave until the officer tells you to

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Managing Sensory Issues

- Mention sensory issues when officer approaches car
- Extra lights may be used at night
  - If night, turn on inside light so officer can see you

Roll Down Your Window

- Roll your window all the way down for the officer to talk to you
- Officer may come to the passenger side for his own safety from oncoming cars
Why So Many Officers?

• Not unusual for more than one officer to be on stop
  – Field training
  – Back up for officer safety

Keep Your Hands on the Steering Wheel

• Wait for the officer to ask for your ID or other documents before you reach for your wallet or glove box
Disclose Your Autism Diagnosis

- Your choice, but that is helpful for the officer to reduce chance for misinterpretation of characteristics you might display

Be Polite

- Be polite and follow instructions
- Do not argue
In Case of Crisis Meltdown

- Meltdown could be created by:
  - Stress
  - Sensory overload
- Ask for help by stating “I’m feeling overwhelmed.” Or “I feel a meltdown coming on, please be patient with me.”

Provide Documents When Asked

- Driver’s license, vehicle registration, insurance card
- Officer will take them back to his car
Documents Envelope

Contents:
DMV Auto Registration
Current Auto Insurance Card
Disclosure Card

Also hand the officer your driver’s license

Information for the officer - how to help the driver:
- Speak calmly
- Use clear, simple words and sentences
- Give one instruction at a time
- Allow for the driver’s processing time
- Reduce noise and lights if possible
- Allow the driver to fidget, rock, flap - it may be a calming technique
- If the driver is upset, consider calling the driver’s emergency contact
Wait In The Car

- Wait patiently
- Officer could take several minutes
- Officer will tell you what to do next
Stay Parked Until Told to Leave

- Officer will tell you when you can leave
- Wait for officer to be safely back in his car
- Pull onto the road safely

What About Your Passengers?

- Same rules apply to EVERYONE in the car
  - Not everyone may be asked to provide ID
Ticket/Citation

• You Must Appear — no choice

Otherwise, choose option:
• Pay Fine
• Request Payment Plan
• Request Waiver Hearing
• Request Trial

Do you know about the Move Over Law??
Move Over Law

- This law requires drivers to shift lanes or slow down in order to provide a "safety zone" for a police car, ambulance, fire truck, tow truck, utility vehicle, or highway maintenance vehicle that is stopped on the side of a road with its warning lights flashing.

To receive your Traffic Stop Kit

Email:
- Your name
- Mailing address

Shelly McLaughlin
smclaughlin@pfamd.org
FOR MORE INFORMATION

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EVERYONE feels anxiety when they see that police car light up behind them. You begin to wonder, “Am I in trouble?” “What did I do wrong?” It may be difficult to slow down your brain in that moment and think about what you need to do. Sometimes, you’ve done nothing wrong but you may have a headlight or taillight out on your vehicle and the officer is just trying to be helpful by letting you know. So it’s time to start thinking about what you should do BEFORE you get pulled over. The goal is to have a safe interaction during a traffic stop.

Pull over slowly
Once you see the police lights or hear the siren behind you, look to see if there is a safe space to pull over and indicate you are pulling over with your turn signal. Take your time, safety first! Your turn signal lets the officer know that you’ve seen them and that you are just looking for a safe place to pull over. It’s okay if this takes you a little bit of time. You don’t have to feel rushed. Then slowly pull over to a safe area. Examples of safe places might be the shoulder on the side of the road, along the curb of a road without a shoulder, a parking lot, or even someone’s driveway.

Pulling over in traffic
Sometimes it’s hard to find a place to pull over. You may not be able to immediately stop. If there is nowhere to pull over, you can stop in the traffic lane you are driving in, but only if necessary. Be aware of your surroundings and the traffic around you. You may need to pull onto a side street or a parking lot for safety purposes. You might have to pull over on the left side of the roadway (it’s not always going to be safe to pull onto the right side of the road depending on what lane you are in).

Once the officer approaches your car and introduces themself, ask if where you’ve stopped is okay or if the officer recommends that you move to a different location. Listen carefully to what the officer tells you. It’s a good idea to repeat it back to the officer to make sure you’ve understood what you are supposed to do. It’s okay to ask questions if there’s anything you don’t understand or that you didn’t hear correctly because of traffic noise.

Roll down your window
Roll your window all the way down so that the officer may talk to you. Do not be surprised if the officer comes to the passenger side of the car. They might do this for their own safety from oncoming cars.

Keep your hands on the steering wheel
It is critical that you leave your hands in plain view on the steering wheel. A police officer could easily think you might be trying to reach for, or be holding a weapon if they cannot see your hands. Wait for them to ask for your ID or other documents before you look for your wallet or open the glove box.

Officers conduct traffic stops all the time. They are used to saying the same thing over and over again, so sometimes they speak quickly. If you have difficulty hearing or understanding what the officer said, simply politely ask them to repeat it.

Disclose your autism diagnosis
This step is your choice to do so. However, your disclosure is helpful for the officer to know. With that information they will be less likely to misinterpret some characteristics you may display for acts of noncompliance. For instance, if you have difficulty looking at someone’s eyes when you speak to them, an officer may mistakenly think that you are trying to hide that you have been drinking. Or if you have sensory issues, and they understand that, they might be more willing to turn off their front lights and sirens.

Help Line 443.330.5341 • Office 443.330.5370
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**Be polite**
Be polite to the officer and follow their instructions. If there's anything you don’t understand, just politely ask for additional explanation. The officer will do the best they can to make sure you understand everything. Do not argue with the officer.

**Provide documents when asked**
In almost every case, the officer will ask you to present your driver’s license, vehicle registration, and possibly certificate of car insurance. They will take your documents back to their car.

**Wait in the car for the officer to return**
The officer will return your documents when they are finished. Checking your information on the police computer can take several minutes. If the officer is going to issue you a warning or give you a ticket it can take even more time! It is important that you wait in your car patiently. Only get out of your car if the officer specifically asks you to. They will provide instruction for what to do next.

**Stay parked until the officer tells you it is ok to leave**
Once the officer has given you back your license, vehicle registration, and insurance card, it’s okay to ask, “Can I leave now?” Once the officer tells you it’s okay to go, put your turn signal on and very carefully check your mirrors or look to see if oncoming traffic is approaching. Cars can approach very fast so be careful re-entering the roadway. You can even ask the officer before they walk back to their car if they can help you re-enter traffic. The officer may pause traffic for you so you can safely re-enter the roadway.

**Additional Resources**

PFA Tips: How to Interact with Police
https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/parent-tips-how-to-interact-with-police/

PFA Autism Disclosure Cards and Other Safety Resources
https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/

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There aren’t “special” rules for individuals that may have a disability when it comes to how you should interact with a police officer. We are all expected to obey the law and there are rules that everyone should follow when in the presence of police. Following these rules can help make sure both you and the officer stay safe.

Show your hands
You always want to let a police officer see your hands, otherwise she may be concerned that you are hiding a weapon. You may have an item in your pocket that helps you feel calm – like a fidget – but NEVER put your hands in your pocket when you are approached by an officer. Explain that you are feeling stressed and your calming item is in your pocket and ask if you may reach into your pocket to get it.

Stay in place
Running away might make a police officer think you have done something wrong, even if you haven’t. Just stay where you are and allow the officer to come and talk to you, or to continue doing his job.

Never touch a police officer
If you try to touch any part of a police officer’s uniform, the officer may think you are grabbing for her gun, badge, or that you are attempting to hurt her. If the police think you are trying to hurt them, they may put you in handcuffs to keep themselves safe.

No hugging
If you really love police, offer a handshake. If you really, really want to hug an officer, ALWAYS ask first.

Don’t stand so close
Sometimes it may be hard to judge how far apart you are standing from another person. But that can get you into trouble if you stand too close to an officer. She may mistakenly think that you want to pick a fight with her, or worry that you want to grab something from her belt. If you aren’t sure if your distance is ok, then ask.

Never touch a police officer’s dog
Police officers’ dogs, also known as K9s, are actual police and are working when they are in uniform. They are police officers too, so just like all other officers, you may not touch them.

It’s ok to ask someone if they are law enforcement
Some police uniforms have light blue shirts and dark blue pants, some are all dark blue, some are all black, some are brown, and some police don’t wear a uniform at all – just regular clothes. With so many different looks it can be confusing. So if you aren’t sure, it’s always ok to ask someone if they are police. All police carry a badge AND have a police identification card that has their picture, like a driver’s license.

Disclose your diagnosis
You may have difficulty looking at someone’s face during a conversation, may not respond quickly to instructions, or you may not be able to tolerate the lights and sirens from the police cars. If a police officer understands these difficulties you may have, she will have an understanding of the accommodations you may need. Items you could show an officer include a medical alert bracelet or a disability disclosure card.

It’s ok to say you don’t understand or don’t know
It’s understandable to want to please someone. So we might be tempted to answer a police officer’s question even if we don’t understand what we’re being asked. Or we might provide information that isn’t correct, just so we can feel like we’ve responded. But we’re not helping if we aren’t offering good information. Or worse, the police may mistake our attempts at being helpful as outright lying to cover up something. And that can get us into trouble. Police would prefer that if we don’t understand what they are asking, or if we truly don’t know an answer, that we tell them.

Police are moms, dads, and other regular people too
Police officers have regular lives outside of their jobs just like you have different interests and activities outside of school or your job. And, just like you, they want to have friends. So if you see an officer out in the community, it’s ok to say hello, ask them how their day is, and introduce yourself. You may just make a new friend.

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HOW TO INTERACT WITH POLICE: IF YOU ARE A CAREGIVER

Face it, if the police have been called to the scene, then something “not so routine” is happening. As a caregiver to an individual with autism or other intellectual/developmental disability, how can you help make this a better interaction?

Allow the individual to be addressed
Police are being taught to address the individual with autism or other intellectual/developmental disabilities rather than assume that a caregiver needs to speak on the person’s behalf. This does not mean that the police will not still want to speak with you, just that they will also want to hear from the individual. If the individual does not use verbal communication, please let the officer know which method of communication is most effective for the person.

Be clear you are there to help
In a crisis situation, your presence could be mistaken as someone attempting to obstruct an officer’s efforts. Identify your role as a caregiver and offer assistance. You may also request to be present during an interview.

Offer up triggers and passions
You may be the only person on a scene with the key to end someone’s meltdown or crisis. The person’s passion may be the redirection tool that can turn a situation around. Providing a list of a person’s triggers can help prevent an officer from creating a meltdown situation. If your loved one is missing and police are called, knowing the person’s passions can assist the officers in their search.

The truth is necessary
As parents we might alter the truth for different reasons; fear we’ll look like bad parents, or fear we’ll portray our loved one in a bad light. But police absolutely need the truth. If you call for help to find your missing child, the police need to know how long the child has been missing because the amount of time gone changes their search parameters. If your loved one has missed medication which helps him function, the police need to know that. If your loved one has carried out threats in the past, the police need to be aware of that fact. These pieces of information could change how they approach your situation.

Fill out a First Responder Form
Fill out this form before a crisis. During times of high stress, it can be difficult for us to recall the most basic of information.

Practice, practice, practice
Practice how to interact with police with your loved one. This will help prepare her should she have an encounter with law enforcement.

Visit your local precinct
Introduce your loved one to the officers in your local precinct so that the first interaction between them isn’t a crisis situation. This way the officers may become familiar with your family so they will recognize your loved one’s signs of frustration and escalation, and have a conversation about the best techniques to help your loved one return to calm. Your loved one may also respond differently to an officer if it’s someone familiar to them.

Additional Resources

First Responder Forms and other safety resources
http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/

Interacting with Law Enforcement
https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/autism-safety-project/community/law-enforcement

Interacting with Law Enforcement: A Guide for Persons with Disabilities

Be Safe The Movie
https://besafethemovie.com/

Written by Shelly McLaughlin, Director of Safety Programs, Pathfinders for Autism.

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