

I'm not a robot



Examples of pathological demand avoidance

For some people, the idea of being asked to complete a task can be overwhelming and distressing to the point that they avoid all thoughts, reminders, or behaviors related to the demand. These individuals might be experiencing pathological demand avoidance (PDA), which can be common in people with neurodevelopmental conditions like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Understanding PDA can be helpful for these individuals and their loved ones. Therapy may be helpful for overcoming pathological demand avoidance.

Getty/recep-bg/Work through avoidant behavior in online therapy/Connect with a licensed therapist/What is pathological demand avoidance (PDA)? According to the Pathological Demand Avoidance Society (PDA Society), demand avoidance generally occurs when someone struggles significantly to complete tasks for themselves or others. This symptom is usually considered pathological when it causes distress, procrastination, burnout, emotional pain, or a build-up of responsibilities. Pathological demand avoidance tends to be compulsive and challenging to work through. PDA is usually most common in children and adults with autism, but demand avoidance itself can be typical on an occasional basis and can happen to anyone.Common examples of pathological demand avoidanceThe demands a person avoids can depend on their personality and lifestyle. Some people may thrive in areas where others struggle. Below are a few examples of pathological demand avoidance, starting with those that frequently impact children in early childhood and beyond: A child becomes distressed and has a meltdown when their parent asks them to clean their room. A child refuses to do the dishes because their parent reminded them to do so, and they didn't need a reminder. A child with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) struggles to get started on their homework because the mounting pressure to do so is overwhelming. A parent asks their child with ADHD to clean the cat's litter box, but they avoid doing so because it doesn't incite a dopamine release and isn't "fun." A child avoids brushing their teeth in the morning because they are tired, and it would take significant mental effort.An autistic child avoids going with friends to complete a school project because they are going to a beach, and sand incites sensory issues for them.Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) examples in adults Adults can also experience PDA behaviors. Below are a few ways this symptom might present in adult life: Avoidance of college schoolwork, leading to low grades, missed classes, or even dropping out of school/Difficulty completing tasks at the end of the day if one has missed or forgotten tasks at the beginning of the day Having the sense that their day or week has been "ruined" because they messed up once, missed an appointment, didn't work enough hours, or changed one's schedule, leading to a cycle of further avoidance and distress/Avoiding showering and putting on a nice outfit even if one wants to do to the sense that it would take too much time or energy Calling out of work for the entire day instead of calling in late because being late causes distress Avoiding difficult conversations with others Avoiding reading a new book or watching a new series because someone suggested it/Avoiding tips from other people about productivity Avoiding cleaning and organization tasks by ignoring messes or spending time outside of the home to avoid seeing them Challenges with personal hygiene tasks Difficulty making meals throughout the week, sometimes leading to increased spending on fast food or food delivery Difficulty completing forms Avoiding appointments/Avoiding any request to hang out with friends or family that seems to create pressure/Why does PDA occur? Pathological demand avoidance is often associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and ADHD. Identifying PDA may help loved ones understand certain symptoms in those with communication, organization, and emotional regulation challenges. People with neurodevelopmental conditions often struggle to cope with pressure and demands, which may arise from factors like the following: A fear of losing control/A fear of being misunderstood/Difficulty coping with change Sensory difficulties, such as sensory overload/Social anxiety/Learned helplessness/Generalized anxiety/A desire to understand why a task is necessary/Difficulty partaking in tasks that are not fun/enjoyable, or dopamine-producing/Poor memory and focus A past traumatic experience/How to push past task avoidance/If you're experiencing pathological demand avoidance, regardless of the cause, the following strategies might help you complete the tasks or demands while regulating your emotions.Put your own spin on the task If you have been asked by someone else or are required to complete a task for school or work, you might experience a sense of distress in response to the idea of doing something entirely because someone else has commanded you to do so. Putting your own spin on a task may help you push past avoidance and take control over the situation. For example, if your professor requires you to organize your binder in a specific way for their class, you might decorate the binder with fun stickers or doodles to make the task more fun.Getty/PamelaJoeMcFarlane/Don't pressure yourself or entertain negative self-beliefs related to pathological demand avoidance (PDA) Adults with pathological demand avoidance often have a history of similar challenges. As children, they might have received messages from their parents, teachers, and other authority figures that they were "unruly," "defiant," "lazy," "dramatic," and "rude." These messages can stick with someone into adulthood, and an adult may repeat them to themselves when they struggle to complete a task. For example, if you don't clean your apartment for a week and the dishes pile up, you might tell yourself, "I'm so lazy and dirty." These thoughts can contribute to emotional pain and may lead to less of a desire to make a change. Instead of pressuring yourself and labeling yourself as "bad," try to remove pressure from yourself altogether. Telling yourself, "I am a hardworking person, and I know I'll get to this task when I'm ready," may remove enough pressure to regulate your emotions, allowing you to do the dishes that same night. Pathological demand avoidance often serves the purpose of helping an individual avoid an underlying fear, such as the fear that one is incapable of completing the task correctly. When you remove shame from the equation, the fear may be reduced, and the task may seem easier to complete.Ensure you have plenty of free time Free time can reduce some of the distress associated with completing the tasks you've been avoiding. Try not to load up your day with too many appointments, responsibilities, and requests, as this can lead to a sense of overwhelm. Instead, try to evenly space out your responsibilities and leave time to decompress. Completing one or two small tasks may be better than scheduling five and doing none due to the associated pressure. Anticipate tasks before they are asked of you If you often avoid doing what others ask you to do, try anticipating some of the requests you might hear from others. For example, before your roommate returns from vacation, you might clean the apartment so she doesn't comment on the mess. If you have a big project due at work, consider submitting it early so you don't have to worry about your boss reminding you before the due date. This strategy is more short-term but may be helpful when your initial emotional reaction to demands leads you to avoid them. Remove unfair demands from your life, including masking as a person with autism People with autism often mask themselves or try to hide their autistic traits in an attempt to fit into society. You might notice that you've taken on some responsibilities in your life because you believe you "should" or because it is expected of you. Look at ways you might become more authentic by reducing the time and energy demands that don't necessarily add to your life. For example, if you have friends who aren't understanding of autism or frequently pressure you to spend time together when you're uncomfortable doing so, you might consider ending those friendships or expressing how the friendship could be more accommodating. If you are a student or employee, consider seeking reasonable accommodations that allow you to function in a way that works for you. You can also accommodate yourself at home by changing how you organize and fit tasks into your schedule. For example, some people with ADHD purchase bins for their clothing instead of folding or hanging them up to reduce the pressure associated with doing laundry the "right" way. Place no expectations on yourself or a task/Setting expectations before a task or responsibility has been completed can lead to unnecessary pressure and fear. For example, if you expect yourself to be able to pre-make seven meals for the week ahead each Sunday, struggling to do so could incite a slew of negative self-beliefs. Instead, set out with the primary goal of preparing meals and allow yourself to make as many as you can at that time. Whether you make one meal or seven, you have still made an effort. How to support your child or loved one with pathological demand avoidance/If you are the loved one of someone with pathological demand avoidance, you may find their avoidant behavior frustrating, confusing, or difficult to understand. Below are a few ways you may be able to support them and avoid conflict: Avoid using labels like "lazy," "ungrateful," "dramatic," or "spoiled" to describe them Avoid shaming them for their behavior or using social comparisons (Ex: "Your sister knows not to do that!") Avoid demands that have no room for conversation or flexibility Don't tell them they're overreacting or making a scene out of nothing Try to understand the cause of their behavior, such as anxiety, past trauma, shame, a sense of pressure, or sensory difficulties/Role-play a task with them beforehand Ask how you could help them make the task easier for themselves Give them control over when and how they do certain tasks (for example, tell your child they can choose which day of the week they clean their room and at what time of day) Offer children rewards for completing tasks that are challenging for them/Try giving indirect demands without any implied expectation Educate yourself on common neurodevelopmental challenges and neurodiversity/How to make a request seem less demanding/To remove pressure from a request to someone with marked demand avoidance tendencies or a PDA profile, consider the following: Give them autonomy over their own space, body, and boundaries/Allow them the option to say "no" and make it clear that they can refuse Give them choices (when it's completed, how it's completed, etc.) Offer a reward Avoid labels and shameful language/Don't push the matter frequently if they are still thinking about it Explain why the request is important to you emotionally and logically, and talk about why completing the request would benefit you, them, or the situation Be honest, direct, and upfront about the details involved in the request If you're a parent, and your child is declining to complete tasks that are essential to their health or well-being, such as brushing their teeth, showering, or the washing away old food in their bedroom, you may want to work with a therapist and child developmental specialist to support them in overcoming their barriers to self-care. However, do not try to physically or emotionally force them into any activity, and avoid yelling at them. Emotional distress may worsen avoidance and could cause panic attacks or an emotional meltdown. Getty/AnnaSills/Work through avoidant behavior in online therapy/Connect with a licensed therapist/Mental health support options for pathological demand avoidance Therapy can be helpful for those with pathological demand avoidance and caregivers of children with this trait. A therapist can guide you through techniques that may reduce your avoidant behavior and improve your daily life without causing extreme distress. However, adding another task to your to-do list can be challenging. In these cases, online therapy appointments through a platform like BetterHelp may be more accommodating. Through an online platform, individuals can connect with a provider from home via phone, video, or live chat sessions. These options and ease of access may make attending therapy seem like less of a demand. In addition, the app gives users control over their support needs, providing other tools like group sessions, worksheets, and journaling prompts for those who want to use them. Studies have found that online therapy can be exceptionally effective, especially in supporting people with ADHD, who often struggle with demand avoidance. In a 2022 study, internet-based interventions improved attention and social function in children and adults with ADHD. Pathological demand avoidance generally refers to the extreme avoidance of perceived demands, whether they are self-imposed or imposed by others. This trait can be common in children and adults with autism and those with ADHD but can present in anyone, regardless of whether they have a neurodevelopmental disorder diagnosis. Strategies like avoiding pressure, rewarding oneself, and taking tasks one at a time may be helpful. Consider contacting a therapist online or in your area to develop a tailored strategy to address this challenge. In the realm of autism, various subtypes exist, each exhibiting unique characteristics and behaviors. One such subtype is Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). This article aims to outline the definition and history of PDA, providing a foundation for understanding this complex aspect of autism.Defining PDA in Autism/Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a profile within the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) characterized by extreme avoidance of everyday demands, a need to be in control, and resistance to complying with demands from others. This behavior significantly impacts daily functioning and relationships.PDA is characterized by extreme resistance to everyday demands and requests, leading to high levels of anxiety and avoidance behaviors. Notably, individuals with PDA have an overwhelming need to be in control and difficulty accepting demands or instructions from others.Furthermore, PDA is primarily recognized within the United Kingdom and is characterized by a strong inclination to resist and evade demands, even when the individual may actually wish to do them. The primary drive behind demand avoidance in PDA is the protection of an individual's autonomy.The History of PDA/The term "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (PDA) was coined by Elizabeth Newson in 1983 to describe a syndrome where individuals resist and avoid ordinary demands of life, even when it is in their best interest. Signs of PDA typically manifest early in life.Understanding the history and definition of PDA is the first step in comprehending this complex aspect of autism. In the sections that follow, we will delve deeper into the unique characteristics of PDA, how it overlaps and differs from other autism profiles, and effective management strategies. Furthermore, real-life examples of PDA will be provided to offer practical insights into how this subtype of autism manifests in various contexts.Characteristics of PDA/Understanding the characteristics of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is crucial when learning about this specific subtype of autism. PDA is marked by distinct behavioral patterns such as a strong resistance to demands, a need for control, and the utilization of social strategies.Resistance to Demands/Individuals with PDA exhibit an extreme resistance to everyday demands and requests. This resistance is not limited to tasks they find challenging; even relatively simple tasks can trigger avoidance behaviors. For example, children with PDA may resist classwork, not because it's difficult for them, but because it is perceived as a demand.[5] Avoidance behaviors can take many forms, including making excuses, creating distractions, focusing intensely on something else, withdrawing, escaping, or experiencing a meltdown or panic attack.Need for Control/An overwhelming need for control is another defining characteristic of PDA. This need stems from the individual's high anxiety levels and their desire to mitigate the stress associated with demands. Both direct and indirect demands can cause anxiety in these individuals, leading to a strong desire to dictate the terms of their environment.Poor executive functioning, or the ability to plan and organize one's actions, can also exacerbate the need for control. If an individual with PDA struggles to anticipate expectations that are not of their choosing, their need for control can intensify.[5] Utilizing Social Strategies/Individuals with PDA often utilize social strategies to avoid demands. This can include manipulation, negotiation, and role-play, all used in an attempt to maintain control and avoid the anxiety associated with demands.However, due to their difficulty with executive functioning, they may struggle to understand the schedule or structure in a social situation. As such, demands can feel unexpected and increase their anxiety, leading to further avoidance behaviors.Understanding these key characteristics of PDA can help in better managing the condition, and tailoring interventions to meet the individual's unique needs. It's important to remember that while these behaviors can be challenging, they are driven by a need to manage anxiety and should not be seen as willful or defiant. Instead, they highlight the need for understanding, patience, and supportive strategies that can help those with PDA navigate their daily lives.PDA and Other Autism Profiles/Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a behavior profile that some individuals on the autism spectrum exhibit. Understanding how PDA overlaps with other autism profiles and how it contrasts with other disorders helps in providing adequate support to individuals exhibiting these behaviors.Overlapping Traits with Autism/PDA has been described as a 'profile' of behaviors exhibited by some autistic individuals rather than a distinct syndrome or diagnosis. Despite insufficient evidence to support PDA as an autism subtype or an independent condition according to a 2018 study, some clinicians find the concept useful [4]. PDA behaviors involve using social strategies to avoid demands and mask anxiety or underlying processing and communication issues. Approaches to dealing with children with a PDA profile differ from those used with autistic children, focusing on novelty and variety rather than structured routines. PDA discussion has been primarily in the U.K., but awareness is growing in the United States.The PDA Society labels it as a profile within the autism spectrum, requiring an initial autism diagnosis.PDA vs Other Disorders/PDA is not widely accepted among U.S. clinicians, with varying interpretations of its significance. Critics argue that designating resistance as 'pathological' might be influenced by ableist biases and values. Some professionals see children's opposition to demands as acts of consent and self-advocacy, emphasizing the importance of considering the context behind such behaviors [4].Studies on PDA are limited in number and scale, with few robust studies available to support or refute the validity of PDA. Children exhibiting PDA traits might form a small proportion of the autistic population, with some outgrowing these behaviors by adolescence or adulthood. Research indicates that these children often enjoy avoidance behaviors triggered by phobias, novelty, and uncertainty, using strategies like manipulation or shocking behavior to distract authorities.In conclusion, it's clear that PDA intertwines with other autism profiles, but the debate over its significance and acceptance among clinicians continues. Further research on PDA will help to clarify this behavior profile and its relationship with autism and other disorders.Management Strategies for PDA/Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), a complex profile of autism, requires unique strategies for management and treatment. A comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach often yields the best results, involving professionals like psychologists, therapists, educators, and healthcare providers. This strategy addresses the core features of PDA and any co-occurring conditions or additional needs [2].Multidisciplinary Treatment Approach/An effective treatment approach for PDA in autism must be personalized, addressing individual needs, strengths, preferences, and developmental stages. Because what works for one person may not be as effective for another, it's vital to develop personalized interventions and strategies.Furthermore, addressing PDA requires a multidimensional approach. This includes behavioral strategies, communication and social interaction techniques, sensory regulation strategies, and emotional and mental health support. Collaboration between caregivers, therapists, educators, and other professionals is essential in developing a comprehensive treatment plan.Therapeutic Interventions/Several therapeutic interventions have been proven effective in treating PDA in autism. They include:Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): This approach focuses on modifying negative thoughts and behaviors. It teaches individuals to identify and challenge their negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones.Occupational Therapy (OT): OT addresses sensory processing and motor skills. It helps individuals improve their ability to perform daily activities and promotes independence.Speech and Language Therapy (SLT): SLT targets communication and social interaction challenges. It assists individuals in understanding and using language effectively.Positive Behavior Support (PBS): PBS is an evidence-based approach used to address challenging behaviors in individuals with PDA. It focuses on understanding the reasons behind the behaviors, creating supportive environments, teaching new skills, and utilizing reinforcement techniques.These interventions can be tailored to the needs of the individual and adjusted over time as those needs change. They are often used in combination, providing a holistic approach to managing PDA in autism.Remember, managing PDA effectively requires ongoing communication and collaboration among all involved, including the individual with PDA, their family, and their team of professionals. Together, they can develop and implement effective strategies that promote growth, development, and overall well-being.PDA from a Global Perspective/When viewed from a global perspective, Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) presents a significant clinical challenge. This challenge is not limited to the United Kingdom, where the term was first coined, but is faced by healthcare professionals worldwide who are dealing with the complex constellation of symptoms that define PDA.Recognition and Challenges/PDA is characterized by children who go to extreme lengths to avoid meeting demands from adults and peers, exhibiting behaviours ranging from openly oppositional or manipulative to extreme shyness, passivity, and muteness [7]. This avoidance behavior is often publicly displayed, showing no concern for appropriateness and sometimes even in an exhibitionist style termed extreme demand avoidance (EDA).PDA is not limited to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). It can also be seen in language disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), selective mutism, school refusal, anorexia nervosa, specific behavioral phenotype syndromes like 22q11 deletion syndrome, Marfan syndrome, and epilepsy. This wide range of associated conditions suggests that PDA is not an extremely rare phenomenon, but a complex behavioral pattern that may occur across a range of neurodevelopmental disorders.Future Research and Studies/Despite the increasing recognition of PDA in clinical settings, treatment approaches are currently based on guesswork, clinical experience, and trial and error. This highlights the need for a comprehensive clinical research effort to better understand the diagnostic boundaries, prevalence, gender ratio, pathogenesis, comorbidity, natural outcome, and treatment of PDA.In terms of progress, the development of the "EDA-Q" (Extreme Demand Avoidance Questionnaire) by O'Nions and colleagues has been a significant step forward. This 26-item parent questionnaire has promising psychometric properties, marking a breakthrough for the systematic study of PDA. However, further validation in various groups of children is still needed [7].The study of PDA, its recognition globally, and the development of effective treatment strategies represent an important area of research within child and adolescent psychiatry. Continued research and studies on PDA will help provide a more nuanced understanding of this complex condition and improve the lives of those living with it.Real Life Examples of PDA/Understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) in real-life situations can provide valuable insights into this complex condition. Here, we explore how PDA might manifest in school and social situations, as well as within family dynamics and relationships.School and Social Situations/In school settings, PDA can pose unique challenges both for the child and the educators involved. Children with PDA may resist doing classwork even though it's not difficult for them, making it hard for teachers to know how to support them.For instance, a child with PDA might refuse to participate in a math lesson despite being capable of solving the problems. They may create distractions, focus intensely on a different task, or even have a meltdown to avoid the perceived demand.In social situations, PDA can also present challenges. Kids with PDA may not grasp the schedule or structure in a social situation, so demands placed on them can feel like they came out of nowhere. This could lead to avoidance behaviors like making excuses, withdrawing, escaping, or experiencing a panic attack [5].For example, a child with PDA might refuse to participate in a planned game at a birthday party. They may feel overwhelmed by the rules and expectations, leading to resistance and anxiety.Family Dynamics and Relationships/Within family dynamics, PDA can significantly affect relationships. The avoidance behaviors seen in school and social contexts can also be present at home, often leading to tension and misunderstanding.A child with PDA might resist simple day-to-day tasks such as getting ready for school, eating meals, or going to bed. Parents may struggle to understand why their child is so resistant to these seemingly straightforward tasks.Moreover, siblings might feel confused or frustrated by the behaviors of their sibling with PDA. This can lead to strained relationships within the family unit.It should be noted that PDA poses a significant clinical challenge globally, and treatment approaches for PDA are currently based on guesswork, clinical experience, and trial and error. Therefore, understanding and managing PDA takes patience and a multidisciplinary approach, with ongoing research crucial to improving outcomes for individuals with PDA and their families.References[1]: [1] [2]: [2] [3]: [3] [4]: [4] [5]: [5] [6]: [6] [7]: [7] Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. 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