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PDA AUTISM

"PERVASIVE DRIVE FOR AUTONOMY"
AKA
"PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE"

PDA is...



- A group of personality traits found in 1/5 of autistic people*
- A lifelong neurological difference
- A Fight/Flight/Freeze instinct triggered by demands

PDA is NOT...

- The result of "bad parenting"
- A conscious choice
- "Fixable" with rewards or punishments
- Being "spoiled, disobedient, lazy, selfish," etc.
- The same as oppositional, personality, or conduct disorders

A PDAer might be...



- A funny, imaginative storyteller
- Independent & routine driven
- Empathetic & perceptive
- Devoted to their passions
- A kind and loyal friend

A PDAer might also...



- Unintentionally offend authority figures
- Neglect sleep, food, or hygiene
- Struggle to follow directions
- Not want to compromise
- Insist on things being "fair" or equal at all times
- Have meltdowns triggered by demands

*1. Gillberg et al., 2015
2. Curtis & Izett, 2025
3. McConnell, 2023

PDA is sometimes jokingly called a "flavour" of autism.



PDA Autism OR "Traditional" Autism



Often outgoing and friendly. Conflicts arise about perceived inequities, obedience, or compromise.

Socializing



May be more reserved. Less likely to be bothered by authority figures and social hierarchies.



More likely to enjoy interactive play with imaginative worlds, characters, and storylines.

Play Style



More likely to prefer solo play, engaging in a rich inner world without needing to socialize.



Interests are often social in nature, or possibly fixated on a specific person.

Interests

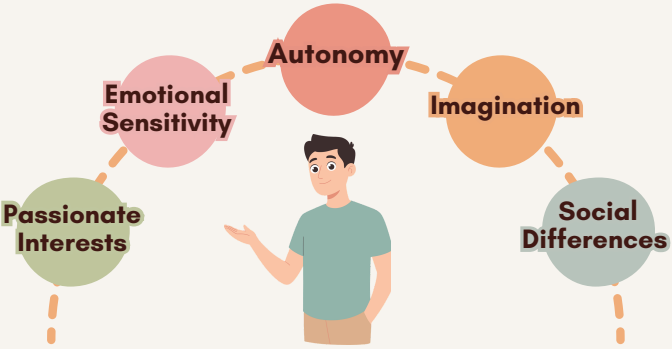


Interests might be impersonal, academic or technical in nature.

Not **"better"** or **"worse"**
Just a **different way of being**

4. PDA Society
5. PDA Society, 2022
6. American Psychiatric Association, 2022
7. O'Nions, E. et al., 2015

Qualities of "PDAers"



Passionate Interests



Like many autistic people, those with PDA often develop deep, passionate interests. However, PDAers are more likely to be socially-focused. They may even focus on one special person.

Many PDAers are highly intelligent. They can amass an incredible wealth of knowledge about their topic of interest. These interests are not simple hobbies — they are sources of meaning, motivation, joy, and mastery.

Respecting and supporting their interests can open up pathways for learning, connection, and growth.



Emotional Sensitivity

PDAers are usually sensitive and empathetic. They can be very perceptive and aware of others' feelings. They may connect deeply and quickly with new friends. They often experience intense emotions when they are misunderstood.

Supportive, nonjudgmental relationships that validate their emotions can help them regulate more effectively.

Paying attention to physical, emotional, sensory, or social needs and meeting those needs early and often supports healthy emotional regulation.

5. PDA Society
8. Egan et al., 2019
9. Kenny & Doyle, 2024

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Autonomy

PDAers strive for control over themselves and their environments. This drive for autonomy may be mistaken as defiance, but it's actually an automatic, self-protective response to feeling a loss of control.

When environments emphasize choice, collaboration, and flexibility, PDAers are likely to feel safe and participate authentically.

With sufficient autonomy, they are often highly motivated, capable, passionate, and successful people.



Imagination

Imagination is often a strength and source of comfort for PDAers. Many use storytelling, roleplay, or fantasy to rehearse social interactions or manage anxiety.

Many PDAers prefer to use a puppet or fantasy character to process emotions. This creative lens allows them to step back and work through challenges, blending logic and fantasy in unique and expressive ways.

Rather than dismissing this retreat into fantasy as avoidance or childishness, we can recognize it as a powerful tool for processing intense emotions, building resilience, and fostering self-expression.



Social Differences

PDAers often have a strong sense of justice and a natural preference for equality over hierarchy. They may not automatically follow social rules based on authority or status.

This can sometimes be mistaken for disrespect. As a result, misunderstandings with authority figures can occur when no disrespect is intended.

Recognizing these patterns as differences rather than deficits, and supporting their values while clearly teaching communication expectations, helps build trust and authentic connection.

5. PDA Society
8. Egan et al., 2019
9. Kenny & Doyle, 2024

Demand Triggers for PDAers



1. Direct Instructions
"Please put your shoes on."
Even polite requests can feel demanding and may trigger a stress response.





2. Time Pressures or Schedules
"We need to arrive at 5:00."
Transitions between activities are often difficult. Specific time constraints can be triggers.



3. Unexpected Changes or Surprises
"Surprise! It's a party!"
Sudden changes to routines, plans, or surroundings can feel threatening and cause distress.



4. Social Expectations
"Grandma is here. Come visit with her."
Needing to make eye contact, respond to greetings, or participate in conversations can feel demanding.



5. Authority Imbalance
"Finish your homework."
Dealing with authority figures (such as parents, teachers, police, or bosses) can be triggering.



6. Praise and Rewards
"Good job! You did your chores!"
Praise can feel like a demand in disguise. It implies future expectations to repeat a given behaviour.



7. Being Watched or Evaluated
"Don't be shy. Show us what you learned."
Needing to perform in front of observers can feel threatening and trigger fear that shuts down thinking.



8. Sensory Demands
"Wear your uniform." "Sit still at your desk"
Being forced by authority figures to ignore one's sensory needs can feel threatening



9. Internal Demands
"I need to eat." "I should brush my teeth..."
Pressure from within can feel just as demanding, often making health and hygiene challenging.



10. Identity or Moral Demands
"I should do this right. It needs to be perfect."
Pressure from within to be 'good' (e.g., unreasonable expectations of perfection) can be triggering.

5. PDA Society
8. Egan et al., 2019
10. Johnson & Saunderson, 2023
11. Ryan & Deci, 2000

How to Reduce Demands

Demand reduction is not avoidance – it is survival

Instead of opening presents at a party, open gifts privately and send thank-yous

Instead of sitting at the dining table for family meals, sit nearby but separately



Instead of shopping in a crowded store, order online for pickup or delivery

Instead of attending a meeting in person, join via video call

Some life demands are simply non-negotiable

Safety: seatbelts, helmets, crosswalks
Self-Care: grooming, dressing, eating, toileting
Completing Tasks: work, school
Waiting: patience with transitions, delays

When you can't decrease a demand, increase choices

For non-negotiable demands, change the **order, timing, location, method, or environment** to restore choice and autonomy



Example non-negotiable demand:
Brush your teeth.

- Brush at a different sink or at a different time of day.
- Brush while balancing on one leg or doing squats.
- Brush with your favourite music, TV show, or party lights.

4. Curtis & Izett, 2025
5. PDA Society
7. O'Nions et al., 2015
11. Ryan & Deci, 2000

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How to Support Autonomy



What does it mean to "increase autonomy" when facing a required demand?

1. **Clearly identify non-negotiable demands**
   Ask: what must happen for safety, health, or functioning?
2. **Keep the boundary fixed, understood, and universal**
   The same rules apply to everyone.
3. **Increase control**
   Allow choice over how, where, & when the task is done.
4. **Reduce threat**
   Lower pressure and increase emotional safety and connection.
5. **Reduce barriers**
   Accommodate sensory, executive functioning, or mobility needs.

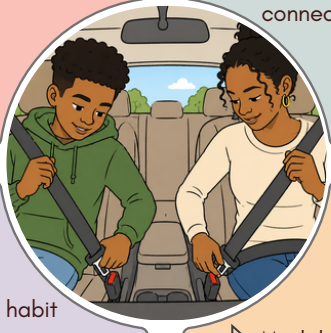
When the task is non-negotiable, make the experience flexible.

Make it a game

- Turn it into a race
- Imagine earning XP
- Collect completed tasks
- Best strategy wins
- Beat your record
- Win a prize

Work Together

- Do the task as a team
- Be a body double
- Everyone follows the rules
- Acknowledge efforts
- Focus on co-regulation, connection & empathy



Make it routine

- Build a daily habit
- Make it predictable
- Know why it's important
- Skip verbal prompting
- Use computerized timers
- Use visual reminders

Add fun, humor & novelty

- Model a playful attitude
- Roll dice / spin a wheel
- Use mystery boxes
- Play music, dance & sing
- Use make-believe

4. Curtis & Izett, 2025
5. PDA Society
7. O'Nions et al., 2015
11. Ryan & Deci, 2000

Meltdowns & Shutdowns



Everyday demands can create intense stress for people with PDA. As stress builds, the nervous system may become overwhelmed, triggering a meltdown or shutdown.

The Body Reacts



These are automatic survival responses:

- **Fight** – Resisting or lashing out
- **Flight** – Trying to escape
- **Freeze** – Feeling stuck or unable to act

The nervous system perceives danger and reacts.



During meltdowns and shutdowns, higher-level brain functions become harder to access: **Thinking, speaking, moving,** and **memory** can be affected.



Even after calm is restored, the nervous system of PDAers **often remains activated**. They may feel highly irritable, emotionally raw, numb, or even exhausted and sleepy.

Meltdowns and shutdowns are a nervous system distress signal.

1. Gillberg et al., 2015
5. PDA Society
7. O'Nions et al., 2015
12. MEDA Foundation
13. PDA Parenting Foundation
14. Autism Research Institute

Meltdowns & Shutdowns
What is the Difference?

Meltdown
outward loss of control
(crying, yelling, movement)

Shutdown
inward collapse
(withdrawal, silence)





Meltdowns & Shutdowns

- Are involuntary distress responses
- May continue even after the trigger is removed
- Take time to resolve and recover from
- Best response: Provide safety, empathy, and support

Meltdowns VS Tantrums?

Sometimes people confuse meltdowns with tantrums, but they are **NOT THE SAME**.



Tantrums are:

- Intentional
- Focused on a goal
- Strategic
- Driven by a want
- Intermittent
- Often shorter
- Will reduce in frequency with consequences

5. PDA Society
10. Johnson & Saunderson, 2023
12. MEDA Foundation
13. PDA Parenting Foundation



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Avoid These Mistakes
During A PDAer's Meltdown

🔴 High Trauma Risk

- Restraining them
- Forced isolation
- Shaming or yelling
- Threats or punishment
- Silent treatment or ignoring
- Mocking or teasing
- Minimizing or invalidating



🟠 Escalates & Increases Suffering



- Taking it personally
- Correcting their behaviour
- Controlling their behaviour
- Demanding apologies
- Comparing them to others
- Withholding comforts

🟡 Increases Overwhelm

- Trying to "teach" in the moment
- Rationalizing or moralizing
- Talking and questioning
- Toxic positivity / platitudes
- Touch without permission



When in doubt?
Reduce demands and stay calm

5. PDA Society
10. Johnson & Saunderson, 2023
12. MEDA Foundation
13. PDA Parenting Foundation

Meltdowns & Shutdowns

Plan Ahead



- Practice regulation techniques while calm
- Discuss triggers using humour or role-play
- Agree on comforting phrases and supports
- Reiterate unconditional love and acceptance

How to Plan

Meltdowns happen, and you can help!
Design a personalized meltdown recovery plan using the acronym **S. A. F. E. T. Y.**

S — Sensory Soothing

For sensory overwhelm: Reduce sensory input, dim lights, slow breathing, reduce noise

A — Affirm Safety

Calmly reassure: Use familiar, grounding phrases: *"You're safe." "I'm here with you."*

F — Find Privacy

Minimize onlookers to maintain privacy
Protect them from harm and embarrassment

E — Evaluate Needs

Check for unmet basic needs: hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain, or sensory overload

T — Tools for Comfort

Offer soothing aids: blanket, fidget, favorite toy, scream into a pillow, swearing is allowed

Y — Yield Pressure

Let go of demands: reduce pressures, social interactions, and verbal input

5. PDA Society
10. Johnson & Saunderson, 2023
12. MEDA Foundation
13. PDA Parenting Foundation

Nervous System Synchrony

Co-regulation happens when a calm person offers their physical presence to help soothe a dysregulated nervous system. Through this calm connection, nervous systems can naturally synchronize heart rates, breathing, movements, and emotional states.

Oxytocin
Supports bonding and calming

Endorphins
Reduce pain and distress



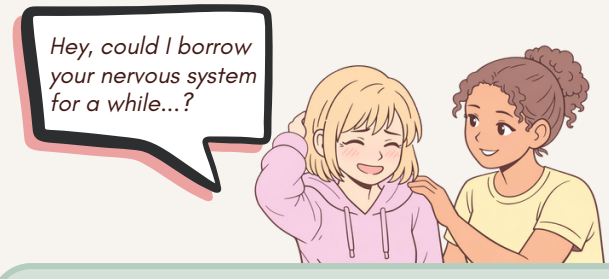
Autonomic Arousal
Stress hormones, such as cortisol, begin to decrease, helping the body move out of a fight-or-flight state.

The Co-Regulation Process

1. **Self-Regulate**
   Regulate your own state first
2. **Attune**
   Notice signs of distress with curiosity and without judgment
3. **Validate**
   Name and acknowledge the feeling or experience
4. **Physical Connection**
   Offer safe, grounding touch when welcome and appropriate
5. **Reassure**
   Communicate safety and care

10. MEDA Foundation
11. PDA Parenting Foundation
12. Autism Research Institute
15. Feldman, 2017
16. Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2015
17. Thayer & Lane, 2000

Co-Regulation Strategies



The Core Principles of Co-Regulation

- The calmer nervous system sets the pace.
- If the helper becomes stressed, regulation stops working.
- Keep a calm tone, slow speech, and relaxed posture.

Exercises to Try

Rhythmic Activities
Rock or swing
Clap in patterns
Hum or sing
Breathe to a slow count

Physical Contact
Deep squeeze hugs
Sit back-to-back
Manually compress joints
Isometric exercises

Do Parallel Tasks
Draw or craft
Sort objects
Walk together
Lift weights

Sensory Reset
Listen to music
Smell a favorite smell
Use a sensory brush
Change environments

Body Calming Techniques

Gentle sensory grounding

Try noticing a few things around you:

4 things you can **see**
3 things you can **touch**
2 things you can **hear**
1 thing you can **taste** or **smell**



The physiological sigh

- Double-long inhale through your nose
- Then a slow exhale through the mouth
- Repeat as you feel your body relax

12. Autism Research Institute
16. Uvnäs-Moberg et al., 2015
17. Thayer & Lane, 2000
18. Balban et al., 2022
19. Zelano et al., 2016

Sensory Input Regulation

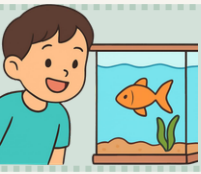
Sensory regulation = getting the right amount of sensory input for your body's current needs

Too much? Reduce input

Regulate

Too little? Increase input

Sight



Engaging visuals
Fun lighting
Visual tracking

Engaging visuals
Fun lighting
Visual tracking

Dark glasses
Hat or hood
Dim lights

Reduce visual clutter
Low-contrast colors



Sound



Loud music
Singing
Humming

Podcasts
Audiobooks
Rhythm exercises

Earplugs
Headphones
White noise

Quiet room
Nature sounds
Soft music



Remember: A person's sensory profile is not a fixed-state. It is a complex balancing act to seek regulation. Sensory needs vary by context, mood, and personal preference.

20. Dunn, 2014

21. Lane et al., 2019

Sensory Input Regulation

Sensory needs vary by person — and by moment

Taste



Chewing toys
Blowing toys
Try new textures

Explore intense flavors
Experiment with temperatures



Allow comfort foods
Mild, familiar flavors
Adjust textures

Try smoothies or purees
Liquid meals

Smell



Gardening
Baking
Aromatherapy

Incense / candles
Scented items



Wearing a mask
Scent-free zones
Open windows

Unscented personal products
Unscented cleaners

Touch



Massage
Sensory toys/fidgets

Tickles/light touch
Hot or cold compress



Wrap in a blanket
Preferred fabrics

Cut tags off clothing
Water immersion

20. Dunn, 2014

21. Lane et al., 2019

Sensory Input Regulation

Proprioception (Muscle Load and Body Position)



Push / pull heavy objects
Lift or carry weights
Tight hugs
Isometric exercises

Deep pressure squishes
Compression clothing
Weighted blankets



Vestibular (Movement and Balance)



High energy movement
High impact exercise
Dance
Swinging/spinning
Jumping/climbing

Tai Chi
Gentle rocking
Slow movements
Stretching/yoga
Meditation/grounding
Motion sickness precautions



Interoception (Internal Body Signals)



Body check-ins
Routines
Emotion charts
External reminders
Eat/drink on a schedule

Acknowledge + release sensations
Progressive muscle relaxation
Grounding exercises
Find a pleasant distraction
Change environments
Change clothes



20. Dunn, 2014

21. Lane et al., 2019



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Q & A

Q: If I am PDA, does that mean I'm also on the autism spectrum?

A: *Probably.* PDA is a descriptive clinical concept rather than a formal diagnosis. Individuals with PDA features typically also meet criteria for autism. In 2013, the DSM-5 consolidated previous autism subtypes, including Asperger's Syndrome, into Autism Spectrum Disorder to better reflect the wide range of autistic presentations. Before this change, individuals with more socially driven profiles were less likely to be identified as autistic. Today, PDA is generally described as a profile within autism.*

Q: I heard Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the best therapy for autistic people. Is that true?

A: No. The best support is the one that respects the autistic person's autonomy and meets their individual needs. No single therapy is appropriate for everyone. Many autistic adults have raised concerns that ABA can prioritize compliance over autonomy and may be experienced as harmful or traumatic. For people with a PDA profile, collaborative, low-demand approaches that emphasize trust and shared problem-solving are generally recommended.**

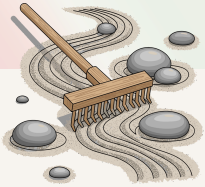
Q: Does "reducing demands" mean getting rid of my family's rules and having no discipline?

A: No, of course not. Your family can still have rules. In fact, clear boundaries, consistent rules, and predictable consequences are helpful for a PDAer's sense of justice, predictability, and fairness. It's ideal that everyone in the household follows the rules so questions of equity don't become a source of conflict.

Remember: reducing demands doesn't mean removing structure; it means avoiding unnecessary pressure or conflict over small things while keeping essential rules intact.



1. Gilberg et al., 2015
**2. Curtis & Izett, 2025
*5. PDA Society, 2022
*6. Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee
**7. O'Nions et al., 2015



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Therapy Options

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Focus: increasing psychological flexibility

- Accept internal experiences without fighting them
- Act in ways that align with personal values
- Reduce avoidance of difficult thoughts or emotions
- Acceptance + committed action under discomfort
- Build mindfulness and present-moment awareness

*See **ACT Mindfully** - Russ Harris*



Occupational Therapy + Sensory Integration

Focus: accommodating individual sensory needs

- Build a sensory profile for the individual
  - Note areas of hyper- vs. hypo-responsiveness
- Find sensory tools that are soothing
- Plan sensory exercises to enhance self-regulation
- Use sensory accommodations in daily life

*See **Aspect Practice Sensory Form** - Autism Spectrum Australia*
*See **Sensory Processing Differences Toolkit** - Aide Canada*



Animal Therapy

Focus: connecting with animals to regulate the nervous system

- Adopt a trained therapy pet
- Attend equine-assisted therapy sessions
- Join animal-engagement community programs
- Volunteer at shelters, rescues, farms, or sanctuaries
- Visit nature-based animal spaces
- Seek therapists who use animal-assistance

*See **Human Animal Bond Research Institute** - habri.org*



22. Harris
23. Autism Spectrum Australia
24. Aide Canada
25. Human Animal Bond Research Institute

Therapy Options

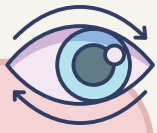
Nature Therapy

Focus: practicing mindfulness in a natural environment

- Find a natural environment
- Turn technology off
- Walk slowly or sit calmly
- Don't set a destination
- Pause often and notice your surroundings



*See **Forest Bathing** - Association of Nature and Forest Therapy*



Trauma Processing via EMDR Therapy

Focus: Processing trauma and emotional triggers

- A specific memory or trigger is identified
- The therapist guides bilateral stimulation using eye movements, tapping, or tones
- This supports the brain in reprocessing the memory

*See **EMDR Institute** https://www.emdr.com/*



Emotional Awareness & Regulation Practice

Focus: Learning to notice, connect with and process emotions

- Notice and explore the bodily sensations of emotions
- Use self-compassion; speak to yourself as a friend
- Recite daily affirmations that are meaningful to you
- Acknowledge unreasonable expectations
- Practice gratitude
- Journal a daily moment of joy

*See **Greater Good Magazine** https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/*
*See Laurel Mellin - **Emotional Brain Training***

26. Park et al., 2010
27. Association of Nature and Forest Therapy
28. EMDR Institute
29. Greater Good Science Center
30. Mellin, 2012

Supportive Practices



Biofeedback

Focus: Using real-time body signals to support self-regulation

- Biofeedback equipment tracks body responses (heart rate, breathing, muscle tension)
- Notice if your nervous system is activated or calm
- Build awareness of stress patterns in the body
- Practice skills to help your body shift into a calmer state



Emotion Processing Through Expressive Arts

Focus: finding creative ways to explore emotions

- Vidual Arts: drawing, painting, collage, sculpture
- Movement: dance, stretching, gesture
- Performing arts: music, rhythm or theater
- Prioritize self-expression over artistic skill

Attunement & Stress Regulation Practice

Focus: Supporting interoceptive awareness and soothing anxiety

- Do gentle, awareness-based mind-body practices (Yoga, Tai Chi, mindful walking, bilateral micro-movements)
- Observe your internal state without judgement
- Notice changes in breath, muscle tension, or emotion

*See **Education Services Australia** - Interoception and self-regulation*
*See **Melissa Romano** - Facebook/Insta: @ ReclaimingMelissa*



Relaxation or Meditation

Focus: calming and centering the body

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation for muscle tension
- Guided meditation for relaxing to scripted imagery
- Mantras to reduce cognitive rumination

*See **Dave Potter** - Palouse Mindfulness*
*See **Meditainment** - https://www.meditainment.com*

31. Malchiodi, 2012
32. Yucha & Montgomery, 2008
33. Education Services Australia
34. Romano
35. Potter
36. Meditainment

PDA-Friendly Parenting

Collaborative Problem-Solving

Focus: finding solutions instead of modifying behaviour

3 Steps to reduce conflict without forced compliance

1. **Empathy** - Understand the child's perspective
2. **Define Concerns** - Share the adult's concerns
3. **Invitation** - Collaborate to find a solution

*Method by **Dr. Ross Greene** - livesinthebalance.org*



Attachment Based Parenting

Focus: co-regulation; relational safety

Emphasis on safety, trust, and reducing relational pressure

*See **Siegel & Bryson (2011)** - The Whole-Brain Child*

*See **Eli Harwood** - @ Attachment Nerd*

What NOT to Do & Why



DON'T be rigid about small details
— Escalates anxiety

DON'T use guilt or shame
— Damages trust

DON'T force compliance during distress
— Increases meltdowns

DON'T rely on authority or hierarchy
— Triggers a power-struggle

Practical, PDA Experience

Focus: autonomy support, anxiety reduction, PDA-informed, relationship-centered parenting

*See **Kristy Forbes** - Autism & ND Support*



PDA First Aid

When life feels impossible...

You are <u>not</u> refusing, lazy, or disobedient
Your nervous system is <u>overloaded</u>

Reduce demands • Restore choice

5. PDA Society, 2022
37. Greene, 2014
38. Siegel & Bryson, 2011
39. Harwood
40. Forbes

Resource Guide

PDA Parenting Reading List

- Christie, P., Duncan, M., Healy, Z., & Fidler, R. (2011). Understanding pathological demand avoidance syndrome in children: A guide for parents, teachers and other professionals. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Davis, M. (2025). A practical parent's guide to PDA & autism: Reduce meltdowns, navigate diagnosis & access school, insurance and financial resources to transform your life now. BrightPath Publishing.
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ACT Therapy Reading List

- Harris, R. (2009). The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living — A Guide to ACT. Trumpeter.
- Olsen, R., & Damian, M. (2018). Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Adults: The New Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. New Harbinger.

Adults with Autism Reading List

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Calming & Connection Reading List

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