

Crisis Call Center Questions for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

This guide includes questions that you can ask when supporting someone with a disability during a mental health crisis call. These plain language questions are designed to supplement a crisis call conversation by helping to better understand a person's lived experience and support needs.

Things to keep in mind

Questions on this guide can be asked in the order that works best for your conversation. The person on the phone may need additional processing time after being asked a question. You may also want to consider rephrasing a question for a person, if needed.

Learning more about a person's communication needs

Communication looks different for everyone. People with IDD may communicate in many different ways including: speaking verbally, using sign language or gestures, pointing to words or pictures, writing/typing, using picture/word exchange systems (sometimes called PECS), or using an iPad or other voice output device (sometimes called Augmentative and Alternative Communication - AAC). People with IDD may use any combination of these communication methods and it is important they always have access to the method(s) they need to effectively communicate. It is also important to consider your language choices. People with IDD may benefit from concrete, specific questions, and information shared using plain language. Extra processing time may also be useful.



1. Do you use a communication device, picture/word cards, or other way to communicate? Do you have it with you?
2. Tell me if anything I am saying is hard to answer. I can use different words to ask it.
3. It is okay to tell me you need a break. Or you can let me know if I need to stop talking to let you think.

Learning more about the situation

'Feelings' questions (e.g., "how are you feeling today") can sometimes be too abstract, or difficult to understand, for a person with a disability in crisis. To better understand a person's current situation or experience, it can be helpful to ask concrete questions focusing on observable behaviors.



1. Tell me what is happening. Why did you call?
2. Tell me what emotions you are feeling right now. What is your body doing?
3. Did something happen to make you feel this way?
4. Is someone with you? Who is that person? Can I talk to them?
5. Are you going to hurt yourself or someone else?

Additional resource guides and a full list of references at <https://www.delawareautismnetwork.org/>.

CDS Mental Health Team. (2024). *DNEA resource guide: Crisis call center questions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)*. University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS).

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Learning more about calming strategies

Everyone has different calming strategies. Self-stimulatory (or stimming) behaviors are repetitive body movements or vocalizations. An example of stimming could include humming, rocking, or twirling an object. Stimming is often a way for a person to self-soothe or regulate emotions. A person with IDD may also have a favorite item or "fidget" they use to calm themselves.



1. Do you have things you use to help you calm down? Tell me about them. Let's do [calming strategy] together right now.
2. Do you use 'fidgets'? Or do you have a favorite item? Do you have it right now? Can you get it?
3. Do you have any stims you use to relax? (Sometimes this is called self-stimulatory behaviors or stimming). Are you in a place where you feel safe to stim?

Learning more about needed supports & accommodations

A person with IDD may need accommodations to navigate some spaces and situations. This may include assistive technology or equipment that helps a person complete activities in their daily life. Some examples of assistive technology could be glasses, hearing aids, weighted blankets, switches, hand grips, noise canceling headphones, or wheelchair accessible vehicles. Additionally, not all adults are their own legal guardian (i.e., guardianship). Other adults have legal supports in place to help with health care decision making (e.g., supported decision-making, surrogate decision-making). Finally, some people with IDD may live in group homes, with family members, or have staff who provide regular support.



1. Do you have a guardian or person who helps you make decisions? What is their name? Are they nearby?
2. Do you have a person who helps you in your home? This could be a nurse, DSP, or other person who knows you and helps you. What is their name? Are they nearby?
3. Do you live with anyone else? What is their name? Are they nearby?
4. What accommodations would you need to [insert next step or activity]?
5. Do you have devices or technology that you use? For example, do you wear glasses, use a hearing aid, or use a screen reader?
6. Do you have any mobility needs? For example, do you use a wheelchair?
7. Do you have any sensory differences? For example, are you bothered by bright lights, loud noises, or people touching you? Does moving around make you feel better?

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