A fact sheet about

Demand sensitivity and PDA

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Demand sensitivity and PDA

What demand sensitivity is, why a wanted task can feel impossible, and one first step.



Key points

- Demand sensitivity/avoidance (definition below) means that being expected to do something can feel like a threat, even when it is something you want to do.
- The threat comes from losing your sense of control, so wanting the thing does not make it feel possible.
- When this is strong and shows up in most parts of life, it is often called the PDA profile. The research on it is young, and most of it is with children.
- A first step is to notice what turned the thing into a demand, before you try to change anything.

What demand sensitivity/avoidance is

You have been looking forward to cooking a meal you love. Then someone you live with asks "can you make that tonight?", and now you cannot even open the fridge. Or you write "ring Sam" on your list, and a call to a friend you miss becomes really hard.

This is not laziness, and it does not mean you did not want it. Something changed between wanting the thing and being expected to do it.

A demand is anything you feel you are expected or required to do. It can come from outside you: a request, a deadline, a question or someone waiting. It can also come from inside you: your own plan, a promise, a "should", or a body need like eating, washing or going to bed.

Demand sensitivity/avoidance means a demand can bring on strong stress and an urge to get away from it. This can happen even when the request is kind and the task is one you enjoy. Many people feel some of this, and it can be stronger on hard days or in burnout.

For some people it is strong and shows up in most parts of life. This is often called the PDA profile, and some people call themselves PDAers. PDA is not a separate diagnosis in the DSM-5, the manual many health workers use. Researchers still disagree about how to describe it. But many now see it as being about a strong need for autonomy, which means having a say over what you do, how and when.

Most PDA research so far is with children, and much of it asks parents rather than the person. Adults with a PDA profile have only recently been asked about their own lives. They describe stress that is there most of the time, and a strong need to feel safe and trusted.

In surveys of adults in general, strong reactions to demands went with both autistic traits and anxiety. So it is not only an autistic experience. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too.

Why a demand can feel like a threat

Everyone needs some say over their own life. When a thing you wanted becomes a thing you have to do, it can stop feeling like your choice. If your need for control is strong, losing it can feel like danger, and your body reacts as it would to danger.

Research suggests that stress you cannot control switches off the planning part of the brain first. Even mild stress can do this. So "just do it" asks the part of you that has gone offline to do the work. You can read more about what happens in your body and brain when you get overwhelmed here.

That is why wanting the thing does not help on its own. The want is still there, but the threat response is louder.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: notice the demand

When something you wanted starts to feel impossible, stop pushing for a moment and ask what turned it into a demand. It might be one of these:

- someone asking, even kindly
- a set time or a deadline
- someone checking whether you have done it yet
- it being on your own list, or a "should" in your head
- it being a body need, like eating or a shower

You do not need to change anything yet. Just name it in a few words, like "Sam asked" or "on my list". You can keep these notes in the Understanding Zoe app and look back on them after a week or two. You may find that some kinds of demand weigh more on you than others.

Naming the demand can take some of the blame off you, and it shows you where to start. You can read more about working with your need for autonomy here. If the hard part is starting at all, even with nobody asking, you can read more about getting started here.

This step comes from what PDA and other neurodivergent adults say helped them. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Some days nothing will feel possible, and resting is a fair choice then too.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with demands and the stress that can come with them, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If demands have felt too much for weeks and all of life feels harder, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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