

Autism & Using a Public Restroom by Dr. Liane Holliday Willey, Dr. Stephen Shore and Dennis Debbaudt © 2010

This brief article will discuss some options and tips for persons on the spectrum, family and educators about social and safety considerations when using a public restroom.

Social Rules for Using a Public Men's Room

While singing in the shower at home or in your hotel room's washroom is perfectly acceptable social behavior, carrying a tune or talking in a public men's room is not. Silence in the men's room is expected and normal. Silence, in this case, is golden.

Men who violate the rules of the men's room risk consequences that include others becoming suspicious of the motives of the violator, confronting the violator or reporting the violator to authorities. Worse, perhaps, is that the violator is thought to be someone looking for an illegal sexual liaison. Difficult interactions with sexual adventurers could result. Police conduct undercover operations to root out this illegal activity. Those who get caught in the sting will be questioned, perhaps arrested.

So, what's a guy to do? What if you are merely unaware of the rules and customs of using a public men's room and violate them without any illegal or untoward intent? The outcome can range from unexpected delays to having to explain your behavior to startled, angry strangers to unwanted sexual advances and contacts with the police.

The social rules in the public men's room include:

- * avoiding eye contact
- * choosing a urinal or stall as far away from the other person as possible
- * looking straight ahead or up and down when using a urinal or stall
- * washing up and walking out without engaging in conversation

Social Rules for Using a Public Ladies Room differ from the men's room. Chit chat conversation is normal. For example, asking another woman where they got their blouse or t-shirt or giving a compliment on their appearance is OK.

Eye contact is typically acceptable. It is not, however, standard to talk to ladies in the public restroom, once you are using the stall. An exception? Passing toilet paper under a stall divider to a stranger in need who asks is not considered an unusual or suspicious activity.

For Educators: The norms in a ladies room, however, would be considered unacceptable behavior in a public men's room. Moms and female teachers should carefully consider the male and female social differences of restroom use. Strongly consider the input, direction, advice and participation of safe, willing men that can model and teach restroom rules to male students.

Social and Personal Safety Tips for using either a ladies or men's public restroom:

A public restroom can be found at interstate rest areas, airports, restaurants and most public buildings. A private restroom is the one at your home and, to a lesser degree, your hotel room. Remember that hotel walls are notoriously thin. The songs you sing can be heard in the next room!

Do not comment on the noises you hear coming from another stall! If someone is ill or needs your help, they will likely speak out to ask for help. If however, you do think someone is in a situation that requires serious help, seek out and ask a restroom attendant, store manager or security personnel for assistance.

Anyone using the public restroom is in a vulnerable position that a criminal could easily take advantage of. Be aware of your surroundings and do what you can to keep yourself out of harm's way. If you are all alone when you go a public restroom, extra careful to lock your stall door behind you and select a stall near the exit so you can make a fast escape if you absolutely had to.

Additional Social and Personal Safety Tips for using a either male or female public restroom:

- Keep stall doors locked
- Watch your purse, briefcase, wallet and personal belongings
- Use long strap with pull twist to secure your bags to the stall door hook
- Do not carry large amounts of cash
- If possible, carry a cell phone

Here are few tips in case you do need to contact or interact with security or law enforcement:

- Carry and know how to safely produce an ID card
- Develop and carry an autism information card
- Carry the phone numbers of trusted and reliable relatives and friends

If you lose the ability to speak when under stress, consider wearing a MedicAlert bracelet or one that lets the reader know this and that you have an information card.

Develop a Plan for Safe Use of a Public Restroom

1. Discuss the risks with people that you trust
2. Develop a personal plan of how you will use the restroom
3. Practice safe use of the restroom by role playing with people you know and trust
4. Develop a generic or personal disclosure handouts
5. role play when, where and how you would use them
6. Adapt and amend your plan. They're not written in stone.

We hope this article is useful for you. Don't forget, when you're using a public restroom, safety is about you and your belongings!