

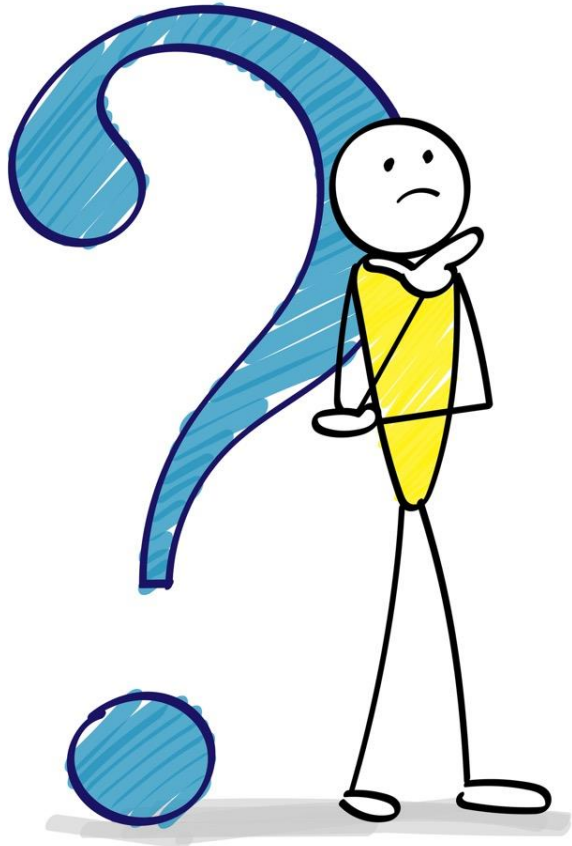


Risk Factors, Warning Signs, and Suicide Prevention for Autistic People

AUTISM SOCIETY OF HOWARD COUNTY

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Suicide and Autism: What Do We Know?

Autistic Individuals and Suicide

- ▶ Suicide is a leading cause of premature death in autistic people
- ▶ Autistic individuals are significantly more likely to think about, attempt, and die by suicide than the general population
- ▶ Autistic females are 13 times more likely to die by suicide than males

Cassidy et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017; Croen et al., 2015; Hedley & Uljarević, 2018; Hirvikoski et al., 2016; Kirby et al., 2019; Kõlves et al., 2021; Zahid & Upthegrove, 2017

Risk Factors

- ▶ Factors known to increase the risk of suicide in the general population are more common in autistic individuals
 - ▶ Examples: social isolation, abuse, low mood, low self-esteem, alexithymia, rumination
- ▶ We should also consider additional factors, that may be more specific to autistic individuals

Risk Factors

- ▶ Co-occurring psychiatric conditions
- ▶ Lack of social support
- ▶ Unmet support needs
- ▶ Camouflaging or masking
- ▶ Late diagnosis
- ▶ Female
- ▶ Autistic burnout

Warning Signs

- ▶ Indicate a more immediate risk of suicide (vs. risk factors)
- ▶ Less research in the autism field on warning signs, compared to risk factors
- ▶ Important: autistic distress/crisis may not look like neurotypical distress/crisis!



- ▶ <https://suicidology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Autism-Warning-Signs-3.pdf>

Autism Resource for Warning Signs of Suicide: Considerations for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN

AND BRENNA MADDOX

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
OF SUICIDOLOGY'S AUTISM AND SUICIDE COMMITTEE



Purpose:

Understand	Understand the need for considerations
Recognize	Recognize the differences
Support	Support autistic people as autistic people

Warning Signs of Suicide

- ▶ Increased substance (alcohol or drug) use
- ▶ No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life
- ▶ Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all of the time
- ▶ Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- ▶ Hopelessness
- ▶ Withdrawal from friends, family and society
- ▶ Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- ▶ Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- ▶ Dramatic mood changes
- ▶ Giving away prized possessions or seeking long-term care for pets

Please Note:

- ▶ Do not make any important, life-altering decisions based on the information in the following slides. All the warning signs for the general public pertain to autistic people too – with considerations about autism.
- ▶ This information is here to broaden existing knowledge about autistic people.
- ▶ Autistic people know the most about themselves. The job of professionals helping - is to make space for them communicate.

No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

- ▶ These statements could be the reality of an autistic person who feels no sense of cultural and/or social belonging.
 - ▶ **“I don’t belong to this world”**
 - ▶ **“I’ve never fit into this world”**
 - ▶ **“I wish I were anywhere but here”**
 - ▶ **“I wish I could leave here and be in a place I belong, and it’s not on this earth”**

Feeling trapped

Autistic people typically have some cognitive inflexibility - narrowing options when feeling stuck in a negative thinking pattern.

A crisis may cause a regression of skills such as problem-solving, diminishing autistic people's ability to regulate their emotions and manage their sensory difficulties.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal from friends, family, and society can be a coping mechanism and self-care for autistic people.



Withdrawing can also be a warning sign for autistic people.



Changes in withdrawal patterns and behavior are concerning.

Other Considerations

The thinking process of autistic people is typically very literal.

Consider the exact meaning of what you say. Use, concise, specific language.

Autistic people will often answer what they are asked in a literal way and may give a response, but not the information you are looking for to help them.



Warning Signs of Suicide for Autistic People

*An autism-specific resource based on research
findings and expert consensus*

Morgan et al., 2021



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Purpose of Resource

Designed to enhance discussions about suicide risk with autistic people

Not a substitute for professional support or risk assessment

Goal of improved understanding about signs of imminent suicidal behavior in autistic people

Structure of Resource

10 warning signs

Scenarios or case examples

Emerging research findings

Additional resources

One-page summary

Crisis Supports and Resources

Limited Guidance

- ▶ No published studies on suicide interventions for autistic individuals
- ▶ No consensus clinical guidelines
- ▶ Effective strategies must consider beyond the autistic individual

“Understanding autism and the culture of autistic people, so autistic people do not have to mask/camouflage their autism, is **suicide prevention.**” ~ Lisa Morgan, 2021

<https://suicidology.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Autism-Crisis-Supports.pdf>

Crisis Supports for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN
IN COLLABORATION WITH AAS'S AUTISM AND
SUICIDE COMMITTEE & COMMON GROUND

Purpose of Toolkit

- ▶ The purpose of the toolkit is to help crisis center workers and other helpers in identifying and supporting autistic callers/ texters who are in crisis.
- ▶ The resource also explains the unique differences in communication, thought processes, sensory issues, and misunderstandings a crisis worker or other helper may encounter while assisting an autistic person in crisis.

Identifying an Autistic Person in Crisis

- ▶ Expresses difficulties with sensory issues
- ▶ May present with opposite emotions
- ▶ Difficulty identifying or verbalizing emotions
- ▶ May not know how to cope with or what to do with emotions
- ▶ Expresses difficulty or inability to make friends or sustain relationships
- ▶ May use echolalia - repeating words, sounds, and responses

Supporting callers/ texters

- ▶ Ask direct, clear questions - use fewer words and get straight to the point
- ▶ Allow extra time to process thoughts and formulate words
- ▶ Help shift the thoughts - ask about any special interests

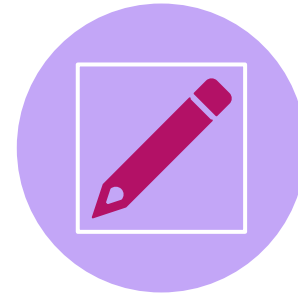
Supporting callers/ texters

- ▶ Avoid using metaphors, social nuances, or slang
- ▶ Speak using words of logic - not emotional words
- ▶ Explain positive coping skills - and how they are helpful

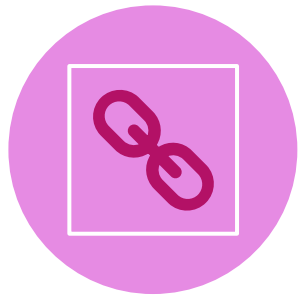
Ending the call/ text



Facilitate a safety plan



Encourage writing down the plan.



Help get connected to local resources



Discuss, write down, and practice what to say when contacting local resources for help.

Conclusions

- ▶ Increase awareness that autism is a risk factor for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
- ▶ Remember that autistic distress may not look like neurotypical distress
- ▶ Say what you mean and mean what you say
- ▶ Make use of the growing number of autism-specific crisis resources



Thank you!

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