

PFA Tips

Supporting an Autistic Person Experiencing Suicidality

Autistic people experience suicidality at high rates. As autistic individuals, friends, family, caregivers, and care partners, it is important to know how to support autistic people who experience thoughts and behaviors related to suicide. Autistic people can experience and express suicidality differently than non-autistic people.

Passive vs active suicidality

Suicidality can present many ways, ranging from daydreaming about falling asleep and never waking up to actively planning ways to die. Passive suicidality means someone has thoughts of wanting to die but no intention to act on them. Active suicidality includes some intention to act on those thoughts.

“Healthy” is different for each person

To support an autistic person experiencing suicidality, acknowledge that what is healthy for an autistic person might not look the same as what is healthy for a non-autistic person. For instance, wrapping up in a blanket and spending the day completely alone watching a comfort show may be a sign of depression for one person, but for an autistic person it may be a helpful way to recharge and prevent autistic burnout.

Similarly, it was long assumed that an autistic person was healthier the more they could suppress their autistic traits, but this was a misunderstanding. A person can be healthy while displaying autistic traits. Stimming, for instance, is regulating for an autistic person's nervous system. For a long time, stimming behaviors were discouraged even when they were not causing harm. Stimming is actually a protective factor against distress.

Provide a safe space

Another way to support an autistic person experiencing suicidality is to provide a safe nonjudgmental space where autistic traits are valued. Hiding autistic traits to fit in is called camouflaging or masking, and it is associated with suicidality. When someone

must hide parts of themselves to fit in, it can make their sense of thwarted belonging even worse.

Communication requires the effort of both people

Acknowledging that communication is a two-way street is another way to support an autistic person. Communication breakdowns happen between two people, not just because of the deficit of one person. Remembering this double empathy problem is protective because communication barriers increase distress and distress increases communication barriers. Conversely, reducing communication barriers reduces distress, and reducing distress reduces communication barriers.

Encourage passions and special interests

Supporting an autistic person experiencing suicidality means, first and foremost, supporting what is protective and regulating for them. Special interests are a key example of something that is protective, but which have long been discouraged for autistic people. Encouraging a person to engage with their areas of expertise and activities they really love can help protect against suicidality.

Acknowledge the person's stressors

Another way to support an autistic person experiencing suicidality is working together with the autistic person to address their life stressors. Autistic people face many stressors at high rates. They experience



high rates of victimization, face barriers in accessing healthcare, and have low employment rates for those who want to be employed. Acknowledging these major stressors means seeing that suicidality can be a response to navigating life's difficulties.

Remember that suicidality itself is not the 'problem;' it is that person's solution to the problem. The best way to support an autistic person experiencing suicidality is to increase their protective factors and help them address the situational stressors causing their distress. Unmet needs can cause a sense of being trapped and having no way out, so addressing these is suicide prevention.

Validate the person's experiences

Autistic people have unique experiences in the world. Autistic people often experience ongoing disconnection due to being misunderstood and rejected for their autistic traits. For many, spending time in the autistic community can provide a sense of belonging and validation that may be difficult to find elsewhere.

Seeing their experiences as real and validating what they are feeling and thinking
continued on back

Supporting an autistic person experiencing suicidality – continued



is protective against suicidality. Many autistic people receive the message, intentionally or unintentionally, that the way they experience and express the world is somehow wrong because it is different. Viewing their experiences as valid is a powerful form of suicide prevention that costs nothing.

Develop a safety plan before a crisis occurs

The best time to talk about how to support an autistic person with suicidality is before a crisis occurs. Take some time to collaborate with the autistic person you support during a calm time and ask them what would keep them safe when they are in crisis. Having this conversation helps ensure that you respect their self-determination when they need that support.

As humans, each of us is the expert on our own experiences. Listening to an autistic person's self-knowledge is an important part of this process. You can develop a safety plan with them that states how they will be supported in staying safe in those moments. *See autism-adapted safety plans under Additional Resources.*

Knowing the individual and their unique risks, protective factors, and experiences is always best. As the common saying goes, “if you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” Each person’s life circumstances, protective factors, and stressors will all be unique to that individual. Autism is a spectrum, which means no two individuals share the exact same strengths, challenges, or experiences.

As part of this conversation, you might talk about what that person’s warning signs look like. Warning signs are changes in their behavior that indicate they might soon have a crisis. Examples might be if a person says they ‘lose words’ when in crisis, if they no longer enjoy their special interests, or if they talk about wanting to go away forever.

You and the autistic person can decide what actions you can take to support them. For instance, if you notice that they are showing one of their personal warning signs, you might proactively check in and offer support.

Look for neurodiversity-affirming supports and professionals

It can help for the autistic person to have professional support, but it is important that the supporter be autism-informed and affirming. Mental health supports were developed by largely excluding autistic people from the research, so some may be unfitting or even unhelpful.

If the situation is urgent and presents an immediate risk to safety, take care to preserve the autistic person’s autonomy and promote self-determination wherever possible. Hospitals and police interactions can be particularly difficult or unsafe for autistic people. If decisions must be made on the autistic person’s behalf, carefully consider the least restrictive option that can preserve protective factors such as comfort items, routines, and familiar places. Even in emergencies, it is possible to respect the input of the autistic person and doing so can make the experience feel more supportive. Collaborating with the autistic person is vital in promoting self-determination while staying safe.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Autism and Suicide

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/healthcare/pfa-tips-autism-and-suicide/>

PFA Tips: Communication Tips for Supporting an Autistic Person in Crisis

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/healthcare/pfa-tips-communication-tips-for-supporting-an-autistic-person-in-crisis/>

Autism and Suicide Prevention Workgroup

<https://www.autismcrisisupport.com/resources>

Suicide Prevention for Autism Neuro-affirming Toolkit (span.toolkit) - for providers

<https://www.spantoolkit.com/>

Autistic Communication Suggestions

https://www.autismcrisisupport.com/_files/ugd/e747a4_9fc34e9244d7481b91dba4ac667d3195.pdf

Autism Adapted Safety Plans

<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/neurodisability/leafletsandmeasures/autismadaptedsafetyplanslink/>

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