

Suicide and social connectedness:

*Changing our perspective on
suicide in autistic people*

By

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- Why do we need to look outside the individual for causes of suicide?
- Social connection and suicide: theoretical perspectives
- The social world that autistic people live in
- How do theories about suicide relate to findings in autistic people?
- What does cultural competency mean in relation to professionals working with autistic people – and how do we get there?



Are mental illnesses (and accordingly
suicide) part of the 'pathology' of autism...
“associated features of autism”? (Tsai, 1996)



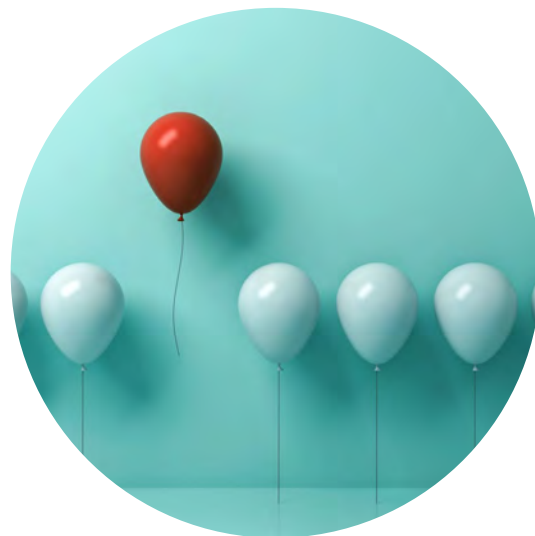
... or a predictable response to living in this world as an autistic person?



LIVING WITH AUTISM



Attention to detail




Thinking outside the box



Problem-solving

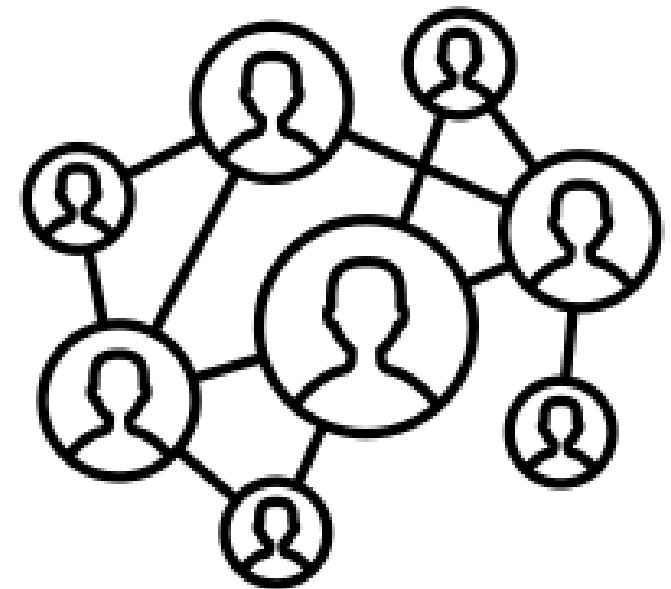


Purple₅

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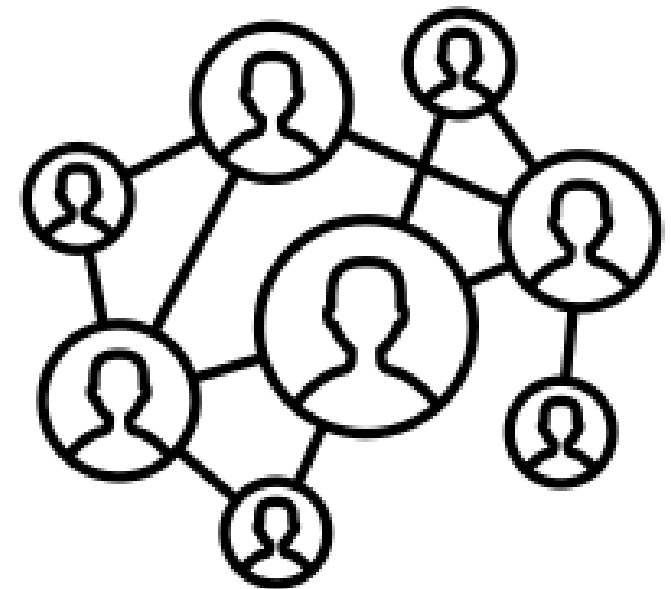
What does research tell
us about the role of the
social environment in
suicide?

Social connection is a fundamental human need... and its absence pertinent to suicide.



“Suicide rates vary inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups to which the individual belongs.”

Durkheim (2006 [1897])

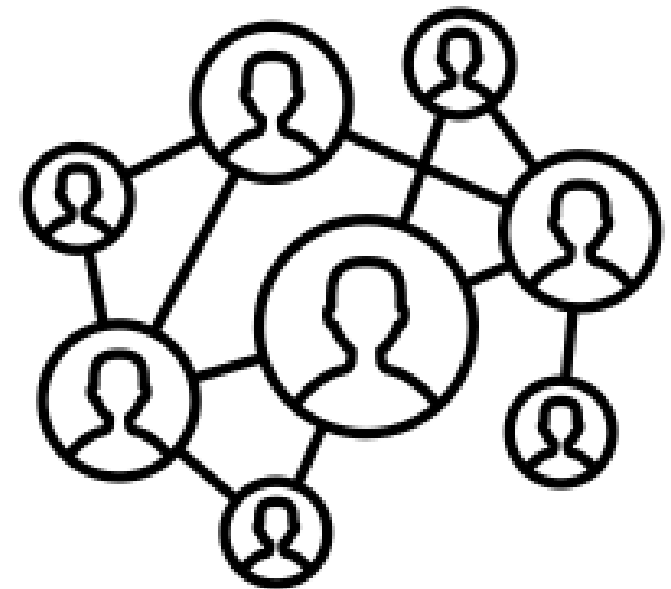


MEANINGFUL SOCIAL CONNECTIONS



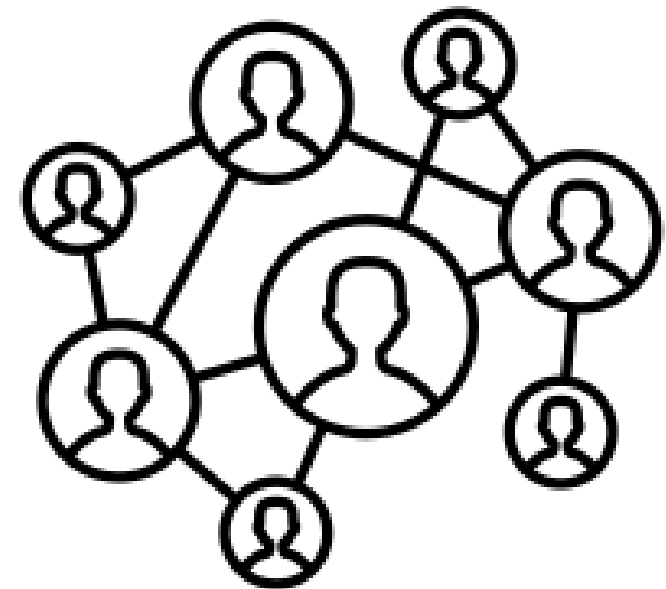
“What is suicide but an effort to stop the unbearable flow of negative affects?”

Schneidman (1985)



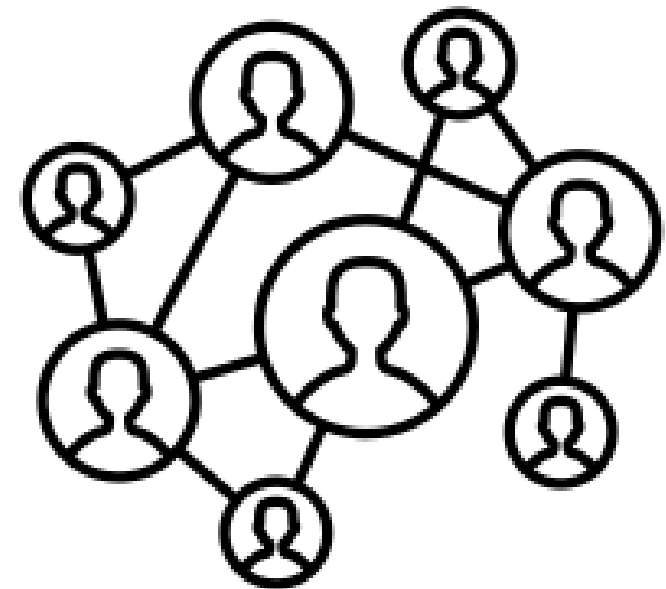
“an unmet ‘need to belong’ is the specific interpersonal need involved in desire for suicide”

Van Orden et al. (2010)



“perceived burdensomeness... beliefs that the self is so flawed as to be a liability on others... self-hatred”

Van Orden et al. (2010)



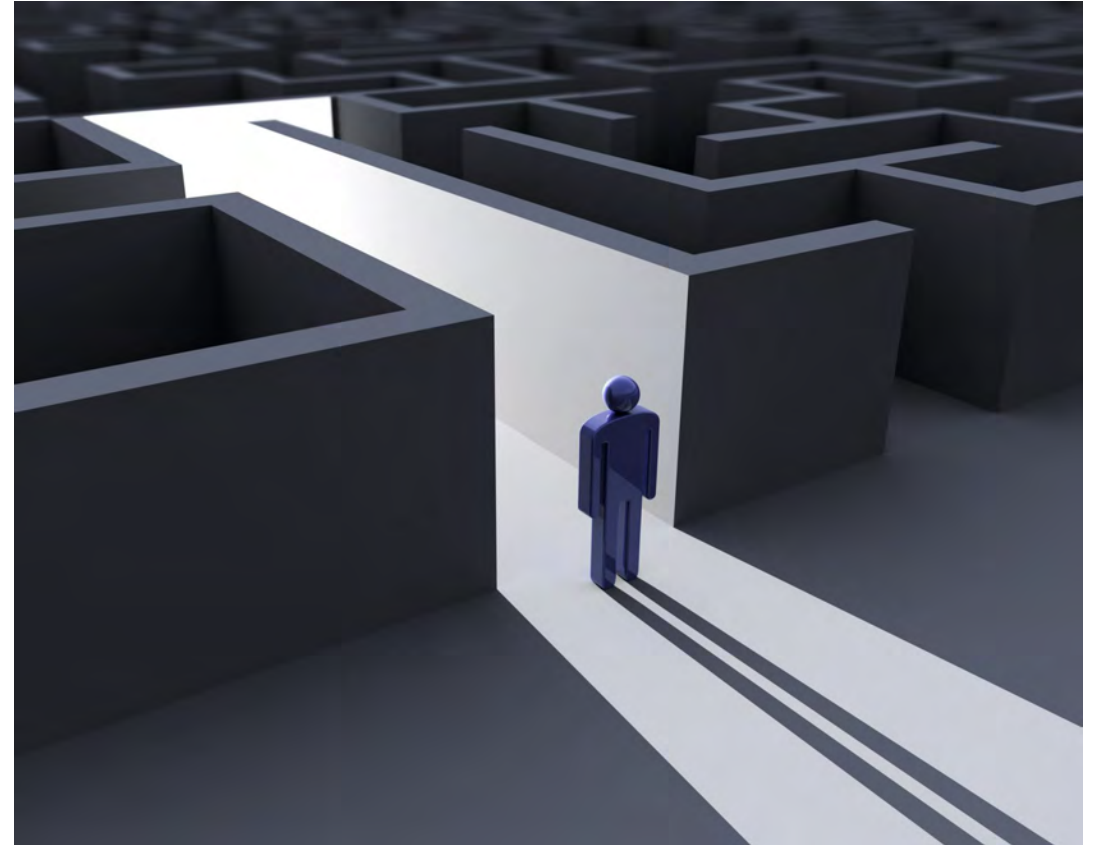



BELONGING:

An unmet need

FEELING VALUED PERCEIVED BURDENSOMENESS

- Clarifying information – the response causes the feeling of burdensomeness
- Perseveration – talking about the same narrow interest's response can cause person to be undervalued
- Rigid
- Value the other person and what they bring to the relationship
- What one person can bring to the relationship and visa versa
- When you are valued, you're are not a burden
- Can't feel valued when you are being rejected, ostracized, invalidated



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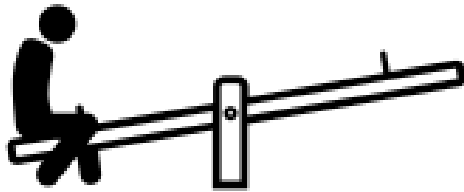
If we consider the social
environment autistic
people grow up in...

... we know we have something to worry about.

“seeing is disliking” ([Whelpley & May, 2023](#))

“Non-autistic individuals consistently rated autistic people as less human than non-autistic people” ([Kim et al., 2024](#))

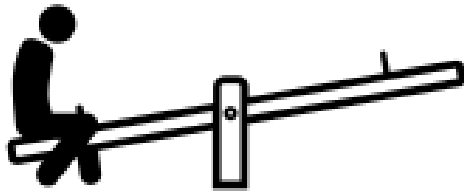
“More than half (respondents) reported that often or sometimes people stare at them (81.4%), tut or shake their heads (61.3%), or actively avoid them (63.6%). ... approximately one in five reported that people (often or sometimes) mock or taunt them (20.2%) and get aggressive with them (19.1%).” ([Jones et al, 2021](#))



Victimisation is often *internalised*:

“I must have done something to cause it because I was seen as a weird kid”

“I spent my whole life, 52 years just hating myself, and thinking... it was my fault I couldn't make friends properly... it was my fault that I got abused”



“Yes, I am the very definition of a ‘people-pleaser’ ... I never knew as a child why people didn't like me or why I didn't fit in so I always tried my best to please them to try to make them like me.”

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Internalized ableism

Different

Compliant



**unmet support
needs**

mental illness

camouflage

**gender
divergence**

loneliness

bullying

unemployment

trauma

**Feeling like you
don't belong**

**Feeling like a
burden**



**Feeling like you
don't belong**

**Feeling like a
burden**

do contribute to suicidal
thoughts and feelings in
autistic people

Pelton et al., 2020,
2023; Moseley et
al, 2022)

Note: you can access PDF and accessible
versions of my papers at
www.scienceonthespectrum.net



A circular arrangement of autumn leaves and acorns on a white background. The leaves are in various shades of yellow, orange, and red, and are interspersed with several acorns and small pinecones. The word "THANKSGIVING" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the top of the circle.

THANKSGIVING

Thwarted belonging

Feeling like a burden

“I just felt like a burden ‘cause (sic) I didn’t get as much as I wanted to but I was made to feel that that was more than I deserved”

“I used to have a lot of support and since the cuts have really struggled... I’m alone almost all the time ... I’ve got to the point where I wonder what the point of me being here is – I don’t contribute anything ... I have no life and no purpose ...”

“Actually, they were very dismissive and made me feel very stupid and as if I was just an anxious person making some stuff up . . . it really has impacted on me and made me feel . . . inadequate . . . and foolish”

[Crane et al. 2019;](#)
[Camm-Crosbie et al., 2018;](#)
[Radev et al., 2024](#)



**Reflections: where do
we need to go from
here?**



Thank you so much for listening

Questions and feedback

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