



# Overview of Resources on **Autism and Suicide Prevention**

Part 1

# Resource Overview

All the resources discussed today can be located here:

- ▶ <https://www.autismcrisissupport.com/resources>

Agenda:

- ▶ Crisis Toolkit (Anne Kirby)
- ▶ Considerations for Warning Signs (Shari Jager-Hyman)
- ▶ Reasons for Living (Jessica Schwartzman)

*LUNCH*

- ▶ Warning Signs of Suicide for Autistic People (Lisa Morgan & Jessica Schwartzman)



# Crisis Supports for the Autism Community



# Purpose:



Identify

autistic  
callers/texters



Promote

effective  
communication



Support

autistic  
people in  
crisis

Identifying  
autistic  
callers/texters

# May express sensory difficulties

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Over or under-responsive to sensory input

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Sensations can be very impactful for autistic people

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Responses may be unique to each person & may be situation-dependent

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Overwhelm may cause regression or temporary loss of skills

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A change of environment may be needed to change sensory input

# Sensory Overwhelm Issues

- Withdraw (a coping technique)
  - Meltdown (external)
  - Shutdown (internal)
    - Anxiety
    - Disassociate
  - Sensory Overload

# May present with opposite emotions

Autistic people may look or sound opposite of what they are feeling



Making assumptions about the seriousness of a crisis based on their presentation may cause a misunderstanding – leading to miscommunication and result in an ineffective call or interaction



# Difficulty identifying or communicating emotions

- If an autistic person states they do not know how they are feeling – it is a true, literal statement
- Identifying and expressing emotions can be challenging for many autistic people (i.e., Alexithymia) & especially so when in crisis
- Emotions may also be experienced more strongly and therefore, more complex to explain quickly

# Supporting identification & communication of emotions

- Provide **extra time** for the caller to identify and/or explain their experiences
- **Offer concrete examples** of potential emotions or experiences, without assuming or assigning
- Listen for **alternative descriptions** of emotions that may sound more like physical pain (e.g., “felt like a hermit crab,” or, “it’s like shooting pains”) – be gently curious about their meaning

# Literal thinking and understanding

An autistic person can be very literal in how they think and perceive the world

A phone call or text makes it difficult to ascertain whether to trust the person on the other end and words are a way to build trust

# Misunderstandings & miscommunication in relationships

- Autism is characterized by having difficulty with social communication and social interactions across multiple circumstances
- Difficulty with relationships may contribute to why an autistic person is in crisis
  - Could impact making, developing, maintaining relationships
- One or more relationship difficulty could be causing distress

# Feels disconnected/ Isolated from society

- Autistic people feel like they don't belong because they are different
- Differences in neurology cause feelings of not being part of society
- Feelings of deep loneliness and complete aloneness
- Environment is abrasive
- Relationships confusing
- Language is culturally different

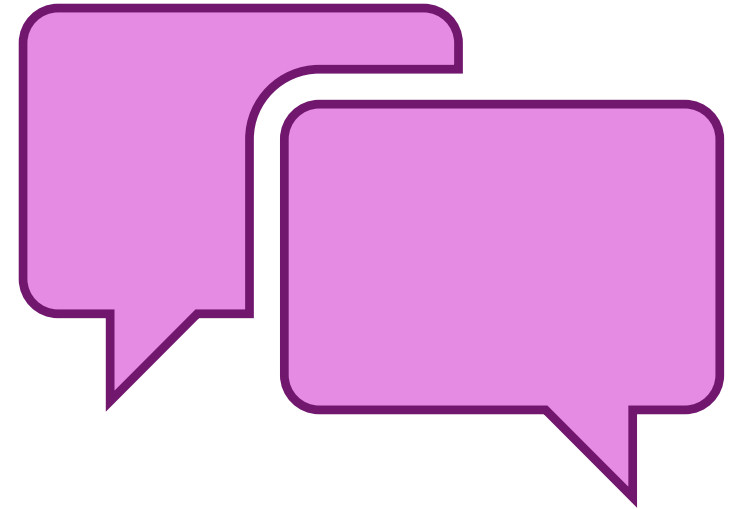


# Perseveration

- Perseveration is the rumination of thoughts both positive and negative
- In a crisis, an autistic person perseverating on negative thoughts may have great difficulty shifting their thinking to more positive thoughts, despite their best efforts.
- Perseveration could be perceived by a crisis responder as not listening, refusing to cooperate, or purposefully making the call difficult.

# Different patterns of speech

- May have an uncommon way of talking (pedantic or robotic)
- May have a large vocabulary
- May talk slowly and carefully and pace their words
- May be no inflection and void of emotion
- Echolalia



# Processing Speed

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Varying processing speeds are unrelated to intelligence

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Processing speed can decrease when anxiety & distress are high

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Autistic people may take longer to respond, especially when in distress

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Try not to rush them

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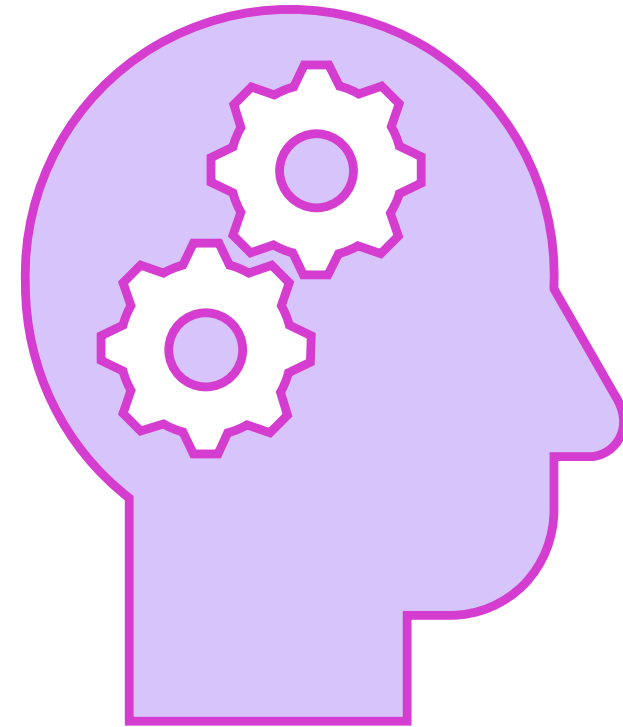
Investigate if an autistic person is done with the call or text even if they haven't talked for a while. They may still be processing.



Culturally  
Competent  
Support

# Ways to be culturally supportive

- Ask direct questions
- Allow extra time
- Avoid using metaphors, slang, etc.
  - Be clear & direct, use fewer words
- Use logical words, not emotional words
- Offer explanations & logic for suggestions
- Do not be patronizing, paternalizing, or ableist
- Be genuine





# Positive coping skills & distraction

- Help shift the thoughts (may be difficult due to perseveration)
- Help them identify strategies that have helped before:
  - watching TV
  - going for a walk
  - listening to music
  - special interests/ passions
- Spending time in social settings can serve as a distraction strategy
- Explain! (might be misunderstood by autistic people as minimizing their pain, meaningless, and dismissive if not explained)

# Reasons for Living & Safety Planning

- ▶ Help them develop a list of their reasons for living
- ▶ Facilitate a safety plan
  - ▶ How can they keep themselves safe now and in the future?
- ▶ Help make connections to people or resources
  - ▶ Professionals
  - ▶ Family or friends
  - ▶ Online networks

\*Explaining how to find resources, what to say (& practicing), who to talk to, and how to get there are just some information an autistic person may need to be successful in accessing resources to help.

# Considerations for Warning Signs Resource

# Purpose

- ▶ To increase awareness of warning signs of suicide and important considerations for working with autistic people
- ▶ Intended audience includes:
  - ▶ Professionals
  - ▶ First responders
  - ▶ Family and friends of autistic people

# Key Objectives

## Understand

- Why considerations are needed

## Recognize

- The differences between warning signs for the general public and autistic individuals

## Support

- Autistic people as autistic people



# Structure



States warning signs for general public



Shows need for considerations



Suggestions for supporting for autistic people in crisis



Warning Signs  
for the General  
Public

# Warning Signs of Suicide

Per the American Association of Suicidology

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Increased substance (alcohol or drug) use

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No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

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Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all of the time

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Feeling trapped – like there's no way out

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Hopelessness

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Withdrawal from friends, family and society

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Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge

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Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking

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Dramatic mood changes

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Giving away prized possessions or seeking long-term care for pets

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## Please Note

- ▶ Do not make any important, life-altering decisions based on the information in the following slides.
  - ▶ 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.

# Remember...

- ❑ All the information about communicating from the autism crisis toolkit is relevant in assessing an autistic person for suicide.
- ❑ The thinking process of autistic people is typically very literal
- ❑ To consider the exact meaning of what you say
- ❑ Autistic people will answer what they are asked in a literal way; their response might answer your question literally but may not give you the information you are looking for to help them.
- ❑ You must ask for exactly what you need or want to find out.



# More on Communicating

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Questions that are too general or too vague may be difficult to answer.

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Examples:

- How are you?
- How can I help?
- What do you need?

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# More on Communicating

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Why are these questions problematic?

There are too many different answers to think about and process.

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May get in the way of an autistic person might getting the help they need.

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Examples of better questions

Why did you call/text?

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What do you want to talk about?

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# Considerations for Autistic People

# Increased Substance (Alcohol Or Drug) Use

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In general, autistic people are less likely to abuse substances like drugs or alcohol.

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They may be stimming or regulating themselves.

# No Reason for Living; No Sense of Purpose in Life

- ▶ An autistic person may feel this way due to social isolation and a professional can take into consideration comments such as:
  - ▶ “I don’t belong to this world.”
  - ▶ “I’ve never fit into this world.”
- ▶ May be just the reality of an autistic person not belonging to this world, culturally, socially, or environmentally.



# No Reason for Living; No Sense of Purpose in Life

- ▶ Autistic people may struggle with these symptoms regularly.
- ▶ **How might one know if they are signs of suicide?**
  - Use concise, specific language during the assessment or crisis call/text.
  - Investigate any changes in levels of anxiety, agitation or sleep issues

# Feeling Trapped

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Autistic people can't escape their autism or how society in our culture treats them.

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There is no way out and an autistic person will most likely be very honest about it.

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Consider if saying the blatant truth about someone's life as an autistic person is a warning sign of suicide.

# Hopelessness

**It is a myth that autistic people do not have or feel emotions.  
It is true that many autistic people can't identify or express their emotions.**

Autistic people are extremely honest.

An autistic person may feel hopeless and say they feel hopeless because  
it's true.

It may be a word choice, not an emotion.

**Further investigation is necessary.**

# Withdrawal

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Withdrawal is a coping mechanism.

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It is self-care.

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It can also be a warning sign for suicide.

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Determine any changes in the level and/or type of withdrawal.

# Rage, Uncontrolled Anger, Seeking Revenge

- Could be the result of an overactive sympathetic nervous system.
- Alexithymia can hide strong emotions an autistic person may experience.
- An autistic meltdown can look like rage and uncontrolled anger.
- A true autistic meltdown can not be stopped by will or want.
- Help by keeping the autistic person safe.



# Acting Reckless or Engaging in Risky Activities

- ▶ Being misunderstood socially is common for autistic people. What may look like this warning sign for suicide in the general public might be a sign of something else in autistic people, including:
  - ▶ Over thinking
  - ▶ Perseverating
  - ▶ Deeply thinking
  - ▶ Confusion
  - ▶ Stimming

# Acting Reckless or Engaging in Risky Activities

- ▶ Dramatic mood changes can be caused by:
  - ▶ Overwhelming emotions
  - ▶ Sensory overload
  - ▶ Change
- ▶ These mood changes are different than autistic meltdowns.
- ▶ Reframing the situation can help the autistic perceive what happened in a different, more helpful way.

## Giving Away Prized Possessions or Seeking Long- Term Care for Pets

- ▶ Some autistic people have strong emotional connections with one or two possession.
- ▶ Many are very connected to their pets, including therapy pets.
- ▶ Giving away possessions or seeking long-term care for pets warrants further investigation.
- ▶ Closest true warning sign for autistic people – if they existed
- ▶ Remember the person you are helping. Autistic people may have other reasons for giving away prized possessions.
- ▶ Consider an example from Lisa's life.



# Reasons for Living Resource



# Reasons for Living

A Suicide Prevention Resource for Autistic Individuals  
Developed by the Autism and Suicide Prevention Workgroup

## Why Reasons for Living are Important

Reasons for living can

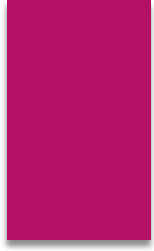
- remind you why to not die
- give you hope
- help regulate your feelings
- remind you that you have a purpose
- remind you who you are and what you can do

## Where to Keep Your List

- In the same place
- A place you can easily find it, like on your phone or in a location you check often
- It is important to know where it is at all times
- You can have more than one copy and keep them in different places



# Reasons for Living



## How to create it.

- Ask the questions
- What to remember

## When to use it.

- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-harming thoughts
- When unsure about continuing to live

## How to use it.

- Hold it in your hand and read it.
- Read it out loud or silently to yourself as many times as needed
- Re-write it out

## Remember to change it

- Keep it up to date
- Especially if there's a pet or people on it that may not be in the person's life anymore

## How to Create a List of Your Reasons for Living

Ask yourself these questions:

- What is one reason I want to stay alive now?
- What is one thing I love?
- What do I want to keep doing?
- What object, pet, or person is very important to me?
- What goal(s) do I have for the future?

Living with thoughts of suicide can be very hard. It is important to remember:

- You decide your reasons for living.
- Your reasons for living can change.
- It can be hard to make a list of reasons for living.
- You do not need to finish your list all at once.
- You can ask for help with your list.
- Other people do not need to be your reasons for living, but they can be.
- Reasons for living can be big or small.
- You should write down your reasons for living so that you can remember them even when you are upset.
- You can draw or add pictures to your list.

## When to Use Your List

- When you have thoughts of hurting or killing yourself
- When you are unsure about continuing to live

## Some Ideas for How to Use Your List

- Hold it in your hand
- Read it silently
- Read it out loud
- Read through the list over and over
- Read one reason at a time and think about each reason
- Draw pictures or look at pictures of your reasons
- Write the list over and over

## Changing Your List

- It is important for you to change your list if your reasons for living change.
- Look at your list again when you are not upset and make any changes you think it needs.

# In Conclusion...

- ▶ **We all have a role to play in suicide prevention efforts!**
- ▶ Learn directly from autistic people with lived experience of suicidality
- ▶ Don't be afraid to ask about suicidal thoughts . . .and listen to the answer
- ▶ Remember that autistic distress may not look like neurotypical distress
- ▶ Make use of the growing number of autism-specific crisis resources
- ▶ Advocate for more autism-specific training for crisis center workers, emergency department clinicians, and other mental health professionals

STAY TUNED!

AFTER LUNCH:

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE  
FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

CODE FOR ALL RESOURCES:

