



*Lisa's story*



# Lisa's story is one of many

- Autistic people are at significant risk of suicidal thoughts, actions, and death
- Studies indicate they have at least **3-5x greater risk** of reported suicidal behavior
- Lifetime: **1/3** autistic people have suicidal thoughts and **1/4** have a suicide attempt
- There are also many reasons they may not report, or their reports may not be believed
- I interviewed 38 autistic adults, mental health professionals, & family members last year and heard so many personal, individual stories that share many similarities



# What does it mean to be autistic?

- To receive a diagnosis of autism, professionals look for:
  - Challenges with social communication, especially with non-autistic people
  - Limited and/or repetitive patterns of thinking and/or behaving
    - Sensory processing differences are extremely common (at least ~75% of autistic people)
    - Alexithymia—difficulty identifying & communicating emotions—is also common (at least ~50% of autistic people)
  - Autistic features must have been present since early childhood (but may have been missed)
- Many autistic people may go undiagnosed
  - Until later in life or ever
  - Because they don't fit existing stereotypes
  - Some people may self-diagnose because of barriers

(APA, 2013; Kinnaird et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2022)



# As we heard in Lisa's story...

Autistic people's experiences can include:

- Trauma and distressing life situations
- Daily life challenges and unmet needs
- Social challenges, isolation, and invalidation
- Difficulty with emotions
- Pressure to conform to a neurotypical standard (& masking)
- Thwarted belonging & perceived burdensomeness
- Lack of support for mental health and other needs
  - Mental health services that don't help, and may even harm



***Frustration  
Hopelessness  
Suicidality***

# Trauma & Distressing Life Situations

- Childhood & adult traumas are experienced at elevated rates
  - DSM & non-DSM trauma events (Kerns et al., 2015; Li et al., 2024; Peterson et al., 2019)
- Other difficult life situations causing distress

*“so much of this, difficulties [we have] with social communication, it builds up as trauma. It causes this trauma response. And there's a reason you see kind of this executive function similarities with people who experience complex PTSD because it's just, it's traumatic to not be heard the way you wanna be heard, to realise that any situation can be a threat.”*

# Daily Life Challenges & Unmet Needs

Our and other research have found several daily challenges associated with suicidality:

- Basic needs not being met (Cassidy et al., 2018)
- Times of change and transition are difficult
- Sensory overwhelm
- Health problems causing difficulty (e.g., sleep, GI, pain, autoimmune)
- Constant stress leading to burnout

“I try you know I tried making car payments, paying rent, I tried that whole thing, and it pretty much killed me. It, yeah. I almost drove myself to suicide dealing with all of that.”

# Social Challenges, Isolation, & Invalidation

- Social challenges are required for an autism diagnosis
- Social challenges can also contribute to exclusion, marginalization, & suicide risk
  - Isolation
  - Misunderstandings
  - Rejection
  - Loneliness

(Mourney et al., 2023)

“I do think social isolation is at the root of my issues with suicidality but there isn't much fix for that you can't make people love you or value you in the world so I find that to be really challenging.”

# Difficulty w/ Emotions & Thought Patterns

- Alexithymia (difficulty understanding/recognizing one's own emotions)
- Difficulty managing emotions & distress
- Repetitive thoughts make it hard to get out of a cycle

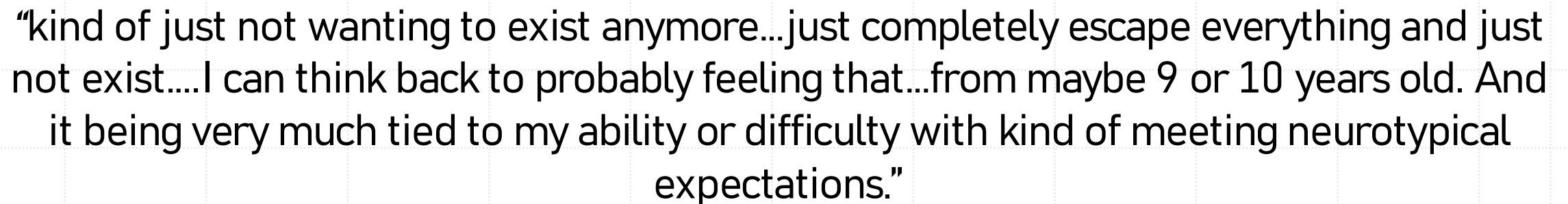
“I do think that the perseveration and, you know, the, the, the, always having that background task that never ends is part of why it just keeps it [suicidality] always um a thing.”





# Pressure to Conform

- Neurotypical expectations & pressure from neurotypical society
- Being shamed or punished for autistic tendencies
- Masking - hiding autistic traits and emotions
- Identity struggles
- Experiencing stigma for being autistic

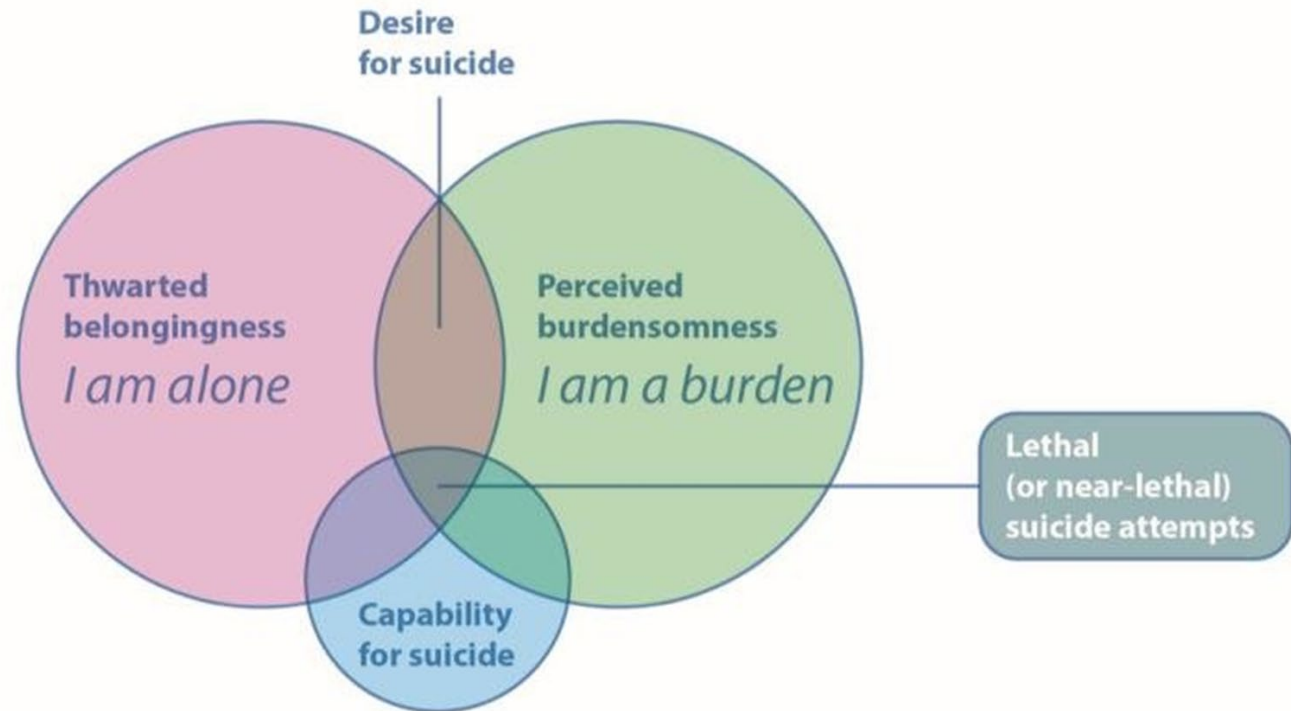


“kind of just not wanting to exist anymore...just completely escape everything and just not exist....I can think back to probably feeling that...from maybe 9 or 10 years old. And it being very much tied to my ability or difficulty with kind of meeting neurotypical expectations.”

# Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

- Thwarted Belonging
- Perceived Burdensomeness

*\*See Dr. Moseley's work!*



The interpersonal psychological theory of suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010)



# Lack of support

- Mental health services that don't help, and may even harm
- Lisa's story emphasized how services that should have been there to HELP her actually were extremely distressing. From first responders to mental health professionals. Unfortunately, this is all too common.

“I think lack of treatment access is also a huge reason suicidality tends to be a chronic thing for me.”

# To be continued...

- Over the next two days, we will talk much more about many of these topics
- Let's all extend gratitude for Lisa who shared her very personal story with us today
- And I also thank the many autistic people who shared their stories for our research
- Our goal: make a difference for the autistic community



[Credit:ksenija18kz](#)