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Suicidality in Autism: Risk and Prevention

How common are suicidal thoughts and behaviours in people with autism?

A growing body of research evidence is showing that many people with autism experience mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, at some point in their lives. Depression is a well-known risk factor for committing suicide in the general population. One large research study showed that over 90% of people who committed suicide were also diagnosed with depression. But what about suicide risk in people with autism?

In my research, I encounter a lot of concern from clinicians, and carers, who are supporting people with autism experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours. However, there has been very little research in this area. Studiesⁱ have shown high rates of suicidal thoughts (10.9% – 66%), and suicidal behaviours (11% - 30%) in adults and children with autism. Between 7.3% - 15% of people who have been hospitalised for attempted suicide also have an autism diagnosis. This is much higher than the 1% rate of autism diagnosis we would expect in the general UK population.

These figures show that suicidal thoughts and behaviours are worryingly high in people with autism. However, there is a wide range in these figures, with some studies showing a quite low proportion of people with autism experiencing suicidal thoughts (10.9%), and others very high a very high proportion (66%). This is most likely because of differences in the way the research was carried out; 7.2% ofⁱⁱ parents of children with autism report their child thinks about committing suicide, whereas 66% of adults newly diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome report having thought about committing suicide at some point in their livesⁱⁱⁱ. It will be very important for future research to explore how many people with autism experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours, the role of factors such as age, time of diagnosis, and how these are measured.

Assessing suicide risk in people with autism

So how can clinicians effectively assess suicide risk in people with autism? At the moment there are no assessment tools for depression or suicidality which have been developed specifically for people with autism. However, there are important things to consider when assessing suicide risk in these individuals.

For example, many people with autism also experience mental health problems, and social difficulties such as bullying^{iv}– both these factors have been shown to increase risk of suicidal thoughts in people with autism. So it is important to be alert to the potential risk factors the person may be experiencing, and gather background information about these.

There are also aspects of autism which must be taken into account when asking these individuals about their suicidal thoughts and behaviours. For example, some people with autism tend to interpret questions literally, such as “have you ever attempted suicide?” This could potentially lead to over-reporting. So it is very important to probe the specific circumstances and check understanding of the questions. Some people with autism can also have difficulty describing their own internal emotional experiences (known as Alexithymia)^v. This can present a challenge for clinicians when assessing depression or emotional distress in people with autism, who may have difficulty articulating the nature of their feelings and the specific circumstances these occur. Using visual aids to help the individual identify and label their emotions, and describe the situations where they occur, could be beneficial for some people with autism during assessment and treatment.

Our research group is currently exploring these issues^{vi}, and develop new measures and guidelines for assessing depression and suicide risk in adults with autism.

Preventing suicide in people with autism

What steps can be taken to reduce suicide risk in people with autism?

Awareness that many people with autism may experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours is the first step to prevention. Clinicians need to be alert to increased risk, and consider screening for mental health problems and suicidality in adults seeking an autism diagnosis^{vii}. Also being aware of the fact that many people, and particularly adults, also experience delays in being diagnosed with autism^{viii}, alongside lack of support post diagnosis for children and adults^{ix}, and poor outcomes^x such as health and social difficulties, social isolation, unemployment and underemployment in adults with autism. All of these factors could increase risk of secondary depression in people with autism, a key risk factor for suicidal thoughts and behaviours^{xi}. We also know that strong post diagnostic support^{xii} improves mental health and quality of life of adults with autism. This means that the secondary depression and suicidality are preventable. Access not only to timely autism diagnosis, but appropriate support post diagnosis are therefore key to reducing suicide risk in people with autism.

To reduce suicide risk in people with autism, we need to prevent these people from 'slipping through the net', and not accessing appropriate timely diagnosis, and appropriate support.

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Author: Dr Sarah Cassidy, Atypical Development Theme Lead
Organisation: Centre for Research in Psychology Behaviour and Achievement, Coventry University
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