

# Suicide risk factors in autistic individuals, risk assessments, & safety planning

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# Objectives

Attendees will be able to:

- Identify risk factors unique to autism
- Adapt risk assessments when assessing autistic youth
- Identify warning signs of suicidality in autistic youth
- Learn considerations for safety planning with autistic youth

# Prevalence

- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death for people ages 10 through 14
- Suicide research has mainly focused on neurotypical youth. We know very little about suicidality in autistic youth.
- Suicide is the leading cause of premature death in autistic individuals.
- Autistic individuals may also have other identities or backgrounds that affect their experiences in the world, impacting their risk for suicide.

(Schwartzman et al, 2021)  
(Hedley et al, 2022)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), [National Center for Injury Prevention and Control](#)

# Intersectionality within autism spectrum disorder

Each autistic individual is unique and comes with different identities, lived experiences, & backgrounds. Marginalized subgroups of people with autism experience unique factors that may contribute to suicide risk.

## Autism:

- Intellectual disability
- Non-verbal communication
- Co-occurring mental health condition



LGBTQ2IA+

## Sex and gender:

- Assigned female at birth

## Race or Ethnicity:

- Black, indigenous, people of color
- Language

## Location:

- Underserved areas/communities
- Unstable housing
- Distance to care

(Hadley et al, 2022)

# Risk factors unique to autism

## Risk factors unique to autism:

- Autistic burnout & masking
- Challenges with life transitions
- Isolation and social difficulties
- Lack of social support
- Alexithymia (challenges in recognizing, expressing, and describing one's own emotions)
- Unmet support needs (employment, healthcare, education)
- Late diagnosis



Masking by Nihilivonne  
[Mirroring Masks and other Poems and Art](#)  
[Masking by Nihilivonne – The Art of Autism](#)  
[\(the-art-of-autism.com\)](#)

(Hunsche et al, 2020)

# Autism Resource: Toolkits

## Autism Resource for Warning Signs of Suicide: Considerations for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN  
AND BRENNA MADDOX  
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION  
OF SUICIDOLOGY'S AUTISM AND SUICIDE COMMITTEE

## Crisis Supports for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN  
IN COLLABORATION WITH AAS'S AUTISM AND  
SUICIDE COMMITTEE & COMMON GROUND

# Risk assessment & screenings with autistic youth

Screening for suicidality is a critical first step in identifying youth at risk who may require immediate intervention and support

However, suicidality in the context of autistic youth is not well understood or studied

When assessing for risk of suicide:

Thinking process of autistic people is often very literal and concrete

Use the exact meaning of what you are trying to say – clear, direct questions

Autistic people have may have a different inner experience than they present

Listen to exactly what they tell you

Assessing them by their mode of communication

Use verbal, written, device, and/or images

Autistic folks have varying processing speeds unrelated to intelligence

Be patient & wait for the individual to respond

(Morgan & Maddox, 2018)



# Warning signs for suicidality in autistic individuals

Sudden or increased withdrawal & isolation

No words to communicate acute distress

Current traumatic event, reported by self or others

Marked increase rate and/or severity of self-harm behaviors

Worsening in levels of symptoms of anxiety and/or depression

New focus on suicidal talk, ideation, death-related topics that are not a special interest

Perseverative suicidal thoughts and ruminations

Seeking means or making plans for suicide or suicide rehearsal

Statements about no reason to live or no sense of purpose of life

Hopelessness


(Morgan & Maddox, 2018)

# Safety planning

Safety planning emphasizes developing a concrete plan (behavioral strategies, social supports, professional supports, coping strategies) and creating a safe environment to use during **periods of high risk**.

What are these periods for your patient?

## My Safety Plan



This form is to help you plan for times when you have strong thoughts, feelings or urges to end your life.

There is also space for you to provide information about how people can best support you when you feel this way. Follow the steps below until you feel safe.

This form can be completed by the person experiencing suicidal feelings, or with support from a trusted friend or family member, health care professional, or support worker.

### My reason for living is

(Please use this space to write a message to yourself for when you feel suicidal. You may also like to attach a photo to this form and/or something meaningful to you that you can focus on when you feel suicidal).

## 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

### 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?

### 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

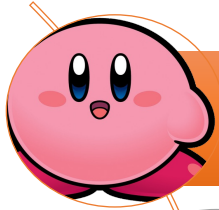
- Hold it in your hand
- Read it silently
- Read it out loud

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

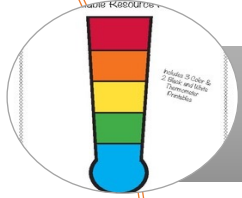
(Morgan & Maddox, 2023)

(Schwartzman et al, 2021)

# Safety planning considerations with autistic youth

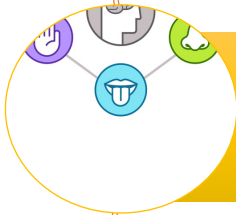


Incorporating a youth's interests (e.g., characters, tv shows, video games)

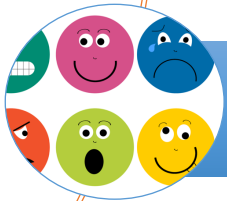


Pairing discussions with visual supports (e.g., mood thermometer, visual representation high risk periods)

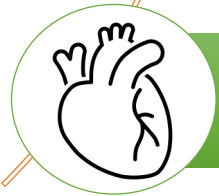
- Using worksheets to identify emotions



Consideration of sensory differences and needs such as overstimulation (e.g., loud noises, being touched, too much information)



Emotion recognition may be challenging for autistic youth (differences in describing and regulation emotions)



Using concrete explanations of physiologic signals and behaviors that may indicate distress

- “What does your body feel like when it is calm? What does your body feel when it is escalated?”

(Schwartzman et al, 2021)

# Caregivers' role in safety planning with youth on the spectrum

- Collaboration can greatly benefit the development and implementation of a safety plan
- Caregivers' awareness of warning signs in their youth can help caregiver provide support to their child and implement coping strategies
- Caregivers may also support in limiting/restricting access to dangerous
  - e.g., creating a safe environment, locking up potentially dangerous items
- Developing a **parallel caregiver-specific safety plan** to support their own emotional regulation and concrete steps on how to aide their child

(Schwartzman et al, 2021)

# Current research

Principal investigators, **Brenna Maddox** and **Shari Jager-Hyman**

The purpose of this study is to compare the effectiveness, feasibility, and acceptability of two suicide prevention strategies tailored for autistic youth (age 15-24) at risk for suicide: the Safety Planning Intervention tailored for Autistic individuals.

[A Comparison of Two Brief Suicide Prevention Interventions Tailored for Youth on the Autism Spectrum - Full Text View - ClinicalTrials.gov](#)

# References

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# Questions

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**THANK YOU!**

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