

Suicide and autism

Jon Spiers, September 2017

About Autistica

- The UK's leading autism research charity
- We want to give everyone affected by autism the chance of a **long, happy, healthy life**
- Our research is driven by the views of the autism community – mental health problems are their top priority

About autism

- Lifelong neurodevelopmental condition with difficulties in social and communication skills, repetitive behaviours, narrow circumscribed interests, and sensory difficulties.
- Affects 1% of the population - 700,000 in the UK.
- Most are adults and many remain undiagnosed.
- 2.5x increased risk of premature death, with autistic people dying on average 16 years younger than neurotypical peers

Mental health and autism

- High rates of comorbidity with mood and anxiety disorders:
 - Depression present in 30 – 50% of adults with autism (e.g. Cassidy et al. 2014; Lugnegård et al. 2011; Hofvander et al. 2009; Sterling et al. 2008), and 30% of children (e.g. Strang et al. 2012).
 - Anxiety present in ~50% of adults (e.g. Lugnegård et al. 2011; Hofvander et al. 2009), and ~40% of children (e.g. Strang et al. 2012; van Steensel et al. 2011).
- Mood disorders are a significant risk factor for suicide in the general population (Kasper et al. 1996; Baraclough et al. 1974)

Suicidality and autism

Initial studies were small and poorly powered but indicative of a serious problem:

- 42 autistic adults living in the community; suicidal ideation 40% suicide attempts 15% (Balfe and Tantam, 2010)
- 26 adult psychiatric patients with ASC; suicidal ideation 30.8%, 7.7% died by suicide (Raja et al. 2011)
- 74 autistic adults with depression; suicidal attempts 24% (Takara and Kondo, 2014)
- Autistic adults make up 7.3% - 15% of suicidal populations (Kato et al. 2013; Ryden et al. 2008)

Suicidality and autism

Later, larger studies confirm earlier research:

- 374 newly diagnosed adults with Asperger Syndrome; suicidal ideation 66%; suicide plans/attempts 35%, depression 31%
 - Autistic traits and depression risk factors for suicidality
- Adults with autism significantly more likely to die by suicide than the general population
 - Being female, autism without LD, and depression are risk factors, though only half of suicidal autistic adults are depressed
 - In those with autism and no learning difficulty (c.65% of autistic people), suicide is the second most common cause of death – nine times increased risk compared to typical population
- Suicide attempts in autism seem to be more aggressive/lethal

Autism-specific challenges

- Do typical suicide prevention measures work for autistic people?
 - Less likely to use helplines, communication challenges
- Do standard measures work for autistic people?
- Alexythymia, literal interpretation: under/over reporting of suicidality and depression?
- Overlapping symptoms in autism and depression? E.g. social withdrawal, sleep problems
- Unique aspects of suicidality and depression in autism:
Disinhibition, reduced cognitive flexibility

Information and research



This is new to the vast majority of the autism community: we must take care how and when we communicate the risks, be clear on what we do and don't yet know, and be sensitive to autistic people's needs

Research:

- Psychological autopsies study in Derbyshire and Cambs – preliminary data suggests confirmed, probable or possible autism in c.10% of deaths by suicide
- May 2017, Autistica organised the first global autism and suicide summit – now exploring a series of new studies

AUTISTICA

Building brighter futures through autism research

Thank you

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