

CRISIS SUPPORTS FOR THE AUTISM COMMUNITY: STARTING A CONVERSATION

Lisa Morgan, M.Ed.
and Jacqueline Wynn, Ph.D, BCBA-D,
COBA



INTRODUCTION

◉ Speakers

- Jacquie Wynn, Ph.D, BCBA-D, COBA
- Lisa Morgan, M.Ed.

◉ Collaboration

- American Association of Suicidology,
 - Colleen Creighton
- Nationwide Children's Hospital, Columbus Ohio
 - Jacquie Wynn, PhD, John Ackerman, PhD, Stacey Fredrix, LISW-S, Emily Moubray, LPCC, Karen Tabern, PsyD
- Special Citizens Futures Unlimited, Inc, NY
 - Jessica Guberman, PhD
- Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors
 - Carla Stumpf Patton, EDD, LMHC, NCC, FT, CCTP
- Autistic Adults and other Stakeholders Engaged Together
 - Lisa Morgan, MEd

MISSION:

- ◉ Why are we here?
- ◉ What are our goals?

CURRENT RESEARCH

- ◉ 84% of children diagnosed with ASD have a comorbid mental health diagnosis
- ◉ 66% of individuals diagnosed with ASD have contemplated suicide
- ◉ Children with ASD are 28 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts compared to their peers
- ◉ Current suicide rate in the general population is 13 per 100,000 individuals
- ◉ Suicide is the leading premature cause of death in individuals with ASD
- ◉ Of particular concern is a 5-fold higher rate of suicide attempts we observed among adults with ASD compared to the controls
- ◉ In a recent study, high prevalence of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts was reported among individuals with Asperger syndrome.

PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS OF CARE INVOLVED IN CRISES

- ◉ Individual in crisis
- ◉ Families/Caregivers
- ◉ Primary Care doctors
- ◉ Specialists
- ◉ Emergency room personnel
- ◉ Educators
- ◉ Co-workers
- ◉ First Responders
- ◉ Mental Health Professionals
- ◉ Group Home staff

CURRENT SUPPORTS IN PLACE

- ◉ Suicide Prevention Lifeline
 - Suicide-Risk-Assessment-Standards
- ◉ Text Line
- ◉ Autism Speaks: Managing a Crisis Situation
- ◉ Emergency Rooms
- ◉ 911
- ◉ Medical and Mental health providers

SUPPORT SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

- ◉ Services need to be ASD-informed
- ◉ Improved training for professionals
- ◉ Increased service availability
- ◉ Quicker access to appropriate services
- ◉ Training for individual person on autism spectrum on what to do/next steps (what to talk about, expectations, communication)
- ◉ Opportunities for individuals on autism spectrum to learn self-advocacy

FIRST STEPS IN INITIATING SUPPORT

- ◉ What to look for
- ◉ Ask direct questions
- ◉ Give time to process
- ◉ Shift the thoughts
- ◉ Words have meaning
- ◉ Get them connected

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- ◉ Is there talk about being misunderstood?
- ◉ Not belonging? No friends? Feeling isolated?
- ◉ Express not knowing what to do with emotions?
- ◉ Difficulty conveying their needs verbally?
- ◉ A feeling of impending doom?
- ◉ Overall confusion?
- ◉ Feel like they don't belong to this world?
- ◉ Describing symptoms of sensory overload?

ASK DIRECT QUESTIONS

- ◉ Vague comments and questions can be difficult to understand and answer, especially in a crisis.
- ◉ Direct questions with fewer words that get straight to the point are much easier to answer and will help with communication.
- ◉ Autistic adults may not be able to formulate their thoughts into words to be able to express how they are feeling.

GIVE TIME TO PROCESS

- ◉ Many autistic adults have varying processing speeds, and may take more time to process information when in crisis. Processing speed, unrelated to intelligence, is negatively correlated to levels of stress, anxiety, and heightened emotions.
- ◉ Time is needed to be able to communicate effectively.
- ◉ If a long time has gone by and the autistic adult in crisis continues to be silent, asking for one word is a way to help process the thoughts. A sentence may be too much, but one word could start communication up again.

SHIFT THE THOUGHTS

- ◉ There is a high probability an autistic adult in crisis is perseverating on negative thoughts.
- ◉ Shifting the thoughts is imperative to helping them move out of the crisis.
- ◉ Ask them to name a special interest.
- ◉ If they do name a special interest, ask simple direct questions to keep them talking. A special interest can be strong enough to break the negative thought pattern and be calming.
- ◉ If they do not name a special interest, ask simple direct questions to find something they can connect with - colors, movies, books, nature, food, hobbies, crafts, science, poetry, a person.

WORDS HAVE MEANING

- ◉ Autistic adults typically rely on the exact meaning of words to communicate.
- ◉ They may not understand metaphors, allegories, slang, or any other way a word may be used differently than its literal meaning.

Ex. I understand.

- ◉ It can be very confusing for an autistic adult to be faced with a word used in a different way than what it was meant to be used for.
 - Say exactly what you mean.
 - Speak logically
 - Keep emotions out of communication
- ◉ A feeling of being lied to, due to words not being used with the correct meaning, could result in the end of communication and the autistic adult not getting the support they need.

GET THEM CONNECTED

- ◉ Many autistic adults feel disconnected, isolated, misunderstood, and even ostracized from the world socially. It is a major reason for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and death by suicide.
- ◉ Extreme emotions can cause an autistic adult to withdraw into themselves.
- ◉ It will be important to try to get them connected to someone else before ending the call/ text session.
- ◉ Ask them to name *one* person they trust to connect with after the call/ text.
- ◉ If they can't name one person, try to have them name one activity they can start doing after the call.

NEXT STEPS

- ◉ Identify opportunities for research on ASD and suicide
- ◉ Increase awareness
- ◉ Develop ASD friendly supports
- ◉ Develop trainings for professionals involved in care and treatment
- ◉ Develop plan for self advocacy initiative
- ◉ **A panel discussion proposal has been submitted for the American Association of Suicidology Annual Conference in D.C on April 18-21**

Want to keep up-to-date on information?

Please email:

lisa.morgan7@yahoo.com or
autismresourcecoordinatorsteam@nationwidechildrens.org

RESOURCES

- ◉ National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org | 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- ◉ American Association for Suicidology
www.suicidology.org
- ◉ Crisis Text Line 741-741
- ◉ Autism Speaks www.autismspeaks.org | (888) 288-4762
- ◉ Nationwide Children's Hospital-Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders
www.nationwidechildrens.org/autism
- ◉ Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors
www.TAPS.org 1-800-959-8277
- ◉ Special Citizens Futures Unlimited, Inc
www.specialcitizens.org/

REFERENCES

- ◉ Mayes, S., Gorman, A., Hillwig-Garcia, J., Sayed, E., (2012). *Suicide ideation and attempts in children with autism*. Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 7, 109-119
- ◉ Croen, L., Zerbo, O., Qian, Y., Massolo, M., Rich, S., Sidney, S., Kripke, C., (2015) *The health status of adults on the autism spectrum*. UC San Francisco Previously Published Works, https://escholarship.org/uc/ucsf_postprints
- ◉ *Suicide ideation and attempts in children with autism*. (2012, August 25). Retrieved October 18, 2017, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1750946712000931>
- ◉ Cassidy, S., Bradley, P., Robinson, J., Allison, C., McHughe, M., Baron-Cohen, S. (2014). *Suicidal ideation and suicide plans or attempts in adults with Asperger's syndrome attending a specialist diagnostic clinic: a clinical cohort study*, 1, 142-147
- ◉ Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Boman M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., Bölte, S. (2016) *Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder*. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 3, 232-238
- ◉ National Center for Health Statistics. (2017, March 17). Retrieved November 03, 2017, from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>