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# Autism and suicide prevention

## The importance of listening to autistic people



## Summary

More than one in 100 people in the UK are autistic. Yet, autistic people are not always supported, or accepted, by society.

There is a considerably increased risk of suicide in autistic people compared to non-autistic people. Suicide rates in the autistic community are unacceptably high and lack of support is costing lives. Our research found that suicidality in autistic people is under-researched. It also showed a lack of appropriate support available for autistic people.

Our recommendations have been recognised in the Government Suicide Prevention strategy, and autistic people are now recognised as a high risk group. However, more work needs to be done. We need to work with autistic people to improve the support that is available. We need to listen to autistic people when they tell us what they need. We need to turn the high level aims of the government strategy into actual practice. This can only be achieved by working with autistic people.

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# The Problem

Autistic people are **nearly 8 times more likely to die by suicide** than non-autistic people. The key issues are a **lack of understanding of autism within healthcare services** and a **lack of support** available to autistic people. There is also a **lack of assessment tools** to understand suicidal thoughts and behaviours in autistic people and a **lack of interventions** designed for autistic people. Autistic people also report numerous **barriers when trying to access mental health services**.

These barriers make it challenging for autistic people to get support when they need it. Additionally, **autistic people are not always believed when they say they need help**. This leads to autistic people not trying to get help until they reach crisis. There needs to be a **better understanding of autism, autistic people need to be believed and more appropriate interventions and tools are essential**. We need to support autistic people **before they reach crisis**, and this **support needs to be informed by autistic people**.

## Recommendations

- **Listen** to autistic people when they tell you **they need help**.
- **Improve the support** available after **diagnoses**, including mental health assessment and treatment. The support available should be **informed by autistic people**.
- Change legislation to improve mental health care for autistic people. Healthcare professionals need to **have knowledge of autism**, should **recognise the high risk for suicide** and should **provide appropriate treatment and support**.

## Our Research

We conducted systematic reviews on **research into suicide in autism**, and on **international suicide prevention policy**. We then spoke to **more than 1000 autistic people and those who support them** to identify the **key issues**. We worked with autistic people to **prioritise** what was most important to them. We are now working with autistic people to **develop recommendations for support**. We need to know **what ideal support looks like** for autistic people and how it can be implemented.

## Quote

**"Society fails us, we don't fail society...it's society that breaks us...we're just human but different"**  
- Autistic person

# Our Findings

We asked autistic people and those who support them to identify the **top priorities needed for change**.

These priorities included:

- Working **with autistic people** to ensure interventions and prevention strategies are **appropriate**.
- **Improving diagnoses and post-diagnostic mental health support**.
- Providing support **designed with and for autistic people**.

What is clear from our research is that **systemic change is needed** within the mental health care system. Staff need to be **informed about autism** and **need to listen to autistic people**. Treatments for suicidal thoughts and behaviours need to be adapted **with and for autistic people**. Only by working with autistic people will we be able to provide appropriate support. The current level of suicidality within the autism community is **unacceptable** and **these changes need to be made now**.

- The **top priority** was **understanding and removing the barriers** autistic people experience when trying to access mental health support.
- Autistic people have now been recognised as a **high risk** group by the Government Suicide Prevention Strategy.
- We need to **work with autistic people** to discern **what appropriate and effective support looks like**.

## Call to Action

"We need a **holistic** view that encompasses our lives in total, **not just waiting until we have had enough of this world that we want to leave**"

- Autistic person

# Implications

The Government has now recognised the scale of the issue of increased suicidality in autistic people. However, more work is needed. We must now discern **what good support looks like for autistic people**. Providing appropriate support for autistic people will lead to a **better quality of life**. This will have positive consequences for society, both socially and economically.

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