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The Power of Human Connection: Autism and the Suicide Risk

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Abstract

As researchers continue to understand autism spectrum disorder (ASD), one outstanding factor is causing concern within the psychological community: those with ASD are at a much higher risk of suicidal tendencies. These tendencies include suicidal ideation, attempting suicide, and death by suicide. Possible contributing factors to this increased risk include high levels of loneliness, pressure to conform to societal norms, as well as depression and anxiety. To decrease suicidality among the ASD population, further research is needed to fully understand why this behavior occurs at such a high percentage. Research is also needed to find appropriate and effective solutions to these issues. Within this literature review, I will delve into the possible causes of high suicidality rates among ASD individuals as well as propose potential solutions to this serious problem. These solutions will be based on current research within the field of positive psychology, including concepts like self-compassion, exercise, and supportive relationships.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, suicide, prevention, loneliness, connection

The Power of Human Connection: Autism and the Suicide Risk

In 2017 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) listed suicide as the 10th highest cause of death within the United States (CDC, 2017). As suicide continues to present a serious problem in the United States, one population is more at risk for both suicidal ideation and attempted suicide: those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; South et al., 2020). Since 2014 it is estimated that 1 in 59 children are born with ASD (CDC, 2019). This means that out of the 73.8 million children in the United States (Forum, 2021), roughly 1.3 million of those children will have autism and therefore may be more vulnerable to suicidal tendencies. This statistic also suggests that out of the 308 million current adults living within the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2019), over 5 million will potentially experience higher levels of vulnerability to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts because of the emerging relationship between autistic traits and the related struggles and suicidality.

Autistic traits are defined as the following: deficits in social, emotional, and communicative reciprocity; restrictions in behavior that are manifested in repeated movements; and obsessive interests or a rigidity about completing ritual practices (Autism Speaks, 2019). These diagnostic criteria provide insight into why a person with autism may experience higher levels of suicidal vulnerability. Difficulties in social, emotional, and communicative reciprocity are significant because these challenges may often be exacerbated by the increased anxiety individuals with autism feel at having to perform well in social situations. This finding could explain the high levels of loneliness and isolation, as well as the pressure to conform to a cultural standard that contribute to the "increased vulnerability" to suicidality (South et al., 2020, p. 2).

Though autism and its effects on suicidal ideation are relatively new and understudied, even less is understood in the way of suicide prevention for autistic individuals (Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017). Therefore, the possible solutions proposed within this literature review will focus on the available research about factors, such as mental health issues, loneliness, and societal pressures, that are potentially contributing to higher levels of suicidality in autistic individuals and

how these issues are treated in the typically neurologically developed population within the view of the field of positive psychology.

Rates of Suicidality, Depression, and Anxiety in the Autistic Population

Suicidal ideation includes the following factors: thoughts about suicide, suicidal behaviors (e.g., self-harm), and attempted and completed suicide. A meta-analysis of studies about suicidality within the ASD population found 10.7–50% of samples displayed suicidal ideation, which is an alarmingly high number (Segers & Rawana, 2014). In another study, South et al. (2020) found that 46% of the autistic individuals sampled self-reported that they had created a specific plan for suicide, with 16% of the sample actually attempting their plan. Within the same sample, 76% were also found to have mild to severe depression and 81% were found to have mild to severe anxiety. These rates could indicate that high levels of anxiety and depression are adding to the high percentage of suicidal ideation within the autistic population. These numbers are also a testament to the mental pain that autistic individuals feel on perhaps a daily basis. For many of these people, these symptoms of mental anguish seem inescapable because they are not divisible from ASD.

Possible Causes for Suicidality, Depression, and Anxiety in ASD Individuals

A contributing factor to the high rates of suicidality within the ASD population may be due to around half of autistic and potentially autistic individuals (51.2% and 54.5%, respectively) going undiagnosed for mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety (Au-Yeung et al., 2018). Au-Yeung et al. found that the lack of diagnoses is because autistic individuals, caretakers, and medical professionals might not recognize that depression and anxiety are not necessarily fundamental aspects of autism, therefore confusing symptoms of depression and anxiety as inherent by-products of autism. These misunderstandings may also occur among diagnoses given by medical professionals, since the link between mental health and autism is under researched and symptoms of depression may be overlooked because of the symptoms of ASD and vice versa (South et al., 2020). This oversight could be another contributing factor to high suicidality rates in

the ASD population, as those without the capacity to recognize their mental health issues may be less likely to seek help for them. When those individuals do seek help, medical professionals may not be adequately equipped to prescribe the appropriate support because they do not have enough information about the complexity of the relationship between mental health issues and autism.

Another possible explanation for depression and anxiety within the autistic community may be the extreme sensitivity to sensory information (Liss et al., 2008). Sensory overloads may occur when an autistic individual experiences extreme discomfort at a particular sound, visual stimulus, touch, taste, or smell, and that discomfort may illicit an extreme reaction (Autism Speaks, 2020). That reaction might cause an autistic individual to refrain from social situations, as the uncomfortable stimuli coupled with socializing may prove to be overwhelming. This type of social isolation may be a cause of loneliness within ASD individuals, who are significantly more prone to feelings of loneliness than are the non-autistic population (Deckers et al., 2017). Even though the choice to socially isolate may reduce discomfort caused by unpleasant sensory information, isolation is likely more detrimental than helpful due to the link with higher levels of loneliness. Such high levels of loneliness may have a significant effect on levels of depression, and therefore suicidal ideation, on the autistic population because loneliness is also shown to be highly associated with both depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in other non-autistic populations (Teo et al., 2018).

Another potential reason for increased anxiety, depression, and suicidality among autistic individuals may be the set of techniques autistic individuals employ to mask social deficits, which is called 'camouflaging' (Hull et al., 2017). Lack of social prowess and normal social functioning is one of the hallmark traits of autism (Autism Speaks, 2020). The lack of these skills has created a negative stigma for those with autism as they engage in social interactions in unexpected and sometimes socially unacceptable ways. Camouflaging techniques may include concealing ticks, mimicking other socially successful people, or creating scripts on how to act in certain environments (Hull et al., 2017). Though these techniques may create a perceived social competence to the observer, they often come with many negative side effects, such as exhaustion and anxiety, that could significantly increase suicidality in the autistic population (South et al., 2020). Finding ways of decreasing the need for social camouflaging may prove to be an

effective way of both decreasing suicidality and enriching the relationships of the autistic population.

Why the Autistic Population Camouflages

During adolescence, autistic individuals experience an increased desire to have meaningful social interactions, but the attempts are often unsatisfactory, possibly leading to higher levels of loneliness (Deckers et al., 2017). Considering the significant anxieties people with autism feel about socializing, some may find this desire for social connection surprising. However, Warren (n.d.), a positive psychology professor at BYU, describes this desire for social connection a "fundamental human need" (Supportive Relationships Module, A Fundamental Human Need Subsection). He teaches that social connection is rooted in human evolution, since social networks would have been essential to our ancestors' survival throughout history. We might use this idea to argue that those with autism seek social connection on the same fundamental level that typically developed people do. This may explain why those with autism enact camouflaging to appear socially competent in social situations, despite the negative effects (which will be explored in the following section).

In one study, when asked about their motivations for camouflaging, most participants said it was to blend in with normal people (Hull et al., 2017). This suggests that, not only do autistic people think they are abnormal in a negative way, but that those abnormalities must be covered in order to properly socialize and be considered normal. This belief is present in adults with autism that were diagnosed much later in life (Leedham et al., 2019). This finding may indicate that those with autism either camouflage naturally or that they somehow recognize their differences from a young age and perceive that those differences are not welcomed by the social majority. This raises interesting questions as to whether social camouflaging is a natural process for those with autism or if societies' ingrained stigmas towards autistic behavior drives autistic people to try to "act natural." Either way, camouflaging can come with significant emotional and

mental costs that may answer why those with autism suffer from higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality.

The Costs of Camouflaging

Camouflaging for an autistic individual may be so extreme that they may present a completely different personality to those around them than the personality they exhibit privately (Hull et al., 2017). This study also found that getting ready for the day is like putting on a costume, and that the ASD population achieves positive social interactions by copying speech patterns and body language from others. This type of behavior may be considered a type of experiential avoidance. Experiential avoidance is the psychological processes a person may go through to avoid uncomfortable mental situations (Harris, 2006). Autistic individuals may use camouflaging to avoid the possible pain caused by exposing their autistic symptoms to their social circle. Harris (2006) states that experiential avoidance actually exacerbates mental issues, instead of easing them. The same also seems to be true of camouflaging, as those with autism who engage in this practice tend to suffer from extreme mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion, as well as the feeling that they are fakes and liars (Hull et al., 2017). These negative factors could be contributing to the increased rate of suicidality in autistic individuals.

Another possible consequence from camouflaging is the lack of proper medical help women with autism receive, as they tend to be diagnosed at a much older age than their male counterparts (Leedham et al., 2019). Autistic women have gone without appropriate care for longer periods of time because their camouflaging is so effective that health professionals diagnose for only depression and anxiety, not autism. However, even depression and anxiety may go unnoticed because of successful camouflaging. The internalization of these traits and emotions may be the reason why autistic women could be one of the most vulnerable populations to suicidality, as they are least likely to receive proper care (South et al., 2020). This consequence could open up new paths of discussion regarding autism and suicidality, since gender seems to create differences in the expression of autism and its possible negative repercussions. More research would be needed to see how race, socioeconomic status, religion, and other sociological concepts intersect to affect the risk of suicidality in the

autistic population. By researching this, we may be able to find solutions to the problem of high suicidality within autistic individuals.

Potential Helps for High Levels of Suicidality Among the Autistic Population

The high rates of suicidality within the autistic population are drastically different from those who are typically developed; therefore, prevention strategies must be suited to these risks (Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017). Because so little is understood about the relationship between autism and suicidality, and even less is known about possible solutions, finding successful treatments quickly could be problematic. Many suggest that traditional methods of psychotherapy could successfully treat autistic individuals and suicidality, but others believe that these traditional methods based in symptom reduction are much more likely to create clinical disorders (Harris, 2006). However, no current research has fully investigated the effect that positive psychology methods can have on the quality of life for ASD individuals. With this in mind, we will explore the field of positive psychology, its impacts on the typically developed, and how it may aid those with autism.

According to Warren (2020), positive psychology includes the following aspects: purpose, mindfulness, savoring, gratitude, supportive relationships, compassion, personal growth, self-compassion, and physical exercise. Though all these principles have the potential to bring valuable treatments to the autistic population, this paper will only focus on human connection (both to other people in supportive relationships and to our bodies in the form of exercise) and how these principles may be adapted to an autistic individual for maximum possible benefit.

Real Friendships for Those With Autism

Having meaningful relationships is consistently linked with living longer, being healthier, and experiencing greater happiness (Waldinger, 2016). One study encouraged the mothers of autistic children to write letters of gratitude about their child to help relationships flourish between the autistic and the typically developed (Timmons et al., 2017). Mothers who did this were better able to point out the positive personality traits of their child and expressed hope for their

child's future. Gratitude may be a principle that helps typically developed people build better friendships with those who are autistic because the focus remains on the good qualities of the autistic individual instead of the deficits. This practice may allow an autistic child or adult to be freer with their expression of autistic traits as they feel more accepted by the people around them, potentially reducing the need for social camouflaging.

Autistic individuals may also have trouble creating meaningful and lasting relationships because of deficits in communication skills, such as understanding verbal & non-verbal cues (Autism Speaks, 2020). However, this particular explanation fails to recognize the role of a typically developed person in such a relationship, as all relationships require at least two participating members. As previously mentioned, autistic individuals will go to great lengths to camouflage their autistic traits to fit into social situations, suggesting they care greatly about forming normal friendships (Hull, 2017). Perhaps helping the autistic population to create more supportive relationships begins with greater acceptance and understanding from the non-autistic population.

The Undeniable Benefits of Exercise

Research indicates that thirty minutes of exercise a day for five days a week reduces risk of depression, anxiety, fatigue, chronic illness, arthritis, and diabetes, as well as actively reducing any negative symptoms of these diseases already present in an individual (Warren, 2020). We might argue that exercise may also prove successful at treating anxiety and depressive symptoms in autistic individuals, just as it does for the neurotypical population; however, exercises may need to be tailored to each individual. This is because autistic individuals may experience barriers when it comes to incorporating regular exercise into their life. As previously discussed, people with autism may have negative reactivity to certain sensory input (Autism Speaks, 2020). This sensitivity may mean that certain sights, sounds, smells, or touch sensations at gyms, swimming pools, or outside environments may cause distress and make finding a safe environment to exercise difficult for those with autism. Autistic individuals might also engage in repetitive motor movements called stimming (e.g., energetically rocking back and forth) to cope with sensory information (Hull et al., 2017). These repetitive movements may inhibit exercising, and incorporating new exercise habits into an already established routine may cause significant distress in some autistic

individuals. The distress may counteract any positive effect on stress that the exercise is supposed to promote. Since autistic traits are so diverse among the autistic population, individual considerations should be taken into account to see how exercise might benefit an autistic individual.

Another biological effect of exercise is that it produces brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) (Cotman & Bechtold, 2002). BDNF is a protein used for growth in the brain and has been linked to preventing cell degeneration, maintaining cell circuitry, and stimulating neurogenesis or building new brain cells (Warren, 2020). This may be a benefit to autistic individuals because they may have fundamental biological differences in the brain that contribute to their psychological thought processes and behavior (Grandin & Panek, 2014). Stimulating BDNF in the brain through exercise may help autistic individuals cultivate their best brain possible, potentially leading to greater plasticity and better neural connections in areas where those individuals may experience deficits. Though it is very unlikely exercise will stop all difficulties an autistic individual may experience, regular exercise may still have the power to significantly help autistic individuals in many aspects of their lives.

Lastly, Looking for Potential Solutions in the Example of Temple Grandin

Temple Grandin is a well-known autistic author that advocated for proper socialization of autistic children through supportive and loving parents (Grandin & Panek, 2014). Though she was on track to become mute through severe auditory and verbal developmental deficits, Grandin became an independent and socially competent person through the constant support of her mother. This may have significantly helped Grandin's quality of life because poor social skills are linked to anxiety and depression in ASD individuals due to the lack of communicative abilities (Liss et al., 2008). Within Liss et al.'s study, lack of communication skills was diminished with high parental support, where parents consistently taught the child how to communicate their feelings appropriately. This finding also seems to have been successful for Grandin. In these cases, the ability to label emotions may decrease distress, anxiety, and depression because the individuals are able to appropriately communicate a need for help when desired. These communication skills could potentially reduce the cases of undiagnosed depression and anxiety within ASD individuals. As children and adults with autism become more

capable of communicating their symptoms, medical professionals may be less likely to overlook problematic symptoms that lead to higher cases of suicidality.

Despite the assumption that autism is considered a hinderance to financial and career success, Grandin is a famous creator of humane cattle enclosures at farms all over the United States (Grandin & Panek, 2014). She attributes this success to her autistic traits. Grandin's cognitive processes are based in thinking primarily in pictures. By thinking in pictures, she is able to easily and accurately identify visual elements that may be causing stress and fear in cattle and causing issues for cattle farmers. Grandin's self-acceptance is an aspect of positive psychology that could have beneficial effects for other autistic individuals. Acceptance is a crucial part of mindfulness, an aspect of positive psychology that has been tested and correlated to significant reduction of anxiety and depression (Ma et al., 2018). Individuals with autism can increase satisfaction with their lives by practicing self-acceptance and recognizing their unique talents. As a result, autistic individuals can decrease their rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

Conclusion

High numbers of autistic people are suffering from elevated levels of suicidality (South et al., 2020). Not enough is known as to why this happens or how to prevent it (Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017). Current suggested causes are higher levels of depression and anxiety linked to lack of proper diagnoses and communication skills, loneliness through social isolation because of sensory sensitivity, and exhaustion due to camouflaging for social acceptance. Positive psychology may hold the keys to helping the autistic population socially and biologically. Cultivating positive psychology principles may have the potential to change the perspectives of the typically developed public, fostering more acceptance for autism. Encouraging routine exercise could have the power to increase brain functioning, lowering stress and anxiety levels, while also fostering a healthier relationship between the mind and body. The human connection that may alleviate the suffering of the autistic population may not only be a social connection, but also connection to the self. This connection makes room for autism instead of seeing the diagnosis as an obstacle to be removed. Ultimately,

the psychological community has a duty to study and conduct more research on these issues in order to aid a population that is suffering deeply.

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