

Suicidality and Autism

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Disclosure

**I have no actual or potential
conflict of interest in relation to
this presentation**

Learning Objectives

- Review major outcomes from research on suicidality in autism spectrum conditions (ASC) to date
- Identify major risk factors for suicidality in ASC
- Discuss ideas to support autistic people who are at risk for suicidal ideation and attempts

1. Overview of Major Research Findings

Suicide in the General Population

- 2nd leading cause of death in US, ages 10-34 (CDC, 2017)
- 10th cause of death overall in US
- Ideation in adults: 17%
- Attempts: 0.79%
- Most suicides completed by males (3.5 to 1)
- Depression is major risk factor

Suicidality in Autism

- ❑ Leading cause of premature death in autistic people (Hirvikoski et al. 2016)
- ❑ Prevalence of ideation: 72%
- ❑ Prevalence of attempts: 7% -47% across studies (Zahid & Upthegrove, 2017)
- ❑ Most completed by women

Population Study, Taiwan

- 5618 adolescents and young adults with ASD, 4x's matched controls
- 3.9% of ASD group attempted within 3.6 years
- 0.7% of matched controls attempted in 6 years

- Chen et al., 2017

Risk Factors for Suicidality in Autistic Youth

- Being over 10 years old, Black/Hispanic, Low SES, Male
- Depression, behavior problems, teased (Mayes et al., 2013)
- Increased impairment in emotional regulation (Connor et al., 2020)



The increased risk of self-injurious behavior in younger and less cognitively-able children with ASD is matched by an increased risk of suicidality in those at a more advanced developmental level.

-Veenstra-VanderWeele, 2018

Risk Factors for Suicidality in Autistic Adults

- Agitation during a depressive episode, history of suicide attempts, Autistic traits/autism diagnosis (Takara & Kondo (2014))
- Social camouflaging (Cassidy, 2019)
- Depression (Cassidy, 2014)

Autism Traits in Suicidal People

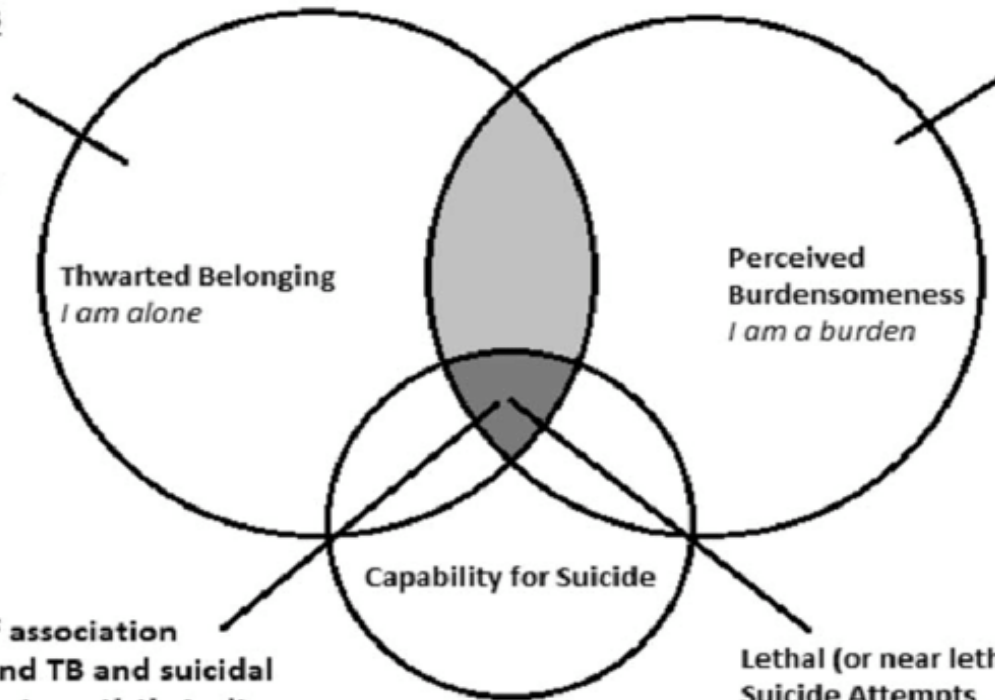
- 40% of adults who have attempted suicide meet cut-off on AQ (Richards et al, 2019)
- Self-reported autistic traits associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Pelton & Cassidy, 2017)

2. Model of Suicidality in Autism

Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide Applied to Autism (Pelton & Cassidy, 2017; based on Van Orden et al., 2010)

Autistic traits predict TB

Increased risk of social isolation, loneliness, difficulties establishing reciprocal relationships.



Autistic traits predict PB

Caregiver burden, unemployment, physical and mental illness, poor self-esteem, agitation.

Weakening of association between PB and TB and suicidal behaviour due to autistic traits.

Lethal (or near lethal) Suicide Attempts

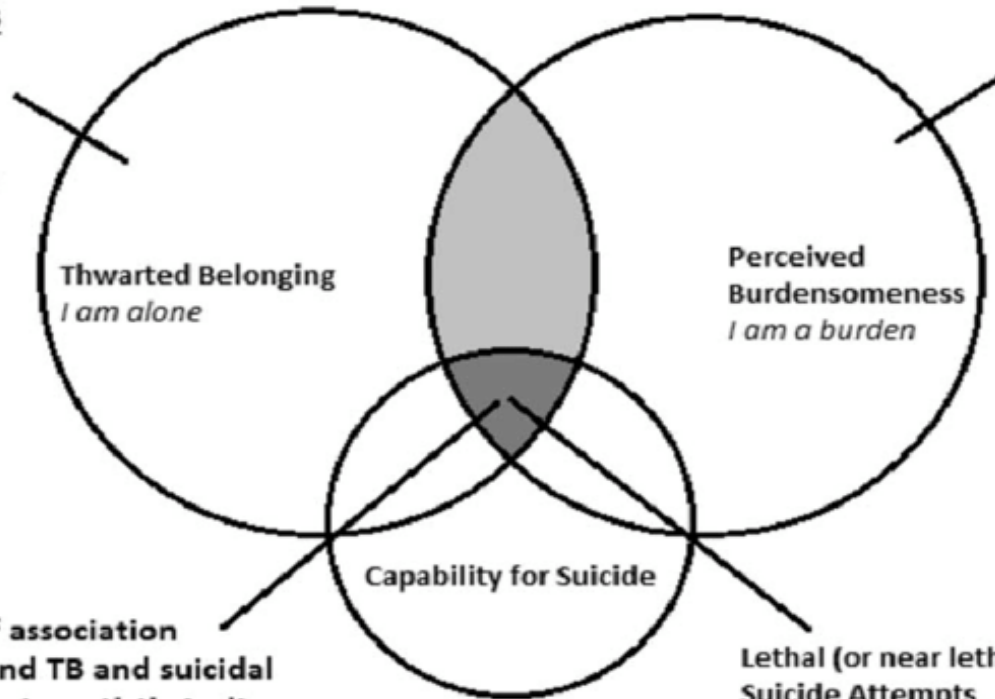
Definitions

- Thwarted belonging: absence of reciprocal social relationships (Pelton & Cassidy, 2017)
- Perceived burdensomeness: perception that one has become a hopeless burden on family and friends (Pelton & Cassidy, 2017)

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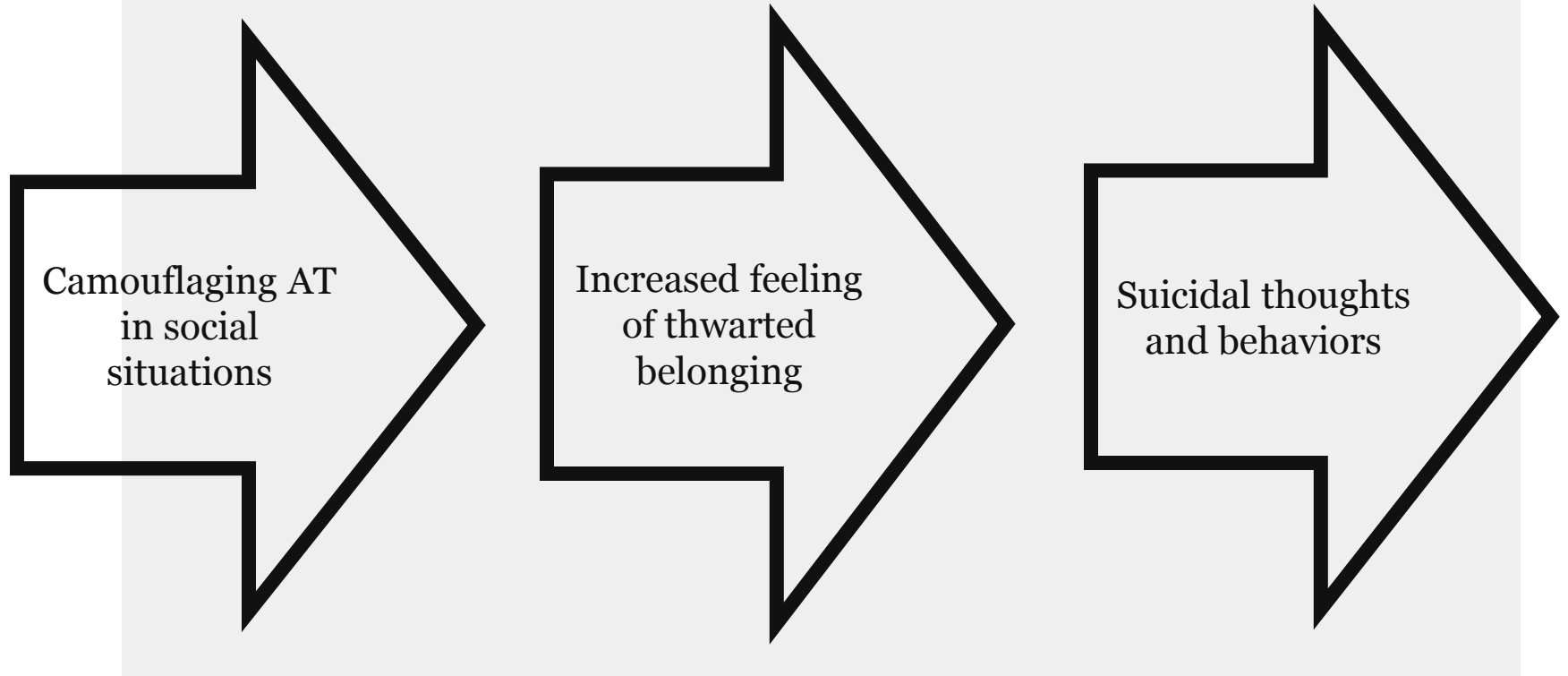
Lethal (or near lethal) Suicide Attempts

Definitions

- Camouflaging: actively attempting to mask and compensate for autistic traits in social situations in attempt to fit in better socially (Cassidy et al, 2019)
- Assimilation: component of camouflaging, taps into feeling that social interactions are not natural/genuine, you need to pretend or put on an act (Hull et al., 2017)

**Harm from
Camouflaging
(Cassidy et al. 2019)**

Harm from Camouflaging (Cassidy et al. 2019)



3. Old and New Approaches to Improve Life for Autistic People (and Protect Against Suicidality)

Current Intervention Approaches

- Most interventions for autism place the onus on the autistic individual to change.
- Treatments seek to make autistic people act or think differently.

- Mandy et al., 2016



A growing body of research consistently showing the negative consequences of camouflaging autistic traits in social situations, demonstrating well-intentioned but potentially damaging consequences of this traditional approach. (Mitchell et al., 2019)

“Double-Empathy Problem”

- Non-autistic people have trouble interpreting behavior, intension of autistic people (Sheppard et al., 2016)
- This can lead non-autistic people to rate autistic people less favorably (Alkhadi et al., 2019)



So future interventions could focus on helping non-autistic people more effectively interact with autistic people. Reducing the emphasis and pressure for autistic people and those with high autistic traits to camouflage their ‘true self’ could even help prevent risk of developing mental health problems, suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

- Cassidy et al., 2019

New Bases for Future Interventions

- Improve the fit between the person and environment by modifying the environment (Mandy, 2016)
- Teach non-autistic people to interact with autistic people more effectively (Cassidy et al., 2019)

Areas to Continue Working

- ❑ Improve coping skills, reduce depressive symptoms
- ❑ Mitigate problems with emotional dysregulation
- ❑ Improve employment outcomes
- ❑ Support social participation, reduce loneliness

Any questions?

Site discussions

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