Autism & Suicide

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Presentation to
National Autism Association Annual Conference
November 14, 2015
Tradewinds Resort, FL
Personal Story
What Is Suicide?

- **Suicidal Behavior Disorder - SBD**
- **Suicide**: death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior.
- **Suicidal Behavior**: any action that could cause a person to die, such as taking a drug overdose or crashing a car on purpose.
- **Suicide Attempt**: a non-fatal self-directed potentially injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior. May or may not result in injury.
- **Suicidal Ideation**: thinking about, considering, or planning for suicide.
The Toll of SBD

- Non-fatal behaviors 25-50 times more prevalent than actual suicide
- 25:1: attempts → deaths (1.1m:39,000)
- Significant distress, disability and mortality
Suicide Mortality

• 10th leading cause of death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of deaths for leading causes of death</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Heart disease: 596,577</td>
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<td>• Cancer: 576,691</td>
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<td>• Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 142,943</td>
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<td>• Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 128,932</td>
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<td>• Accidents (unintentional injuries): 126,438</td>
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<td>• Alzheimer's disease: 84,974</td>
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<td>• Diabetes: 73,831</td>
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<td>• Influenza and Pneumonia: 53,826</td>
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<td>• Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis: 45,591</td>
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<td>• Intentional self-harm (suicide): 39,518</td>
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Source: Deaths: Final Data for 2011, table 10 [PDF - 1.5 MB]
Age & Gender

- Attempts: 3:1 female:male
- Deaths: 4:1 male:female
- Age 15-34: 2\textsuperscript{nd} leading cause of death
Unacknowledged Epidemic

- 2000-2009 suicide rate increased 15%.
- Each suicide costs society $1 million in medical & lost work.
- 10 people emotionally affected per suicide.
- NIMH suicide research budget shrinking since 2011.
- CDC: suicide not among "winnable" priorities like motor vehicle injuries or HIV.

Sources: Rockett 2012; USA Today, Oct 2014; Putting a Face on Suicide
Autism Is a High Risk Group

Medical & Psychiatric Conditions Among Adults with ASD

High Risk Across Subgroups

• Suicidal ideation in Asperger’s is 66% or 9x higher than general population.
  35% had planned or attempted suicide during their lifetime.¹

• ASD teens 28 times more likely to plan or attempt suicide than typical peers.²

• No significant association between suicide risk and intelligence scores or severity of autism.²,³

• Genders more equal than general population.

¹ Cassidy, 2014  ² Mayes, 2013  ³ Baggs, 2006
Contributors to Risk

- Interaction of multiple risk factors
- Distal, mediating, & proximal (precipitating)
- Risk vs protective
- Individual, social, biological
- Why might be higher in ASD and their families
Individual

Cognitive
- Problem solving
- Inflexible thinking
- Changes cause high stress
- Protective: lower executional capability

Mental Health
- Depression, hopelessness
- Anxiety, stress
- Schizophrenia
- Bi-polar
- Aggression, impulsivity
- Conduct disorder
- Substance abuse
- Agitation

Social Connectedness
- Isolation, relationships
- Signal distress
- Poor help seeking
- Self disclosure
- Emotional awareness
- Sense of belongingness

“When communication fails, the risk for suicide arises.” - Gvion Apter 2012
Social

- Family conflict, abuse, neglect
- Chronic stress
- Unemployment, financial crises
- PTSD, trauma, bullying: 63% of ASD children (Kennedy Krieger)
- Thin social networks
- Protective: religion
## Biological

### Drugs
- Trazadone
- Benzodiazepines
- Antidepressants
- Opiates
- Chantix
- Distilled alcohol

### Conditions
- Concussion
- Chronic illness
- Chronic stress
- Chronic sleep disturbance

### Exposures
- Allergy, inflammation, infections (influenza, toxoplasma gondii)
- Gluten, caffeine, vitamin D, lithium
- Pesticides, mercury

### Physiology
- Serotonergic hypofunction
- Tryptophan metabolism/pathway
- Impaired HPA axis
- Synaptic communications, von Economo neurons
- High testosterone, low cholesterol
ASD Families at Risk

- Families members may have risk factors.
- Shared biology and environment.
- Stress, isolation.
- Fewer resources.
- Siblings – age group, a burden on others.
- Murder-suicide exists but is rare.
Suicide Is Preventable
Target Risk Factors!

- Increase self-efficacy & emotional IQ.
- Create a future.
- Foster social networks & social communication.
- Stop bullying.
- Listen/watch for distress.
- Healthy lifestyle – sleep, exercise, diet, exposures, mindfulness, medication side effects.
- Include mental health professional.
  - College counselors, Active Minds
  - Behavioral-psychology partnership
- Get family respite.
## Signs of a Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in behavior</th>
<th>May self harm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawing from friends</td>
<td>Feeling like a burden, not belonging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exaggerated responses</td>
<td>Life stressors – divorce or break up, family turmoil, fired or demoted from job, financial distress, family or friend death (esp by suicide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about death or no longer being alive - “I wish I were dead. I wish I weren't here. I'm going to kill myself.”</td>
<td>Serious illness</td>
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<tr>
<td>History of suicide attempts</td>
<td>Embarrassment or humiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in substance use</td>
<td>Assault, abuse or bullying (cyber-bullying)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of or exaggerated emotions - depressed, irritable</td>
<td>Major life transition – college, retire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gives away things</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk taking behavior</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Purchases weapons</td>
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Crisis Signs in ASD

- May be non-verbal.
- May not describe self as depressed.
- May use unusual language*
  - Man so deeply sad and hopeless described himself as “now darkness.”
  - Woman constantly thought it was time to leave this planet, in search of another galaxy where she would fit in better and find a friend.
- May not reach out to others (a social skill).
- Jump in lake, off buildings, out of cars, choking on objects.
- Self Injurious Behaviors
- Acute panic attacks

*DeWeerdt, Sfari, 2014
Behaviors in Severe ASD

...Some of our suicide attempts are so inept that people don’t realize they’re suicide attempts. Some of my head-banging...was because I thought if I did that long enough I’d die from it. I have taken small amounts of pills honestly thinking they were enough to kill me. I know of an autistic person, who was labeled low-functioning..., who tried to fight taking his migraine meds thinking that maybe the migraines would kill him...

...When an autistic person “wanders off” and dies in traffic or of exposure, or “accidentally” drowns, or any of a number of other unpleasant deaths, how does anyone know this was not deliberate?....

...I don’t think a suicide rate will ever be able to be measured, because most such deaths, like many of our actions, will be ruled accidental, not possibly having anything to do with conscious will or decision. And some of them will be accidental, but some of them will be suicide.  

- Mel Baggs 2006
Actions in a Crisis

**Act Quickly**
- Stay Present

**Talk & Listen**
- Do not interrupt
- Listen openly
- Ask questions, gain specifics, narrate
- Don’t judge: “You won’t do anything crazy will you?” “You’re just being silly.”
- Careful of word choice
- Relief that someone cares, understands.

**Remove Access**
- Firearms, sharp objects
- Poisons, drugs
- Cords, ropes
- Windows, locks

**Get Professional Help**
- Call, go with
- 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- 911
- Crisis center, ER, counseling center
- Physician, autism specialist
- Don't leave. Advocate.
Treatment

- Difficulty expressing emotions and thoughts makes diagnosis and treatment difficult. Still... ...Even severe ASD can be treated!
- Suicidal ideation waxes and wanes over time. Don't stop therapy. Past behavior is best predictor.

- Psychoanalysis
- Cognitive Behavior Therapy
  - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention (CBT SP)
  - Dialectic Behavior Therapy
  - Facing Your Fears (anxiety)
- Non-verbal therapies
  - Music, art, movement
# Training

## QPR
- Question
- Persuade
- Refer
- Lay people

## C-SSRS
- Columbia- Suicide Severity Rating Scale
- Ask questions about thoughts AND behaviors

## Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide
- Teaches how to address teens, talk about suicide, 1 hr

## Assist – Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training
- A 2-day skills class for caregivers of suicidal people

## Safe TALK
- A 3.5 hr program teaching Tell, Ask, Listen & Keep safe
- ID & support suicidal people
Resources & References

- http://www.cdc.gov/injury/overview/data.html
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255 (TALK )
- Julie & Michael Tracy Foundation http://jmtf.org/
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention https://www.afsp.org/
- Oquendo MA, Baca-Garcia E. Suicidal behavior disorder as a diagnostic entity in the DSM-5 classification system: advantages outweigh limitations. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4102277/