

VIEWPOINT

People who need people: Leveraging desire for connection to address suicide in autism

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Substantial evidence shows that autistic adults are at an **elevated risk for suicide**. Being socially connected helps **protect against suicidal thoughts and behaviors** in the general population but has been overlooked as a protective factor for autistic people. This is likely due to the unfortunate misconception that autistic people are uninterested in social interaction — an idea known as the **social motivation theory of autism**.

The social motivation theory lacks empirical support. Recent **findings** from our lab, from a study of 100 autistic adults and 100 non-autistic adults, suggest that autistic adults actually have greater levels of desire and motivation to connect with others than do non-autistic adults. Autistic adults also have a similar number of social connections as non-autistic adults, according to a 2021 **study** of 184 people who self-reported an autism diagnosis. And more than three-quarters of those study participants report feelings of social identification with at least one social group.

In other words, the social motivation theory likely does not apply to most autistic people, let alone all of them. Autistic adults cannot be assumed to have fewer social connections — or less desire to have social connections. Our field must work to dismantle these damaging and inaccurate notions and develop suicide interventions that promote social connection for autistic people. Such connections could protect against suicide among autistic people. There are a variety of existing interventions designed to **improve social connection** that could be adapted for autistic populations.

Reasons other than social motivation could explain why autistic adults sometimes experience a lack of social connection and isolation. They may have the same range of desire to connect with others as their non-autistic peers but display it differently — such that others do not always recognize their attempts. For example, non-autistic people interpret autistic people's diminished

eye contact as a sign of social disinterest, a 2010 **study** suggests.

Also, many autistic people may be highly motivated to connect, yet they often **face social rejection**. According to a 2020 **editorial**, non-autistic people's misconceptions about autistic people's motivations and preferences for social connection are stigmatizing and often lead non-autistic people to overlook the barriers that prevent autistic people from pursuing their desire for social connection. The isolation autistic people face is likely not a result of self-preference but of self-protection, given experiences of bullying, harassment, rejection and even abuse.

Participatory research that builds on the voices and work of autistic adults can help to clarify the factors that affect autistic adults' motivation to socially connect. Such research could also help the field better address their social needs.

By inaccurately assuming that autistic people are less interested in connecting with others, researchers are diverted away from studying social connection as an important measure to prevent suicide among autistic adults. The misdirection is especially unfortunate given that suicide prevention is all the more pressing for this population.

Mounting evidence explains why autistic people may face increased social isolation and rejection even though they wish to remain socially connected and socially inclined. Accordingly, we must continue to deconstruct the misconception that autistic adults lack a desire for social connection. Rather, we ought to leverage their considerable desire for social connection to develop suicide interventions that promote social connection.

*With contributions by **Evan Kleiman**.*

*If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, help is available. Here is a **worldwide directory of resources and hotlines** that you can call for support.*

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