



# Autism & Suicide Prevention

Understanding Risk, Warning Signs, and Autism-Informed Support

*Featuring a panel of experts from the Autism Society of Greater Akron*

 **Wednesday**  
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 **Via Zoom**  
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# Welcome!

Thank you for your leadership and  
commitment to well-being for the Autism community!





# Sensitive Content Warning

This presentation contains a discussion of suicide.  
Some content may be emotionally distressing.

Please prioritize your well-being while engaging with  
this material. You are welcome to pause, step away, or  
log off at any time.

If you find yourself affected by the content, consider  
reaching out to a counselor or other professional  
support resource.



**Disclaimer:**

This presentation is for informational purposes only. We are not licensed clinicians, therapists, or medical providers. The material shared should not be used as a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health crisis or having thoughts of suicide, please seek immediate help by contacting a licensed professional or calling/texting **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.).

# The Autism Community



# Why This Matters

- Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnoses are present in every community
- Risk increases for members of the Autism community when distress is missed or misunderstood

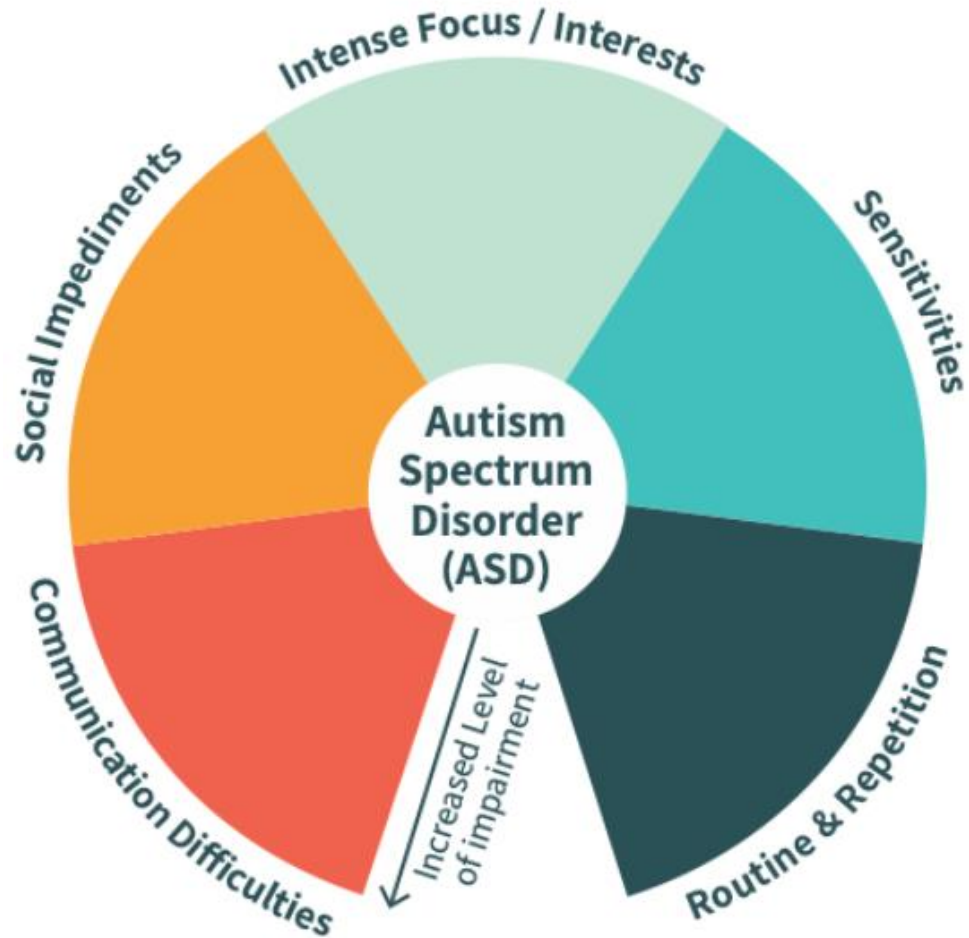




# Understanding Autism

# What is Autism?

Autism is a spectrum — but not a straight line. It's not “more” or “less” autistic.



- Intense Focus / Interests
- Routine & Repetition
- Social Impediments

- Communication Difficulties
- Sensitivities

- Intense Focus / Interests
- Communication Difficulties

If you've met one person with Autism, you've met one person with Autism.



# **What Makes Autistic Distress Unique?**



# Executive Functioning Support

## Recognition

- Missed appointments
- Unanswered messages
- Tasks left incomplete despite expressed concern
- “Stuck” despite wanting change

## Common Misinterpretation

- “They’re not trying.”
- “They don’t care.”
- “If it were serious, they’d reach out.”

Lack of initiation is not lack of distress.

It is often a sign that distress has exceeded capacity.

# Communication Differences

## Recognition

- Information dumping
- Jumping between topics
- Over explaining or under explaining
- Disorganized or non linear speech

## Common Misinterpretation

- “They’re avoiding the real issue.”
- “They’re being manipulative.”
- “They’re not making sense.”

Under stress, Autistic communication often becomes less linear, not clearer and that doesn’t make it less meaningful.

# Emotional Expression Differences

## Recognition

- Very cognitive language
- Flat or neutral tone
- Statements about logic, systems, or efficiency
- Difficulty naming emotions directly

## Common Misinterpretation

- “They’re not that upset.”
- “They’re emotionally disconnected.”
- “There’s no crisis here.”

Autistic people may feel intense emotions without showing them and distress can exist even when someone appears calm.

# Autistic Burnout & Nervous System Overload

## Recognition

- Sudden loss of skills
- Increased shutdowns or meltdowns
- Sensory sensitivity escalates
- Decreased tolerance for demands once manageable

## Common Misinterpretation

- “They’re regressing.”
- “They’re not resilient.”
- “This came out of nowhere.”

Burnout is not sudden, it’s cumulative.

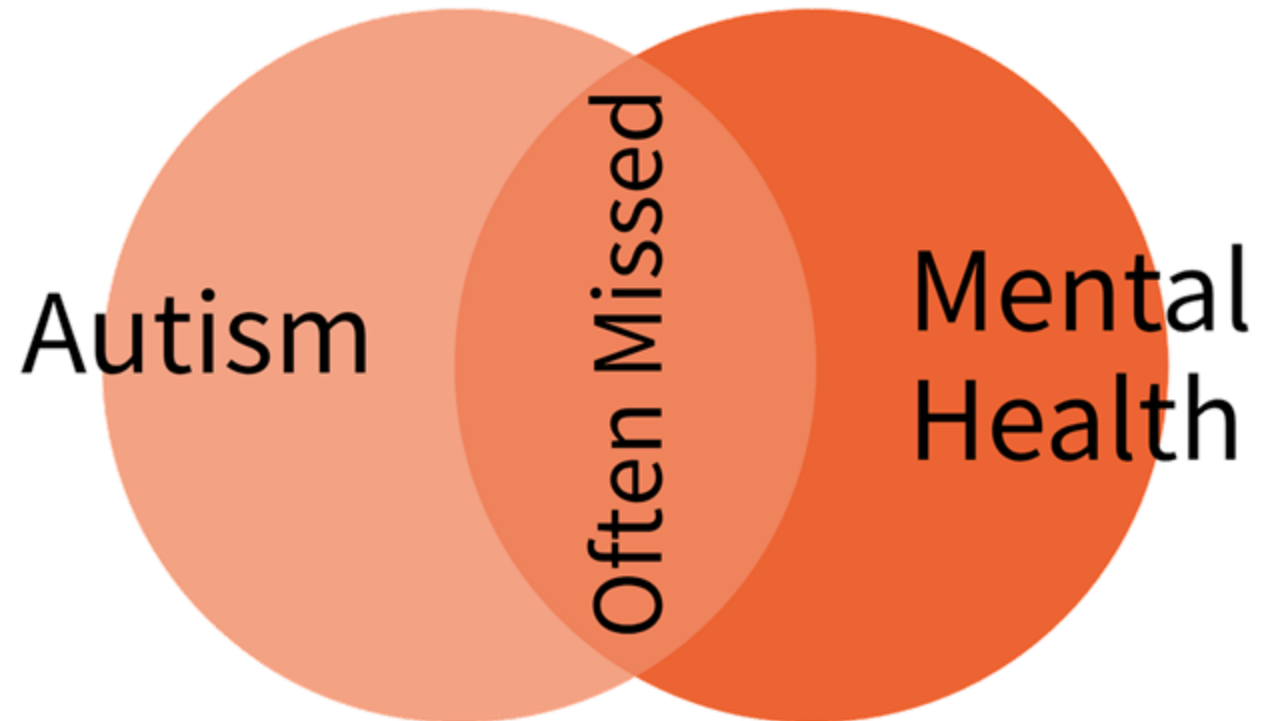
What looks abrupt is often the final stage of long-term unmet needs.



# **Manifestations of Unrecognized or Misinterpreted Autistic Distress**

## Co-Occurring Conditions

- Anxiety, depression, and trauma are common
- Symptoms can be mistaken for “just Autism”



# Masking

- Some Autistic people hide their needs to fit in
- Looking “fine” doesn’t mean feeling okay



# Autistic Women & Girls

- Girls and women are more likely to mask
- Their distress is often minimized or missed



# Bullying

- Autistic youth experience bullying at significantly higher rates than their peers.
- 67% of Autistic individuals experience bullying  
(Daghustani et al., 2025)
- Increases risk for: depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation
- Bullying is often underreported by autistic individuals
- Differences in communication and social expectations increase vulnerability



# Behavioral Expression

- Autistic individuals may express emotional distress through behavior rather than words
- These behaviors are often misinterpreted as misconduct
- When behavior is punished instead of understood, warning signs can be missed



# Access to Autism-Informed Care

- Autistic individuals often face barriers to mental health care:
  - Long waitlists
  - Limited autism-informed providers
  - Inaccessible environments
  - Misinterpretation of autism traits
- These barriers delay prevention and increase suicide risk.
- Consistent access to a trusted, informed provider makes it safer to disclose distress.
- For autistic individuals, trust often develops slowly—frequent provider changes disrupt care and increase risk.



What matters most is noticing patterns early, rather than waiting for a single red flag before Autistic distress becomes crisis.



Warning Signs Toolkit

# Warning Signs

1. Sudden or increased withdrawal
2. No words to communicate acute distress
3. Current traumatic event, reported by self or others
4. Marked increase in rate and/or severity of self harm
5. Worsening in levels of symptoms of anxiety and/or depression
6. A new focus on suicidal talk, ideation, or death related topics that are not a special interest
7. Perseverative suicidal thoughts and ruminations
8. Seeking means or making plans for suicide or suicide rehearsal
9. Statements about no reason for living or no sense of purpose in life
10. Hopelessness



# What Does Support Sound Like?

- Ask clear, direct questions- use fewer words and be straight to the point
- Allow extra time to process thoughts and formulate words
- Help shift the thoughts- ask about any interests or passions
- Avoid using metaphors, social nuances, allegories, or slang
- Speak using logical words- not emotional words
- Explain positive coping skills and how they are helpful
- Help identify effective distractions
- Help identify a list of reasons for living
- Facilitate a safety plan- help make connections to people or resources

# Prevention Starts with Understanding Risk

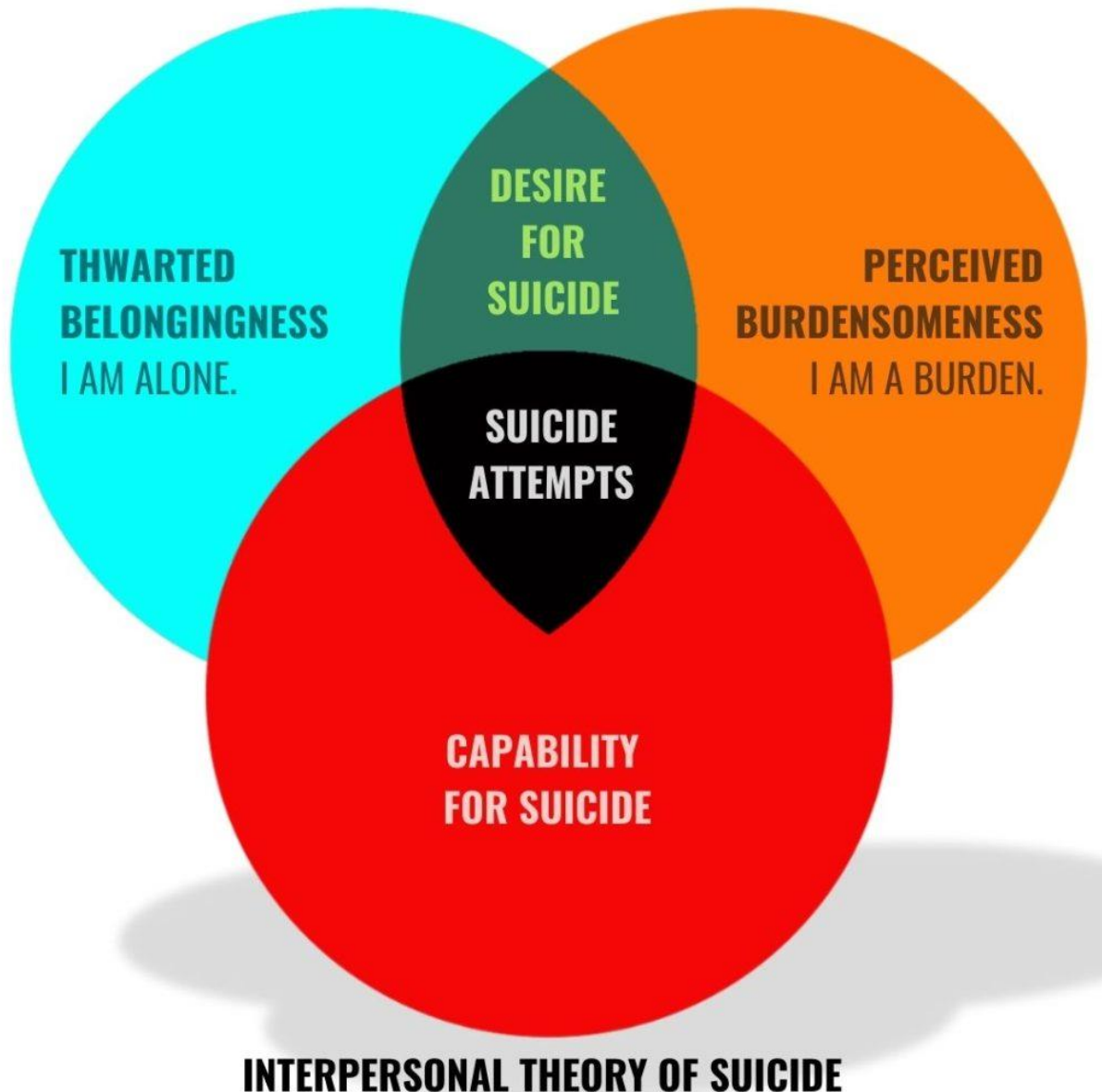
Key drivers of suicide risk:

**Thwarted belongingness**  
(feeling disconnected)

**Perceived burdensomeness**  
(feeling like a burden)

**Acquired capability**  
(reduced fear of death)

**Framework:** Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide  
(Joiner, 2005; Moseley et al., 2022)





# Build Belonging (Core Prevention Strategy)

Social connection is **essential for autistic well-being**  
Loneliness strongly linked to suicidal ideation

## Research Example:

Study of **166 autistic youth**: loneliness significantly predicted suicidal ideation  
(La Buissonnière-Ariza et al., 2022)



## Prevention Actions:

Create inclusive environments  
Foster identity-affirming spaces  
Prioritize meaningful relationships

**YOU WERE**

**madeperfect**

**SHARE YOUR VOICE.**

**CONNECT TO COMMUNITY.**

**BUILD BELONGING.**

# Perceived Burdensomeness

Autistic individuals may feel:

“Others would be better off without me”

Increased risk when facing:

Unemployment

Housing instability



## **Prevention Actions:**

Reinforce value and contribution

Promote strengths-based identity

Support independence with dignity

(Reid et al., 2024)



# The Impact of Bullying & Trauma

Multiple adverse experiences increase suicide risk

## Research Example:

Study of **219 autistic adolescents:**

Multiple types of harassment → higher likelihood of suicidal ideation/attempts  
(Liu et al., 2022)



## Prevention Actions:

Proactively address bullying  
Teach coping and resilience skills  
Ensure safe environments

# Autistic Burnout

Chronic exhaustion from navigating a non-accommodating world

Linked to increased vulnerability to Suicidal Thoughts & Behavior

## **Research Example:**

Analysis of **1,127 online posts:**

Burnout associated with suicidal thoughts and reduced coping ability  
(Mantzalas et al., 2022)



## **Prevention Actions:**

Reduce environmental demands  
Support rest and recovery  
Provide accommodations

# Autistic Fatigue & Burnout

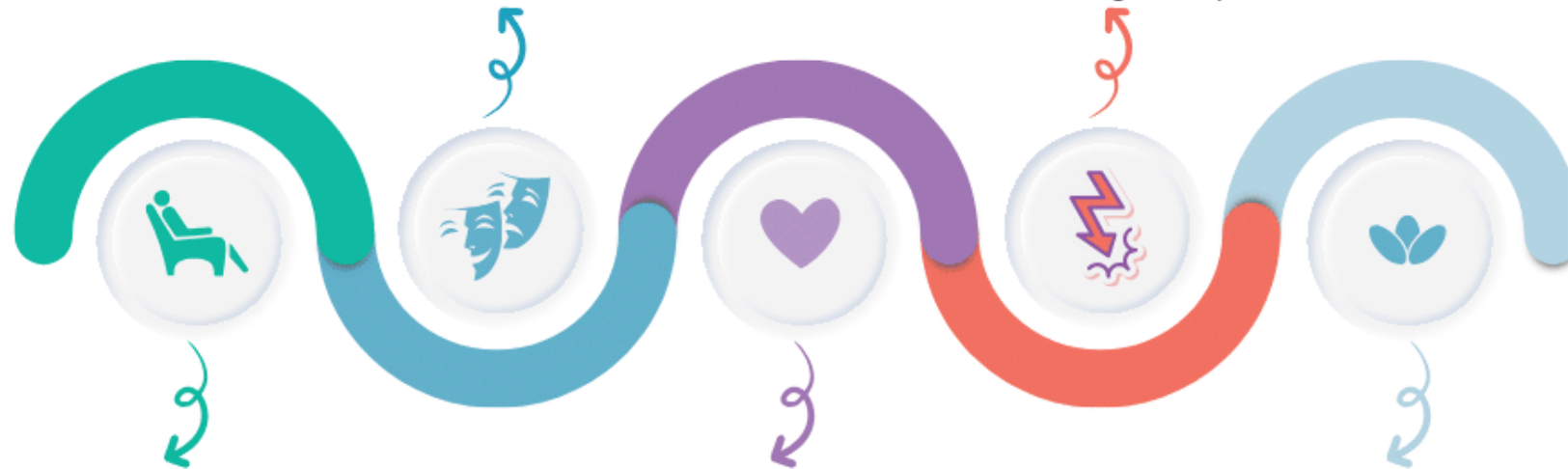
## Coping Strategies

### Unmasking

Allowing yourself to act naturally without worrying about your behaviour is an important step to help recovery.

### Identify Triggers

Identifying patterns can help you understand what your triggers are. This will give you more control over situations and allow you to put strategies in place.



### Rest & Re-charge

Stop and take time to rest to give your body time to recover

### Energy Counting

Plan and organise your activities based on your available energy levels

### Small Changes

- using earplugs to help sensory overload
- practicing meditation
- taking (more) breaks
- finding a quiet place where you can go to recharge when things get a little too much

# Emotion Regulation



Autistic youth are:

**4x more likely** (community sample)  
to experience emotion dysregulation  
(Conner et al., 2021)

## **Prevention Actions:**

Teach emotional awareness skills  
Use structured coping tools  
Model regulation strategies



“Reasons for Living”

# Autism-Adaptive Safety Planning

Evidence-based suicide prevention strategy

## Why it works:

Concrete, structured, step-by-step approach



## Recommended Adaptations:

Visual supports

Clear, literal language

Caregiver collaboration

(Stanley & Brown, 2012; Schwartzman et al., 2021)



# Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions

Depression, anxiety, and other conditions increase suicide risk

## **Research Example:**

Nationwide cohort study:

Psychiatric conditions significantly increased suicide attempts and deaths  
(Kölves et al., 2021)



## **Prevention Actions:**

Early identification and treatment  
Integrated care models  
Ongoing mental health support

# Crisis Response



First Responder Training

## Challenges:

Low use of crisis hotlines (988)

Sensory overload in emergency settings

## Research Insight:

Few studies show autistic individuals accessing crisis services

(Cleary et al., 2022)



## Prevention Actions:

Offer alternative communication methods

Reduce sensory stress

Train responders



# Prevention Across Roles



## **Parents**

- Build belonging at home
- Validate emotions
- Reduce masking pressure



## **Practitioners**

- Use strengths-based approaches
- Incorporate safety planning



## **Friends/Community**

- Offer connection
- Listen without judgment
- Support inclusion

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**Your presence today makes us so grateful for  
leaders like you who prioritize people,  
prevention, & care!**

**Thank you!**

