

Factors, findings, and future research in the correlation of suicide ideation/suicide among
emerging autistic adults

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Introduction

Current trends in research on suicidal ideations (SI) among autistic emerging adults' will be reviewed regarding the risk factors and prevalence of SI in this population of individuals.

What is the correlation between suicidal ideation among emerging adults with autism spectrum disorder? When the early diagnosis of autism is identified, this becomes a key component to the relationship of SI and this group of emerging adults. It also helps to bring about effective strategies of prevention and intervention to meet the needs of those in ASD category. Six scholarly quantitative research articles will be reviewed relative to this correlation.

In reviewing two of the scholarly articles, Zahid and Upthegrove (2017) as well as Moxon-Emre et al. (2022) furnish literary research, connecting the prevalence of suicidal thinking to co-morbidity with autism diagnosis while also bringing to light the biological markers that are associated. The third article, Cassidy et al. (2020) asserts that the SBQ-R and the interpersonal theory of suicide questionnaire must be adjusted specifically for the autism community. In doing so, the autism community will be able to provide a more accurate depiction of the risk factors as it relates to SI. The researchers of the fourth article Kirby, et al. (2019), take a longitudinal study within the state of Utah, while researching control groups of ASD and non-ASD emerging adults over a five-year interval (2019). Their recent discovery was that ASD females had a higher propensity of committing suicide because of differences in gender characteristics. The last two articles, Cassidy, et al. (2021) and Burghardt and Bodansky, (2021), examine why theory-driven research should be utilized and specifically for the future of more effective research in the connection of suicide and the thoughts of suicide among these special needs' young adults. They also express how the SBQ-ASC assessment tool (2021) is one in which future researchers should consider.

Characteristics of autism spectrum disorder

One should consider the characteristics that are indicative of this neurological disorder to better inform the literature review. The criteria of autism in a young adult can include repetitive or challenging behaviors according to (Cassidy, et al., p. 3447, 2020) as well as social communication deficits such as lack of social skills and interests as stated by (Zahid and Upthegrove, p. 237 2017.) Nonetheless, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Edition 5 (DSM-V) more clearly defines features of autism as “Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships...total lack of facial expressions, nonverbal communications...reduced sharing of interests, emotions or affect” (2017, p. 50).

Biological indicators

Regarding prevalence, the biochemistry of the brain was indicated as the researchers assessed the sample studies of both autistic and non-autistic control groups. The biological interactions in the brain of an ASD person apparently are indicative of chemical disruptions or disturbances as proposed by Moxon-emre et al., p. 2, 2022) and was found to be a significant indicator of SI and suicidality in their study. This significance stems from an imbalance involving Glutamate (Glu) excitatory neurotransmission and metabolism as well as N-acetylaspartate (NAA) which can be converted into glutamate and in which both NAA and GLU converge (Moxon-Emre et al., p. 2, 2022). They hypothesized that this neuronal exchange effects ASD young adults with suicidal thinking (SI) more so than those who did not have these thoughts. The researchers who conducted their study selected a small sample group of thirteen participants with suicidal ideation (SI) and fifteen participants who did not have SI. Interestingly, they looked within the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (2022) and measured activity between NAA and GLU. Their results concurred with their hypothesis that this biological exchange is indeed a

factor to consider since those who did not have SI did not have a higher NAA/Glu indicator as their counterpart. “Participants in the SI group had higher NAA/GLU ratio than participants in the SI-group” (Moxon-Emre et al., p. 3, 2022).

Risk factors

Equally important, the researchers asserted other risk factors contributing to the research question. (Zahid & Upthegrove, p. 240, 2017) found that comorbidity, agitation, depression, and history of suicide attempts were among the markers of risk. In their sampling study, 94% of their 2,651 participants had at least one psychiatric comorbidity disorder (2017) but all participants presented with depression. However, in the study of Cassidy, et. al, 2020, thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness were measured with the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS) model and their results confer that emerging ASD adults attempt to hide their awkwardness in social situations, therefore experiencing an increase in thwarted belongingness and suicidality (Cassidy, et. al, p. 3447, 2020). To put it simply, ASD young adults perceive themselves to be a burden and fall to the pressures of blending into the “normal,” social expectations. Interestingly, the researchers of the longitudinal study in the state of Utah (Kirby, et.al, p. 663, 2019) focused on suicide *death* during a twenty-year span and five-year intervals. What they found was an increase of suicide death among females between the years 2013-2017. These researchers share their opinion that ...females may feel the need and can ...cover-up their autism symptoms [which]... are significantly associated with suicidality in ASD” (Kirby, et.al, p. 663, 2019). Their discovery proved to coincide with the previous research of Cassidy, et al. that individuals with ASD tend to “camouflage these in order to fit in social situations, which is associated with increased feelings of thwarted belongingness and suicidality” (Cassidy et al., p. 3447, 2020).

Gap in literature

While the researchers in this literature review expanded on the relationship of suicide and ASD in their findings, there is room for growth for future research. Firstly, there should be an increase towards longitudinal studies in this community of individuals which will help to bring about information that is more accurate and reliable as opposed to short term research with a smaller sample study. For example, Kirby, et al., (2019), conducted a twenty-year study in the state of Utah. It spanned between 1998–2017 and what they found was that there was a gradual increase of suicide ideation and suicide, specifically among females who succumbed to suicide between 2013-2017. Thus, the other literature articles opted to study through pilot, convenience and community samples which are of a smaller population and brief. Moxon-emre, et. al., (2022) confirms their research was limited stating, “the convenience sample reported on here was small (n=28), thus we did not evaluate the potential role of key demographic and clinical characteristics...on our NAA/Glu finding.” (Moxon-emre, et. al., p. 5, 2022). Secondly, while the quantitative study was rich in information and research with its questionnaires and surveys, there could have been more theory-driven research overall. One can see the effort on Cassidy, et al., (2020) as they researched through the model of Interpersonal theory of suicide (ITS) which is a theoretical model, however they themselves remarked that current trends of research are limited, stating, “...research exploring self-harm, suicidal thoughts and behaviors in autism has tended not to be theoretically driven” (Cassidy, et. al., p. 3447, 2020). Thirdly, there are no specifically tailored assessment tools to assess SI/Suicide more accurately among autistic young adults. For instance, Cassidy, et al., (2020) stated that “autistic adults ...reported difficulties interpreting and responding to the SBQ-R (Suicide Behaviors Questionnaire -Revised) items, due

to difficulties with abstract questions, complex language and response options, and lack of items relevant to autistic people's unique experience of suicidality" (Cassidy, et. al., p. 3446, 2020).

Proposed study

The future researcher would propose further study into the correlation of SI/suicide and autistic emerging adults. The key component in this endeavor is to provide prevention strategies that are specifically tailored to this population. Part of the issue is when there is a delay in diagnosis. According to (Cassidy, et al., 2021., p. 2), autistic people who have experienced delay in autism diagnosis until adulthood show the highest estimates of lifetime suicidal thoughts (66%), and suicide attempt (s) (35-36%). This is alarming and a call to aggressive early intervention is required. A preventative could be stronger support systems put into place within pre-school and kindergartens where an early diagnosis can be detected. Nonetheless, future research would entail a greater focus on theory-driven research which can be understood as being much more precise in its method of research. Current and future research as it refers to the topic, can yield results that are marred in nonspecific, vague, and disingenuous results that can hurt the public because of practices that are more novel and explorative as opposed to theory driven. Researchers Burghardt and Bodansky (2021) assert that "...we must drop the innovation requirement for theory-driven and instead require the strongest methods which are marked by high internal and external validity" (Burgardt and Bodansky, p. 1, 2021). The writer would be sure to research the past theoretical underpinnings of the said topic through scientific methods so that there will be greater accuracy in the information found and in which other researchers will be able to replicate.

Secondly, the future researcher will include both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that will target 18 – 25-year-old ASD adults and the general population of the same age group in

quantitative *and* qualitative research. Cross-sectional integration will include non-abstract questions and visuals that the autism community can understand helping them to answer more accurately. Of course, cross-sectional data will be less costly and yield immediate results. Longitudinal studies will be increased with a twenty-year study of both men and women from the ages of 18 – 25. Although longitudinal studies are more expensive, the public will have a better understanding of the developmental transitions that take place during these years and which suicidal ideation/suicide is most prevalent. Lastly, proposed future research will include assessment tools that clearly communicate to the autism community. Cassidy, et al., (2021) confirms this by stating that a key issue in suicidality in autism research is the lack of measurement tools available to assess and compare suicidality and associated risk markers between different groups. These assessment tools will include further refinement of the current SBQ-ASC as well as surveys that include visual components, a larger selection of choices that are simplified and items that will be more relevant relative to the ASD communities' experiences of suicidality.

Conclusion

What is the correlation of the SI/S among ASD emerging adults? One can consider the findings of the researchers in these six articles and understand that ASD young adults have many pressures and biological components which create depression and SI or the unfortunate act of suicide. Most importantly, many individuals have yet to be diagnosed with ASD leading to a late diagnosis in adulthood. By then, these individuals are at greater risk to succumb to the very act of committing suicide and specifically if they are female. Future research must consider how best to assess for early diagnosis which will lead to tailored prevention and intervention of the autism community.

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