

Disability Campaign.org



Image: A self-portrait drawn by Joni Eareckson Tada in the depths of depression after a diving accident left her, then 17, a quadriplegic.

Autism and Suicide

“When at the age of 17, I broke my neck and doctors told me that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, I didn’t want to live. There were nights I would jerk my head back and forth to try to break my neck up higher, hoping to die ... But I had wonderful friends and family who were able to notice the signs of suicide and despair, and they encouraged me to live and hold on to hope. Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death for Americans — and the stigma, financial burden, and prolonged physical and emotional stress of a chronic condition increase the risk of suicide for those with disabilities. But suicide is

preventable; if you’re a friend or relative of a person with a disability or chronic illness, you can make a difference.”

– Joni Eareckson Tada

Suicide is one of the most common causes of death of Americans.

Approximately every 13 minutes, someone in the U.S. dies from suicide — making suicide the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. for people of all ages. Unfortunately, mental health conditions such as depression, manic-depressive disorder, and schizophrenia, as well as disabling or chronic health conditions such as cancer, paralysis, and pain increase the risk that a person will consider and/or attempt suicide. Furthermore, people on the autism spectrum in particular have an even higher risk of suicide.

The link between autism and suicide

- The two leading causes of early death in autism are epilepsy and suicide.
- Adults with autism who do not have a learning disability are **9 TIMES more likely** than the general population **to die from suicide**.
- Approximately **6 out of 10 adults with autism have contemplated suicide**. Studies have found approximately 14% of children with autism experience suicidal thoughts compared to 0.5% of typically developing children.
- The social, cultural, and sensory challenges faced by those with autism can contribute to this risk. Other risks include mental health disorders, issues regarding access to healthcare, increased use of medication, and bullying as well as the pressure to conform.
- Research indicates that 70% of people on the autism spectrum have one mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression, and 40% have at least two mental health disorders, which in part explains the high prevalence of suicide in people with autism.

If you have a friend who has autism, your friend is at high risk for contemplating and committing suicide. It's important you develop a plan if your friend were to consider suicide. Although this may not be something you want to talk or think about, suicide is preventable and as a friend, you can be ready. Below are some ways you can create a suicide prevention plan for your friend.

Image: VerySmartBrothas.com

- 1. Talk with your friend.** If you think your friend is depressed and needs help, approach him with your concerns. Choose a time when he may be available to talk and a space that allows for privacy. Let him know you're available to talk whenever he's ready, maybe over a cup of coffee or on the weekend when he's not stressed with



work; however, if your friend evades you, initiate a dialogue and assess the risk of self-harm. If you suspect your friend is suicidal, directly ask him about suicidal thoughts. Ask the question without dread or expressing negative judgment. You could ask, “Are you having thoughts of suicide?” or “Do you have a plan to kill yourself?”

2. Know the warning signs of suicide.

- Expressing hopelessness
- Feeling trapped, like there is no way out
- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself (pills, guns, knives, etc.)
- Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
- Expressing thoughts of death on social media
- Drawing or journaling dark thoughts

- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Dramatic mood changes
- Withdrawing from friends, family, or activities
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Changes in appetite or sleep

Image: DualDiagnosis.org



3. Listen without judgment and express your care. Tell your friend you want to help and express empathy. Encourage your friend to seek professional help, as thoughts of suicide are often associated with a treatable mental disorder. Remind him that thoughts of suicide are relatively common and that he does not have to act upon those thoughts. Say positive things and highlight his strengths, talents, and significance to others. Allow him to openly express his feelings and reasons for wanting to die, as speaking about this may bring relief.

4. If there is a plan, ask more questions. Inquire when she is planning to commit suicide and what steps she will take to carry out the plan. If she has been using alcohol or drugs, or if she has already made a suicide attempt in the past, she is more at risk.

5. **Do not leave your friend alone.** If you cannot stay with him, arrange for someone else to stay. Do not use guilt or threats to prevent him from committing suicide, but encourage him to contact someone who may have helped in the past. This could be a parent, doctor, therapist, psychologist, or religious leader.

6. **Never agree to keep your friend's suicide plan a secret.** You can respect your friend's right to privacy, but if you need to talk to someone else in order to help your friend or potentially save his or her life, please do so. If possible, involve him or her in your decisions regarding who else knows about the suicidal intentions.

7. **Contact the national suicide crisis hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8225), the closest hospital emergency room, psychiatric hospital walk-in clinic, urgent care center, or call 911.**

Do not try to help your friend on your own, especially if your friend's suicidal behaviors may endanger your life. Save these numbers on your contacts in your phone or make a speed-dial for them in case of an emergency.



Image: Madamenoire.com

8. **Continue to be there for your friend, during and after treatment.**

Even with successful treatment, your friend's risk is still very high given the existing autism. If the thoughts of suicide were brought upon by depression, his chances of falling into depression again increase with each subsequent episode. Furthermore, if alcohol or drugs played a role in his suicide attempt or plans, he will need someone to encourage his sobriety. Remember your presence, empathy, and kind actions are all ways you can continue to help.

For more information on how to prevent suicide visit <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> and <http://www.afsp.org/>.

Bibliography

Giannini, Margaret J. et al. "Understanding suicide and disability through three major disabling conditions: Intellectual disability, spinal cord injury, and multiple sclerosis." *Disability and Health Journal* , Volume 3 , Issue 2 , 74 - 78

"Facts and Figures." American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
<https://www.afsp.org/understanding-suicide/facts-and-figures>

Hirvikoski, T. et al. (2015). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 207(5).

"National Suicide Statistics." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28 Mar. 2016. <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/statistics/>

Personal tragedies, public crisis. (2016). Autistica. <https://www.autistica.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Personal-tragedies-public-crisis.pdf>

Russell, David et al. "Physical Disability and Suicidal Ideation: A Community-Based Study of Risk/Protective Factors for Suicidal Thoughts." *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 39(4) August 2009. The American Association of Suicidology

Simonoff, E. et al. (2008). Psychiatric disorders in children with ASD: prevalence, comorbidity and associated factors in a population-derived sample. *Journal of the American Academy of CaAP*. Vol 47, 8. P.921

Joni and Friends can assume no liability in the recommendation of any product, service or organization, nor does this constitute an endorsement.

© Joni and Friends, 2016

Used by permission of **Joni and Friends**

P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376

www.joniandfriends.org