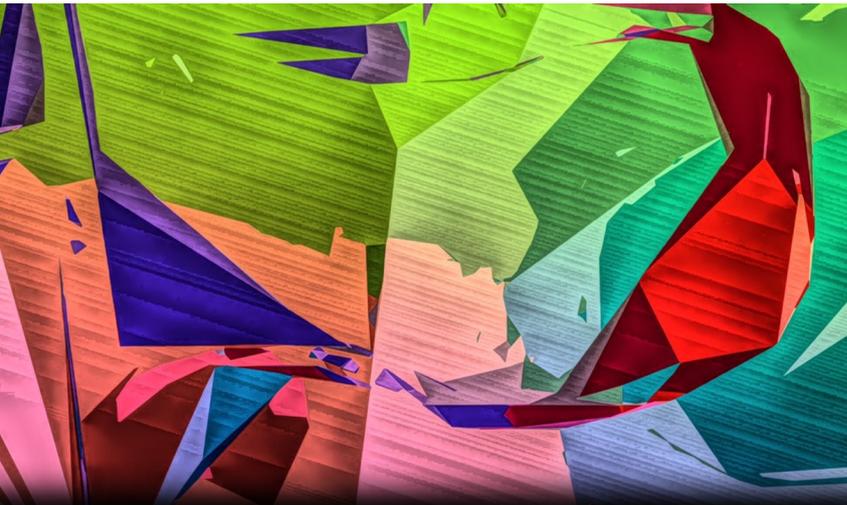


CLAHRC BITE

CLAHRC EoE BITE no 32
January 2019

A bite-sized summary of CLAHRC research: Suicide, autism and autistic traits



**CLAHRC-EoE studies indicate that suicide risk is associated
with autism and elevated levels of autistic traits**

Why?

Research suggests autistic people may be at increased risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts, making suicidal plans/attempts, and dying by suicide. We aimed to explore this important issue further, as a better understanding of the problem may help inform suicide prevention strategies.

What?

Researchers at the Universities of Cambridge and Coventry worked with CLAHRC EoE to examine associations between autism and suicide.

Who?

We worked with Coroners, as well as a steering group of autistic adults with lived experience of mental health conditions, to develop a research programme to examine links between autism and suicide in an effective and sensitive manner.

Background

Our research team previously showed that people receiving an autism diagnosis in adulthood are more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts, and to have made suicidal plans/attempts compared with general population and psychiatric samples (Cassidy et al., 2014). Others have since reported that autistic people are at increased risk of dying by suicide (Hirvikoski et al., 2016; Kirby et al., 2019).

We examined Coroners' records from two UK regions, and found that autistic people were overrepresented in those who had died by suicide. Although the prevalence of characteristics consistent with autism was elevated, most had not received an autism diagnosis. We also used an online questionnaire to measure traits associated with autism that are found throughout the general population. 40.6% of adults who did not report having an autism diagnosis/suspected autism but who had attempted suicide had autistic traits high enough to indicate clinical concern. Autistic traits were higher in adults who had attempted suicide compared to adults from the general population, and higher in those who had attempted suicide more than once compared to those who had made one suicide attempt.

Findings were presented in a keynote speech by Simon Baron-Cohen at the United Nations to mark World Autism Awareness Day, 2017, and discussed at a House of Commons Debate on autism, mental health, and suicide.

Recommendations for practice

More effective risk identification is required. This could include screening autistic adults with mental health difficulties for suicide risk, and screening for autism in adults who report suicidal thoughts/plans/attempts. Further research may better determine the risk and protective factors related to suicide in autistic populations.

References

- Cassidy S, Bradley P, Robinson J, Allison C, McHugh M & Baron-Cohen S. Suicidal ideation and suicide plans or attempts in adults with Asperger's syndrome attending a specialist diagnostic clinic: A clinical cohort study. *The Lancet Psychiatry*. 2014. 1(2), 142–147. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)70248-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)70248-2)
- Hirvikoski T, Mittendorfer-Rutz E, Boman M, Larsson H, Lichtenstein P & Bölte S. Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 2016 208(3), 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192>
- Kirby AV, Bakian AV, Zhang Y, Bilder DA, Keshin BR & Coon H. A 20-year study of suicide death in a statewide autism population. *Autism Research*. 2019. 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2076>

What is NIHR CLAHRC East of England?

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) East of England is a five year programme of applied health and social care research which focuses on the needs of people with complex problems, often vulnerable, when multiple agencies are involved in their care: young people, frail older people, those with dementia, learning disabilities, acquired brain injuries or mental ill health.

The CLAHRC East of England collaboration encompasses some thirty-six organisations, with research hubs in the Universities of Cambridge, Hertfordshire and East Anglia working closely with individuals and organisations involved in the whole care pathway.

Service users and carers are at the heart of what we do, in parallel with an ambitious public health research programme.

Co-production and collaboration at all stages of the research process are fundamental to making a positive impact through applied health research.

For more information:

www.clahrc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/2016/07/suicide-autism-autistic-traits/

Contact: Prof. Simon Baron-Cohen sb205@cam.ac.uk

We are grateful to Jon Adams for contributing this artwork (front page) from 'Democracy Street' project "Wilfred Owen Drive", and his valuable contribution as a mental health champion in this research. Jon is a neurodivergent artist campaigning for parity in the various arenas in which neurodivergent creatives participate through Flow Observatorium.

Disclaimer: The research was funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

CLAHRC EoE is hosted by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust