

Warning Signs of Suicide and Crisis Supports for Autistic People

AUCD WEBINAR SERIES

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Note about Language

- ▶ Identity-first (“autistic person”) vs. person-first (“person with autism”)

AUTISM IN ADULTHOOD
Volume 00, Number 00, 2020
Mary Ann Liebert, Inc.
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Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers

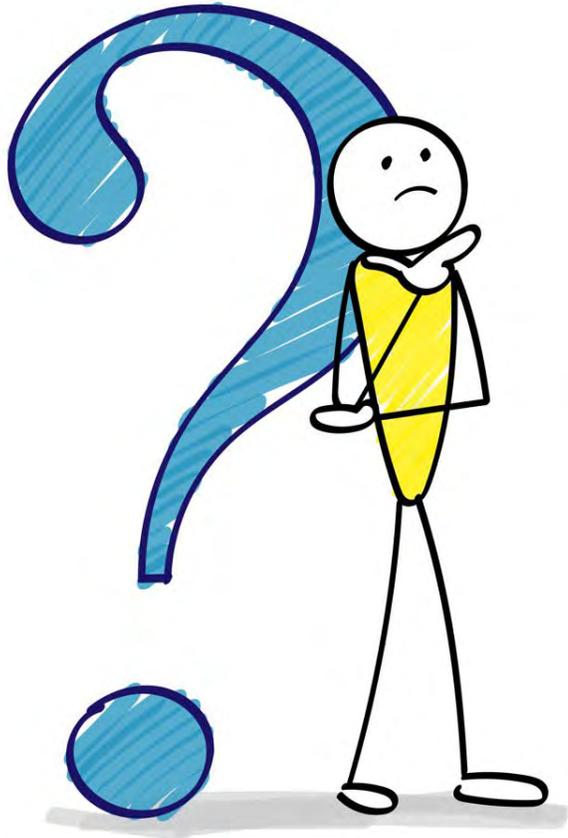
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Note about Content

- ▶ <https://findahelpline.com/i/iasp>
- ▶ Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- ▶ Text HOME to 741741

Overview

- ▶ Autism and suicide: Prevalence and risk factors
- ▶ Warning signs
- ▶ Crisis supports and resources
- ▶ Q&A



Suicide and Autism: What Do We Know?

Autistic Individuals and Suicide

- ▶ Suicide is a leading cause of premature death in autistic people
- ▶ Autistic individuals are significantly more likely to think about, attempt, and die by suicide than the general population

Cassidy et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017; Croen et al., 2015; Hedley & Uljarević, 2018; Hirvikoski et al., 2016; Kirby et al., 2019; Kõlves et al., 2021; Zahid & Upthegrove, 2017

Risk Factors

- ▶ Factors known to increase the risk of suicide in the general population are more common in autistic individuals
 - ▶ Examples: social isolation, abuse, low mood, low self-esteem, alexithymia, rumination
- ▶ We should also consider additional factors, that may be more specific to autistic individuals

Risk Factors

- ▶ Co-occurring psychiatric conditions
- ▶ Lack of social support
- ▶ Unmet support needs
- ▶ Camouflaging or masking
- ▶ Late diagnosis
- ▶ Female
- ▶ Autistic burnout

“Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew”: Defining Autistic Burnout

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Warning Signs

- ▶ Indicate a more immediate risk of suicide (vs. risk factors)
- ▶ Less research in the autism field on warning signs, compared to risk factors
- ▶ Important: autistic distress/crisis may not look like neurotypical distress/crisis!



- ▶ <https://suicidology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Autism-Warning-Signs-3.pdf>

Autism Resource for Warning Signs of Suicide: Considerations for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN

AND BRENNA MADDOX

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
OF SUICIDOLOGY'S AUTISM AND SUICIDE COMMITTEE



Purpose:

Understand	Understand the need for considerations
Recognize	Recognize the differences
Support	Support autistic people as autistic people

Warning Signs of Suicide

- ▶ Increased substance (alcohol or drug) use
- ▶ No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life
- ▶ Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all of the time
- ▶ Feeling trapped – like there's no way out
- ▶ Hopelessness
- ▶ Withdrawal from friends, family and society
- ▶ Rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- ▶ Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- ▶ Dramatic mood changes
- ▶ Giving away prized possessions or seeking long-term care for pets

Please Note:

- ▶ Do not make any important, life-altering decisions based on the information in the following slides. All the warning signs for the general public pertain to autistic people too – with considerations about autism.
- ▶ This information is here to broaden existing knowledge about autistic people.
- ▶ Autistic people know the most about themselves. The job of professionals helping - is to make space for them communicate.

No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

- ▶ These statements could be the reality of an autistic person who feels no sense of cultural and/or social belonging.
 - ▶ **“I don’t belong to this world”**
 - ▶ **“I’ve never fit into this world”**
 - ▶ **“I wish I were anywhere but here”**
 - ▶ **“I wish I could leave here and be in a place I belong, and it’s not on this earth”**

Feeling trapped

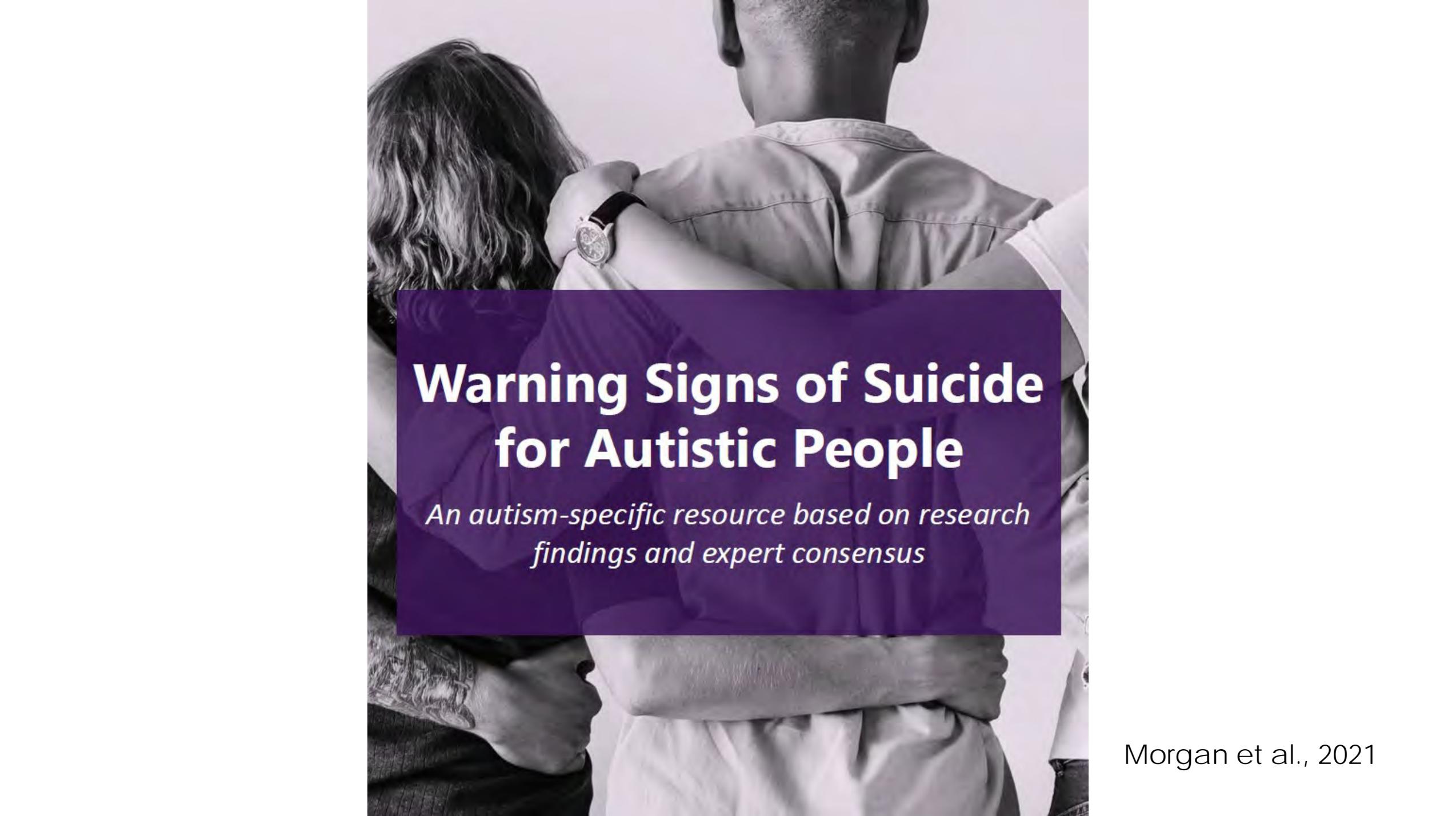
- ▶ Autistic people typically have some cognitive inflexibility, which narrows the options when feeling stuck in a negative thinking pattern or in negative circumstances.
- ▶ A crisis situation may cause a regression of skills in autistic people. Skills such as problem-solving and flexible thinking can deteriorate, diminishing autistic people's ability to regulate their emotions and manage their sensory difficulties.

Withdrawal

- ▶ Withdrawal from friends, family, and society can be a coping mechanism for autistic people. It is needed by many autistic people for self-care in staying regulated and feeling well.
- ▶ Withdrawing can also be a warning sign for autistic people.
- ▶ The best way to differentiate is to find out what the changes are in an individual you are working with. In other words, is the behavior new or typical, and what are the reasons behind the withdrawal?

Other Considerations

- ▶ The thinking process of autistic people is typically very literal.
- ▶ Consider the exact meaning of what you say. Use, concise, specific language.
- ▶ Autistic people will often answer what they are asked in a literal way and may give a response, but not the information you are looking for to help them.



Warning Signs of Suicide for Autistic People

*An autism-specific resource based on research
findings and expert consensus*

Morgan et al., 2021



Lisa Morgan, MEd, CAS



Teal Benevides, PhD, OTR/L



Mary Donahue, PhD



Sarah Cassidy, PhD



Mirabel Pelton, Doctoral student



Brenna Maddox, PhD

Purpose of Resource

- ▶ Designed to enhance discussions about suicide risk with autistic people
- ▶ Not a substitute for professional support or risk assessment
- ▶ Goal of improved understanding about signs of imminent suicidal behavior in autistic people

Structure of Resource

- ▶ 10 warning signs
- ▶ Scenarios or case examples
- ▶ Emerging research findings
- ▶ Additional resources
- ▶ One-page summary

Warning Signs of Suicide for Autistic People

1. Sudden or increased withdrawal
2. No words to communicate acute distress
3. Current traumatic event
4. Marked increase in rate and/or severity of self-harm
5. Worsening of anxiety and/or depression
6. A new focus on 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

Sudden or Increased Withdrawal

- ▶ Lucia routinely withdraws for self-care. Her family and friends understand the need she has for alone time. They know Lucia will be spending time in her room for a while after school, work, and social events, and then will immerse herself in making clay animals. Suddenly, Lucia's family and friends noticed she was spending more and more time in her room. Lucia goes straight to her room when she gets home, only coming out for meals. She continues to participate in her usual activities, although she doesn't want to and takes longer to regulate afterwards. Lucia is no longer interested in making her clay animals and has not replaced that passion with another.

No Words to Communicate Acute Distress (Part 1):

- ▶ Lizzie lives with suicidal ideation, PTSD, autism, and has made at least one suicide attempt to try to stop emotional pain. As a woman diagnosed with autism late in life, she has experienced numerous traumatic experiences. Lizzie can't get away from the triggers that cause her to feel like she's experiencing trauma repeatedly. The triggers come from music, conversations, touch, smells, reading, movies, and her own internal world. Most days Lizzie can work through the triggers by herself, although in a state of high anxiety, tormenting memories and tumultuous emotions leave her exhausted. Lizzie has one person she knows she can go to for support who understands both her internal and external world. She needs to know she's not alone. Yet, when Lizzie goes to reach out for support, she finds she has lost the ability to communicate.

No Words to Communicate Acute Distress (Part 2):

- ▶ The words she wants to say are swirling around so fast in her mind that she can't catch them. It's like they are all inside a tornado churning and turning too fast to access and there's no way to get the words from her thoughts to her mouth to speak or to her fingers to write. When Lizzie needs help the most, she can't reach out for help. She wants to connect, but it's not possible in that moment. She is not withdrawing, although it can look that way to other people. Mostly, she appears calm and in control. Words are important to Lizzie in navigating through life, and when she loses them, it frightens her. Even if nothing else troubling were going on, just losing the ability to communicate is defeating, scary, confusing, and gives her a feeling of helplessness, which triggers her and causes her to feel even more isolated and alone.

Crisis Supports and Resources

Limited Guidance

- ▶ No published studies on suicide interventions for autistic individuals
- ▶ No consensus clinical guidelines
- ▶ Effective strategies must consider beyond the autistic individual
- ▶ “Understanding autism and the culture of autistic people, so autistic people do not have to mask/camouflage their autism, is **suicide prevention**.” ~ Lisa Morgan, 2021

<https://suicidology.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Autism-Crisis-Supports.pdf>

Crisis Supports for the Autism Community

WRITTEN AND DEVELOPED BY LISA MORGAN
IN COLLABORATION WITH AAS'S AUTISM AND
SUICIDE COMMITTEE & COMMON GROUND

Purpose of Toolkit

- ▶ The purpose of the toolkit is to help crisis center workers and other helpers in identifying and supporting autistic callers/texters who are in crisis.
- ▶ The resource also explains the unique differences in communication, thought processes, sensory issues, and misunderstandings a crisis worker or other helper may encounter while assisting an autistic person in crisis.

Identifying an Autistic Person in Crisis

- ▶ Expresses difficulties with sensory issues
- ▶ May present with opposite emotions
- ▶ Difficulty identifying or verbalizing emotions
- ▶ May not know how to cope with or what to do with emotions
- ▶ Expresses difficulty or inability to make friends or sustain relationships
- ▶ May use echolalia - repeating words, sounds, and responses

Supporting callers/ texters

- ▶ Ask direct, clear questions - use fewer words and get straight to the point
- ▶ Allow extra time to process thoughts and formulate words
- ▶ Help shift the thoughts - ask about any special interests

Supporting callers/ texters

- ▶ Avoid using metaphors, social nuances, or slang
- ▶ Speak using words of logic - not emotional words
- ▶ Explain positive coping skills - and how they are helpful

Ending the call/ text

- ▶ Facilitate a safety plan
- ▶ Encourage writing down the plan.
- ▶ Help get connected to local resources
- ▶ Discuss, write down, and possibly practice what to say when contacting local resources for help.

Conclusions

- ▶ Increase awareness that autism is a risk factor for suicidal thoughts and behaviors
- ▶ Remember that autistic distress may not look like neurotypical distress
- ▶ Say what you mean and mean what you say
- ▶ Make use of the growing number of autism-specific crisis resources



AUTISM RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology Releases Autism-specific Web Page for Suicide Prevention and Crisis Intervention

Media Contact:

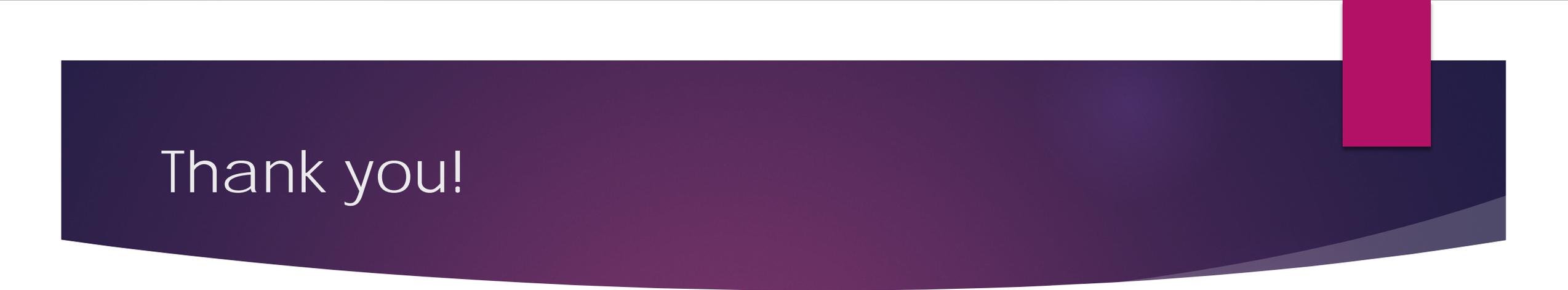
Chris Maxwell

Director of PR and Media

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Washington, D.C. (Feb. 22, 2022): The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) is pleased to announce the release of [resources on its website](#) for autistic people in crisis. In conjunction with the AAS Autism and Suicide Committee, the new page on AAS's website will contain resources, research, and information on how to communicate and support autistic people in crisis. This is the first time a major, national suicide prevention organization has offered resources for autistic people and those who interact with them as a core part of its services.

"AAS has been supportive of the autism community since starting a conversation about autism and suicide in 2017," said Lisa Morgan, AAS Autism and Suicide Committee Co-chair. "AAS has continued their support by providing space for autism-specific resources on their website. The potential impact of this webpage for the autism community goes beyond access to resources and opens doors of understanding and acceptance, which in itself is suicide prevention."



Thank you!

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