



Autism and Suicide

A HIDDEN CRISIS IN THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

Goals for today:

- ▶ Talk about why autistic people need crisis supports
- ▶ Identify unique risk factors of suicide for autistic people.
- ▶ Explain considerations to be taken when using the general warning signs of suicide.
- ▶ Describe how to support an autistic person with suicide ideation or in a suicidal crisis.

Statistics

Suicide is a leading cause of premature death for autistic people

Autistic people are up to 7 times more likely to die by suicide than the general public

Autistic people are up to 6 times more likely to attempt suicide than the general public

Autistic women 13 times more likely than non-autistic women to die by suicide

The risk of dying by suicide is greater for autistic people without an intellectual disability

Unique Risk Factors of Suicide for Autistic People

- ▶ Diagnosis of autism
- ▶ Masking/Camouflaging
- ▶ Number of unmet needs
- ▶ Autism burnout

Diagnosis of Autism

Protective factors for non-autistic people are different for autistic people

- Higher education
- Older age

Some protective factors for non-autistic people are less protective for autistic people

- Marriage/ Co-habiting
- Employment

Masking/ Camouflaging

- ▶ Social strategy to fit in with peers, colleagues, friends, family by masking their autism
- ▶ Safety strategy to alleviate bullying, rejection, and being ostracized
- ▶ Suppression of autistic characteristics and sensory stimulation
- ▶ Cost – exhaustion, lack of sense of self, lack of support, not being known
- ▶ People do not get to know the person for who they are
- ▶ Does help autistic people socialize
- ▶ Autistic people know if they show their true selves – there's a high chance of rejection
- ▶ Hinders relationships – can cause difficulty if autistic people start showing their true selves
- ▶ Leads to profound loneliness of not belonging
- ▶ Internal world very different than external presentation

Number of Unmet Needs

- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Employment
- ▶ Relationships
- ▶ Mental / Physical Health Care
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Social Support
- ▶ Daily Living Skills
- ▶ Transportation

Autism Burnout

- Intense physical, mental, and/or emotional exhaustion
- Accompanied by a loss of skills
- Autistic adults who can live independently are especially affected
- Varies from person to person
- A result from camouflaging/masking
- Have more difficulty managing their emotions than usual
 - Prone to outburst of sadness, anger, anxiety, depression
 - Increased sensitivity to change
 - Can lead to suicide behavior

Warning Signs of Suicide for general public

- ▶ Are different for autistic people
- ▶ Considerations are needed when using warning signs for the general public
- ▶ May cause unintentional harm

Difference

- ▶ They are written based on research with non-autistic people.
- ▶ The differences cause autistic people to either:
 - ❖ Be treated as suicidal when they are not – resulting in:
 - Unintentional harm
 - No meaningful support
 - ❖ Being suicidal and not receiving help or support – resulting in:
 - Being alone during a crisis
 - No meaningful support
- ▶ No meaningful support is a risk factor for autistic people – unmet needs

Considerations

There are aspects of autism to be considered when supporting an autistic person using the warning signs of suicide for the general public.

Considerations need to include stimming, masking/camouflaging, sensory onslaughts, anxiety, sleep issues, and withdrawing.

Professionals must be aware of the communication differences in autism, such as literalness, perseveration, honesty, black and white thinking, speaking concisely and getting straight-to-the-point, using descriptions to express emotions.

May cause unintentional harm

- ▶ Possible hospitalization where autistic people are also greatly misunderstood
- ▶ Traumatic to need help and support from professionals not familiar with autism
- ▶ Receive misguided support and then expected to feel better
- ▶ No voice
- ▶ Reaching out for help results in loneliness and isolation – even with people nearby

WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE (for the general public)

These warning signs of suicide were taken from the American Association of Suicidology website. The list is not comprehensive of all the signs of suicide. AFSP, NIMH, SPRC

- 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

Important Info:

- ▶ The following explanations are considerations to pay attention to when supporting an autistic person for suicidal ideation and / or attempt.

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”**

Anxiety, agitation, sleep issues

- ▶ These symptoms are difficulties autistic people struggle with regularly.
- ▶ **How might one know if they are signs of suicide?**
 - ❑ Use concise, specific language during the assessment or crisis call/text.
 - ❑ Investigate any changes in levels of anxiety, agitation or sleep issues.

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?

Giving away prized possessions or seeking long- term care for pets

- ▶ There are autistic people who have strong emotional connections with one or two possessions and many who are very much connected to their pets, some of whom serve as therapy pets.
- ▶ This behavior warrants further investigation.
- ▶ Closest true warning sign for autistic people – if they existed
- ▶ Remember the person you are helping. Autistic people may have other reasons for giving away prized possessions.

Communication

Literalness

May be extremely literal

Avoid use of figurative language

Emotions

May not understand or be able to identify emotions

Alexithymia

Patterns of speech

Odd pitch or tone

Robotic

Relational

Multiple miscommunications / misunderstandings

May express not being able to make, develop, or keep a friendship

Thought patterns

Echolalia

Ruminating / Perseverating

Literalness

- ▶ The thinking process of autistic people is typically very literal.
- ▶ Consider the exact meaning of what you say.
- ▶ 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.

For example, when non autistic people say they are “in a pickle” it means they’re in a tricky situation. When autistic people think about being “in a pickle” - it could look like this:



Emotions

Difficulty
identifying or
verbalizing
emotions

Alexithymia

May present
with emotions
opposite of
being in a
crisis Ex.
Laughter

May not know
how to cope
with emotions

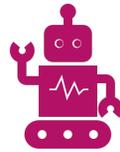
Patterns of speech



High
vocabulary



Talk slowly
and carefully



Robotic



Pedantic

Relational

Shares they have countless misunderstandings and/or miscommunications

Shares inability to make friends and sustain relationships

History of not fitting in with peers

Relational trauma

Thought Patterns

- ▶ Varying processing speed
- ▶ Perseveration / rumination
- ▶ Echolalia





Support

WHAT NOT TO SAY
&
WHAT TO SAY

What not to say...

Everything will be
ok.

You have so
much to be
thankful for.

You just need to
think about good
things.

Have you told
anyone?

There's nothing I
can do for you.

What to say...

I'm glad you
told me.

You matter.

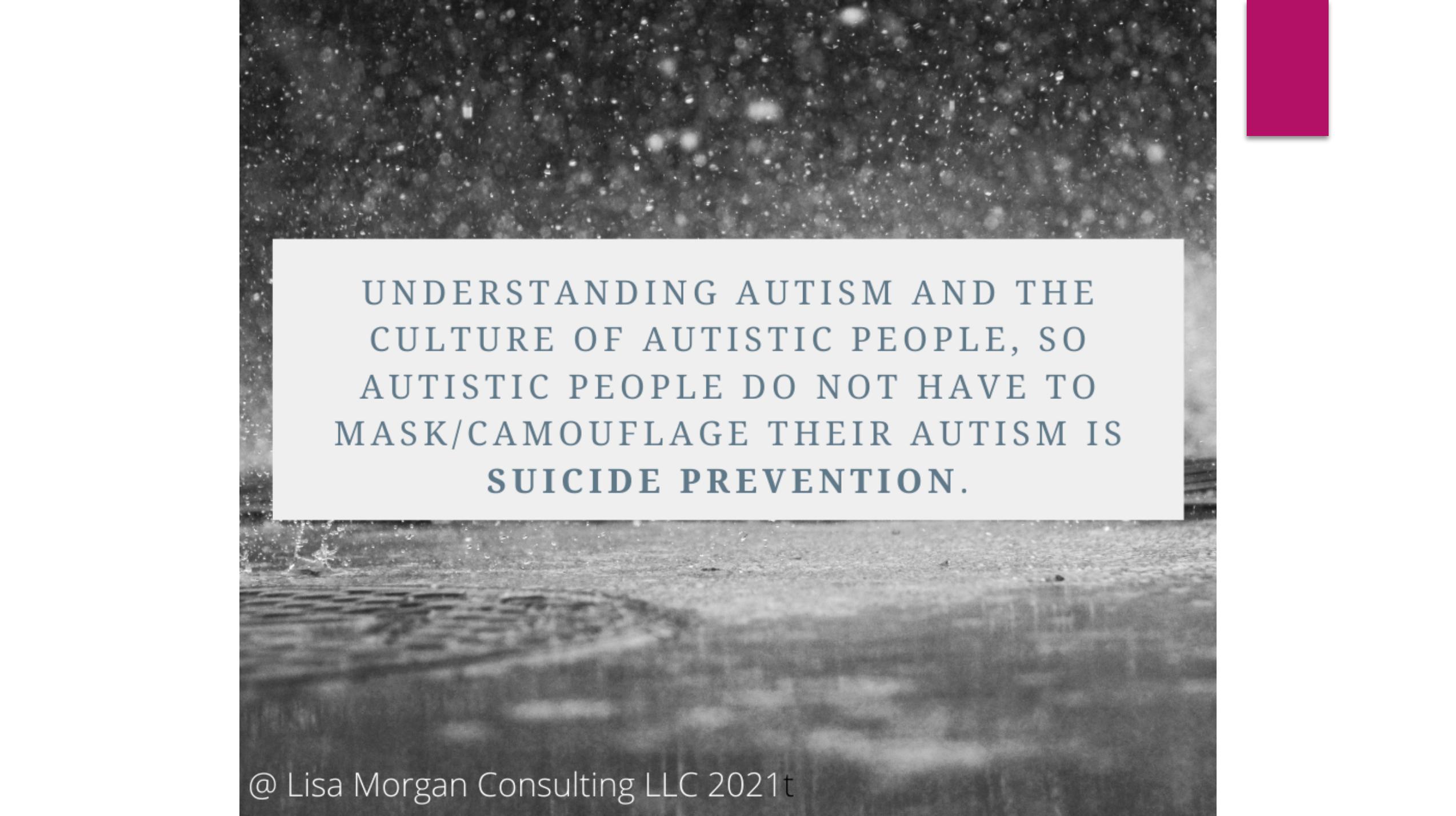
I love and care
about you.

What do you
need?

You can call/text
again if needed.

Supportive Action

- ▶ Ask if they have a safety plan and then use it
 - ▶ A safety plan will have instructions on who to contact
- ▶ If not safety plan – talk about how they can be safe
 - ▶ Example: remove means, find support, call or text crisis line
- ▶ Go through steps on how to find help and support
 - ▶ Writing steps down is helpful
- ▶ Help make those connections
 - ▶ Find the correct numbers to call, go over what to say, what the needs are



UNDERSTANDING AUTISM AND THE
CULTURE OF AUTISTIC PEOPLE, SO
AUTISTIC PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE TO
MASK/CAMOUFLAGE THEIR AUTISM IS
SUICIDE PREVENTION.

Culture of Autism

Based on a belief that autism is a unique way of being and not a disorder to be cured.

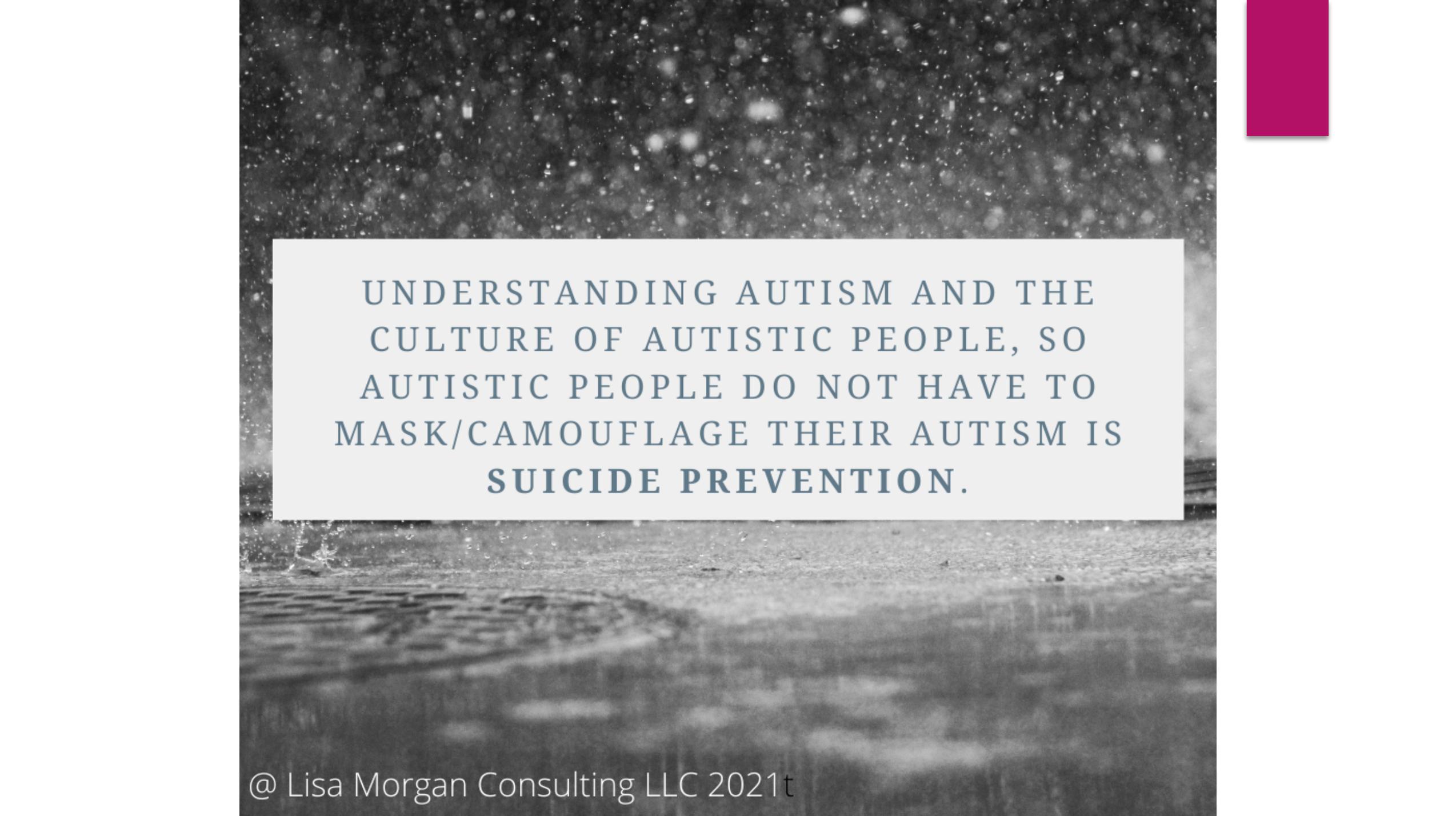
Acceptance of:

- ✓ Stimming
- ✓ Sensory Issues
- ✓ Communication differences
- ✓ The need for time and space to regulate
- ✓ Thinking outside of the box
- ✓ Aversion to change
- ✓ Important passions
- ✓ Many other aspects... withdrawal, anxiety, perseveration, loyalty, honesty, fun!

How to be culturally competent

- ▶ Actively listening
- ▶ Trusting
- ▶ Seeing the person in front of you
- ▶ Clear communication
- ▶ Being inclusive
- ▶ Identifying areas of conflict and resolution





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Crisis Call / Text lines

- ▶ In the US call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255**
- ▶ Or **Text “GO” to 741741** – the 24/7 Suicide Hotline
- ▶ Outside the US – go to www.suicide.org a website containing hotline call numbers for many countries around the world. <http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html>

Resources

- ▶ Autism and Suicide committee of the American Association of Suicidology (AAS).
 - ▶ **Crisis Supports for the Autism Community** – a toolkit
 - ▶ **Autism Resource for Warning Signs of Suicide : Considerations for the autism community**
- ▶ Books:
 - ▶ *Living Through Suicide Loss with an Autism Spectrum Disorder*
 - ▶ *Living with PTSD on the Autism Spectrum*
- ▶ Website:
 - ▶ www.autismcrisissupport.com

References



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Q & A



Thank you!

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