



TEXAS
Health and Human
Services



Suicide Prevention for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities



It is a common misperception that having an intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) protects a person from thinking about suicide or making a suicide attempt. According to the Scientific World Journal, people with intellectual disabilities have thoughts of suicide at a rate similar to the general population without intellectual disabilities. Lancet Psychiatry (2014) reported people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience thoughts of suicide at a rate nine times that of the general population. These findings indicate IDD does not serve as a buffer to thoughts of suicide. Professionals, caregivers and loved ones need to be aware of risk factors associated with thoughts of suicide for individuals with IDD.

General Suicide Risk Factors Associated with People with IDD

A risk factor is a characteristic or condition that increases the chance that a person may think about, attempt, or die by suicide. Although limited, research indicates some risk factors are associated with both the general population and people with IDD:

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| • Family instability | ★ | • Diagnosis of anxiety | ★ | • History of trauma |
| • Overall lack of social support | ★ | • Comorbid physical disability | ★ | • Poor self-esteem |
| • Diagnosis of depression | ★ | | ★ | |
| | ★ | | ★ | |



Suicide Risk Factors Specific to People with IDD

The following risk factors are specific to people with IDD:

- Research in Developmental Disabilities reported thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts are common among people with mild or moderate intellectual disability, but rare in people with severe or profound intellectual disability.
- Camouflaging or masking is a strategy used by people with ASD to hide their differences from peers and family according to research published in Lancet Psychiatry. People with ASD may try to look and act like others by concealing their autistic traits, causing them to lose their sense of self and feel unsupported as a person. Constantly working to hide themselves may lead to a profound sense of loneliness and not belonging.



Warning Signs Associated with People with IDD

Warning signs are indicators that a person may be in acute danger of making a suicide attempt or dying by suicide and needs help urgently. The following are warning signs associated with people with IDD:

- Sudden withdrawal from family or loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- Decreased response to reinforcers
- Change in appetite or refusing to eat
- Current traumatic event
- Persistent crying or sadness or increased agitation or irritability
- Regression in skills of daily living or showing an uncharacteristic inability to learn new skills as expected
- Perseveration or rumination on suicide or talk about death
- Making plans for suicide or seeking means for suicide
- Making statements about having no reasons for living or wishing to not be alive or “not here”
- Hopelessness
- Making negative self-statements such as being a “bad person,” expecting punishment, self-blame, or excessively seeking reassurance of worth



How to Ask a Person with IDD about Suicide

When talking to anyone about suicide, it is important to ask about suicide clearly and directly. This is especially important when talking to a person with an intellectual or developmental disability. Many people with IDD think and communicate concretely and literally. Ask “Are you thinking about suicide?” or “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

Additional Communication Tips

- Use short, clear words and phrases. Avoid multistep instruction.
- Do not talk to the person in a childish manner.
- Use gestures, visual aids, or other adaptive devices if it makes communication more comfortable or accessible for the person.
- Tell the person you are concerned about them and want to help them. Explain they will not be in trouble for sharing their thoughts or feelings with you.

- Be aware that some people with IDD want to please others and provide “the right answer” and in doing so, may deny thoughts of suicide. Engage caregivers and family for more information if it is warranted.
- Allow the person time to think and respond to questions.
- Actively listen, maintain an empathic, non-judgmental attitude, and validate how they are feeling.

When it's a Crisis

Do not leave a person alone if they acknowledge thoughts of suicide. It is important to connect them to help and support. Call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to be connected to a trained person who can help you find resources in your area.

If the person is in imminent danger — if they are trying to harm themselves or have already made a suicide attempt — call 911 for immediate action.

