Creating a Personal Support Network

A Suicide Prevention Resource for Autistic Individuals

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Research has shown autistic people to be at a high risk for suicide and co-occurring mental health conditions. Autistic people have also had great difficulty in finding support through mental health care services. A support network can be beneficial to an autistic person, and even provide assistance in advocating for their needs with mental health care services. This resource provides information and suggestions in building a personal support network for autistic people.

I. **What is a support network?**
    A. People known to a person needing support:
        A. who have agreed to support the person.
        B. who have given their permission to be contacted about suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
        C. who have agreed to give time and energy when they can.
        D. who care about the person they are supporting.
        E. who are working together to support a person challenged by something they can't do alone.

II. **How do you create one?**
    A. Make a list of the people in your life.
    B. Cull the list to people you trust.
    C. Choose people to ask to be part of your network (see section III below).

III. **Making Choices:**
    A. **Choosing support person(s):**
        I. Think about the people in your life.
        B. Who do you trust?
        C. Who understands your way of being?
        D. Who validates your way of being?
        E. Who would be comfortable talking about suicidal ideation / attempts?
        F. Who can act in a sincerely honest way with you?
        G. Who has shown over time they are invested in a relationship with you?

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III. Making Choices:

B. What is a good size for a support network?
1. Support network sizes vary from person to person.
2. The size of the support network is an individual choice based on availability.
3. Consider how many people you want to know about your mental health challenges.
4. Think about how many people you are comfortable keeping in touch with.

C. Support networks with more than one person can protect everyone's:
1. Time
2. Mental health
3. Responsibility (is shared)
4. Access to support (for the person being supported)
5. Ability to say, "No, I can't right now."

D. What if I only have one person?
1. One person can serve as a support network.
2. Make sure to discuss and agree on rules (see section IV. C).
3. Use the resources available on the website: https://www.autismcrisissupport.com/resources.

E. What if I don't have anyone who fits the criteria?
1. There are resources available at the website: https://www.autismcrisissupport.com/resources.
2. Consider using 988 with the 988 resource on hand during the call/ text/ chat.
3. Develop a list of reasons for living using the Reasons for Living resource.
4. Try using distraction strategies

F. What is the goal?
1. Connection - Texting / calling / video
2. Distractions - sensory objects / special interest
3. Reduction of means - can the environment be safer?
4. Coping skills - finding joy, walking, moving big muscles
5. Emergency services - if agreed upon if suicide becomes imminent

G. What if they say "yes"?
1. Congratulations - you have started creating your support network. Keep going!

III. Making Choices:

H. What if they say "no"?

1. Thank them for their honesty and move to the next person on your list. If there's no one else on your list, return to Section II to see if you missed anyone. If you didn't miss anyone, consider using 988 with the 988 resource on hand during the call/ text/ chat (https://www.autismcrisissupport.com/resources).

IV. Rules - what to expect

A. Why are rules necessary?

1. Rules set expectations for both parties.
2. Rules help to respect the time of the people in a support network.
3. Rules set comfortable boundaries.
4. Rules increase the probability of the support network being used.
5. Rules keep everyone in the support network safe.

B. What are the importance of the rules?

1. A support network is a social construct, and social constructs need rules to work effectively.
2. Without rules, a rule-based autistic person can feel more alone than they have ever felt in their lives after putting a support network into place and then not having access to it because it lacks rules.
3. An autistic person may not understand the rules and so will not utilize the support network they have worked hard to put into place.
4. Not being able to access the support network they put into place means they can experience loneliness, unmet needs, misunderstandings, and aloneness to a degree they have not experienced before.
5. Not having rules can put an autistic person into crisis because what they thought worked for everyone else has not worked for them, cementing their thwarted belonging firmly into their core belief about themselves.

C. Examples of rules to discuss with your support person:

1. Shared understanding - the support person may not respond immediately, and that is ok. They could be otherwise engaged and will respond when they can.
2. Accountability - there is no "blame" or "responsibility" if an attempt or death takes place after a person reaches out to someone in their network.

IV. Rules - what to expect

C. Examples of rules to discuss with your support person:

3. Expectations - discuss expectations about goals for support (e.g., people in the support network are there to support, not fix).

4. Call back - discuss the plan for reconnecting if a call is disconnected.

5. Need a break - discuss the possibility of taking a break to regulate for self-care when you are safe to do so. It's important to communicate that you are safe and will contact your support person when you're ready.

6. Follow up - discuss a plan for the support person and autistic individual to check in post-crisis regarding next steps or further support. Part of this debriefing process could include suggesting changes to improve the experience in the future (e.g., adding a new rule, clarifying the goal of the connection).