

CONTACTING 988

A GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS OF AUTISTIC YOUTH

BY

THE AUTISM AND SUICIDE PREVENTION WORKGROUP

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What is 988?

988 is a 3-digit hotline that offers 24/7 call, text, or online chat options with trained crisis counselors for individuals experiencing emotional distress and/or a suicidal, mental health, or substance misuse crisis.

Why a specialized resource?

988 Crisis counselors are trained in suicide prevention, risk assessment, and crisis intervention related to general mental health and substance use issues, though these processes are not specific to working with autistic individuals. This resource aims to help parents and caregivers of autistic youth understand what to expect, and ideas for how to best utilize 988.

Adapted from and inspired by the Autism and Suicide Prevention Workgroup resource:
988 information for the autism community

At a Glance:

How to contact?

You, or your child, may contact 988 by calling, texting, or using online chat – either together or independently.

What to expect and keep in mind

- Wait times to be connected to a crisis counselor are usually short. Depending on how you contact 988 there are some initial questions/response options before the connection. Answering these questions may help the counselor provide better help.
- Crisis counselors do not know your child is autistic unless you or your child tell them.
- You can help your child share how they communicate best (i.e. no metaphors, clear, direct questions)

How can this help?

- In a recent study, callers have shared that 988 interactions have helped with fostering engagement and connection, collaborative problem solving, and safety assessment and management of mental health symptoms.
- If you or your child do not agree with the outcome of the call, or feels misunderstood, you aren't alone.
 - You or your child can end the call at any time.
 - If you call/text 988 again, chances are high that you will reach a different crisis counselor.
 - You can continue to reach out to local resources.

GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS OF AUTISTIC YOUTH

When do you contact 988?

- You can contact 988 when you feel that your child is in crisis, or your child may call or text on their own.
- Caregivers can contact 988 to seek guidance on how to best support their child in navigating any sort of mental health or other crisis concern. You don't have to have confirmation that your child is in crisis, it is enough to suspect.

Who will respond if you or your child contacts 988?

- A crisis center worker who has been trained to provide crisis supports.
- 988 has encouraged and offered trainings to crisis counselors on supporting autistic individuals, however, the level of experience in providing autism specific support may vary.

How do you access 988?

- Call 988
- Text 988
- Online Chat 988 (988lifeline.org/chat)
 - Chat or text is the most common form of contact for individuals under 25.
- Videophone call 988 is available for those who are deaf or hard of hearing

Confidentiality

- Efforts are taken to ensure your child's confidentiality during each crisis interaction.
- Despite this, there are some limits to this confidentiality, for more information: [Confidentiality - 988 Lifeline](#)

Reasons to reach out to 988

Emotional distress - negative emotions that impact your life.

Substance use - legal or illegal substances that are having a negative impact on your life.

Suicidal ideation - thoughts or ideas about wanting to die.

Suicidal intent / plan - a purposeful decision to die by suicide, which may include a definite plan.

Mental health crisis - a situation where an individual's ability to cope is overwhelmed by intense emotional distress. This can lead to a situation where actions, emotions, or thoughts put you or others at risk of harm.

Sensory overwhelm - an intense sensory onslaught that overwhelms your ability to regulate and cope.

Challenging relationship interactions – negative interactions causing distress. Autistic people may have difficulty understanding social cues, non-verbal language, and figurative speech of non-autistic people, and non-autistic people may not understand the literal, blunt honesty, and flat affect of autistic people, resulting in relationship challenges.

***If in doubt:** If you are unsure if you or your child has a crisis need it is fine to call, the service provider may help evaluate your situation and can guide you to other resources if relevant

How might contacting 988 support you and your child?

- Providing suicide risk assessment, safety planning, crisis intervention, connection, and collaborative problem solving.
- Gaining referrals and connection with other resources in the community that could help.
- The goal of crisis center workers is to help, but contacting 988 may not always be helpful for autistic people. One thing to remember is that 988 is not an autism-specific resource, which means that some of the questions or information shared may seem irrelevant.
- The crisis counselor who answers a call is likely to be different each time. Contacting 988 may be helpful one time and then not the next, or vice versa. It depends on the knowledge and experience of the crisis counselor who answers.

What happens when you first contact 988?

- If you or your child calls 988, you will have the option to press 1 for veterans and press 2 to access a Spanish speaking counselor. Then you wait for a crisis counselor to join the call.
- If you or your child texts 988, the initial questions need to be answered in order to be connected with a crisis counselor. There are no right or wrong answers - just do the best you can.
- After answering the initial questions, there is a request to complete a survey while waiting for a crisis counselor. The survey is optional, and you can be connected with a crisis counselor without completing it.
- The purpose of the survey is to know more about you/your child's situation so they can support you better. In order to submit your survey responses, you have to answer questions about your zip code, name/alias, age, gender, and main concerns. Sharing your phone number is optional.

Advice:

- Answer the initial questions impartially, using as little emotional energy as possible.
- Fill out the survey, if you have the energy and feel safe doing so.
- If you or your child chats online with 988, you will be taken to a webpage where there is information about 988 and an optional pre-chat survey to fill out before being connected with a crisis counselor. If you'd like to see what the webpage looks like, go to: 988lifeline.org/chat
 - There are answers to frequently asked questions available to help you understand what will happen during a chat discussion with a crisis counselor. (Scroll down at: 988lifeline.org/chat)

There may be a wait to be connected.

- *Wait times are common.* Remain on the phone or text/message thread and a crisis counselor will join. The majority of calls are answered within 45 seconds.
- There will be music while you wait, and you can turn down the volume if this is off-putting.
 - Wait times may vary and may depend on day and time of the call.
- There can also be wait times during your conversation with the crisis counselor; they may not respond to you immediately.
- *Wait times occur for a variety of reasons, none of which are personal.* Wait times do not mean that your difficulties are not important or that counselors do not want to help you. While waiting, you can try doing something you find fun or calming.

For ideas of distraction tools, coping tools, and reading materials, Welcome to a Safe Space is an option

Sharing about autism:

- Consider sharing your child's autistic identity or encouraging your child to share that they are autistic. This is not required, though may support the crisis counselor in understanding how to better communicate with your child.
 - If your child chooses not to disclose, the crisis counselor will not have another way of knowing they are autistic.

Sharing about communication preferences:

- You can share your child's preferences with the 988 counselor or support your child in sharing what might be helpful to understand about their communication style (e.g., concise and direct language, pace/volume of verbal communication).
- Advocating for your child's communication preferences with a 988 counselor does not guarantee that they will understand and accommodate your requests.
- Encourage your child to ask the counselor to clarify any words or questions they don't understand (e.g., "What does 'feeling blue' mean?").

What happens if risk is identified

- Suicidal thoughts are distressing to experience, but do not always suggest that someone is in significant danger. The 988 counselors will ask your child questions to learn more about their suicidal thoughts and safety in order to best help them and connect them to appropriate services.
- If this discussion leads to concerns for your child's safety, crisis counselors will work with your child to involve you or another trusted adult in the call, to support them in accessing appropriate mental health services and safety planning.
- If it is identified that your child has an intention/plan to act on their thoughts and there are concerns about their safety, a counselor may suggest ways (e.g., going to a local emergency room for evaluation) to keep them safe immediately.

What happens if risk is identified (continued)

- Emergency services may be contacted by crisis counselors only in cases where risk of harm to self or others is imminent or in progress, and when a less invasive plan for the caller/texter's safety cannot be collaborated on with the individual; less than two percent of 988 Lifeline calls involve emergency services.

What happens if you lose contact with 988?

- If you lose power, a crisis counselor may reach back out if contact is lost due to a technical issue and it is obvious the person wanted to continue the conversation. In general, crisis counselors want to be respectful to someone choosing to end a call. If the crisis counselor is concerned about a high risk of suicide, they may reach back out.
- If you suddenly leave the call, text, or chat discussion, it is unlikely that you will be contacted by the crisis counselor. 988 crisis counselors are trained to be cautious about contacting people who disconnect or hang up during the conversation because they recognize the right of the individual to stop communicating with the crisis counselor for a variety of reasons. If the crisis counselor is concerned about a high risk of suicide, they may attempt to re-engage.
- If texting with 988 and you or your child types in “Stop”, you will receive two messages:
 - **First:** “You replied with the word “stop” which blocks all texts sent from this number. Text back “unstop” or “start” to receive messages again.”
 - **Then:** “I will now disconnect our conversation. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to us, we are available 24/7 to support you. Have a nice day.”

How do you end the call, text, or chat?

- You or your child can end the call/text/chat at any point.
- You or your child can say/write:
- “Right now I am going to end the call/text, but if I feel I need this service later, I will call/text back.”

What if the crisis counselor ends the call early?

- This experience may make you feel invalidated.
- You can remind yourself that the crisis counselor is doing a job and it's not personal.
- You can contact 988 again if you want to seek more support.
 - Chances are high that a different crisis counselor will answer the call.

What if the call/text doesn't go as planned? What if it further upsets your child?

- Not every communication with 988 will be helpful for autistic people in crisis. Many autistic people have reported negative experiences with 988. If the contact makes them feel worse, they are not alone.
- If they do not feel better after your communication with 988, try to understand what you or your child were hoping to get from contacting 988. For example, were they hoping to feel connection with another person, get resources, or be distracted?
 - If they want to feel connection with another person, you or your child could try contacting someone else. You can encourage them to call/text a supportive friend or family member or work together to contact local resources.

What if you disagree with the crisis counselor's recommended course of action?

- The 988 crisis counselor may not be identifying risk factors that you as a caregiver are aware of, or may have learned some information that is new to you.
- If you do not agree with the recommendation of the crisis counselor, we would encourage you continue to ask questions and share concerns in collaboration with the crisis counselor, and/or to continue to seek care from a local emergency provider (i.e. hospital, urgent care, mental health provider).

How can you give 988 feedback about your experience?

- If you'd like to give feedback about your experience, go to:
988lifeline.org/contact-the-lifeline/

Resources:

988 lifeline. 988 Lifeline. (n.d.). <https://988lifeline.org/>

Gould MS, Lake AM, Port MS, Kleinman M, Hoyte-Badu AM, Rodriguez CL, Chowdhury SJ, Galfalvy H, Goldstein A. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Now 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline): Evaluation of Crisis Call Outcomes for Suicidal Callers. *Suicide Life Threat Behav.* 2025 Jun;55(3):e70020. doi: 10.1111/sltb.70020. PMID: 40405822; PMCID: PMC12099483.

Safespace.vibrant.org. (n.d.). <https://www.safespace.vibrant.org/en/>