Suicidality in adults with autism spectrum disorder: The role of depression and alexithymia

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Background

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have a higher risk of depression and suicidality than individuals without ASD.

Alexithymia, a personality construct characterized by a lack of emotional awareness, that is highly linked to depression, is also more prevalent among people with ASD than in the general population.

Few studies have so far examined the increased risk of suicidality in people with ASD and none have looked into how alexithymia could be a significant risk factor for suicidality in ASD.

Objectives

The aim of the present study is to explore more closely the relationship between alexithymia, depression, and suicidality in ASD.

Hypotheses:

• There are higher rates of depression, suicidality, and alexithymia in people with ASD compared to neurotypical adults.
• Because the risk of suicidality can be explained by high levels of depression and alexithymia in the general population, this is also expected for the people with ASD.

Participants

Sample Description for Age and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>ASD group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Comparison statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=53</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>N=132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>33.75(11.02)</td>
<td>29.06(9.74)</td>
<td>-3.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>7.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21  31</td>
<td>26  31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31  101</td>
<td>35  102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1  0</td>
<td>1  0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: M = mean, SD = standard deviation

Test for age with z(183) = -3.04, p < .01 and chi-square analysis for gender with χ²(2) = 7.72, p < .05

Measures

• Demographics questionnaire;
• Autistic traits: Autism Spectrum Quotient – short version (AQ-short; Hoekstra et al., 2011);
• Depressive symptomatology: Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression – Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977);
• Suicidality: Suicide Behaviours Questionnaire - Revised (SBQ-R; Osman, Gutierrez, Konick, Kopper, & Barrios, 2001);
• Alexithymia: Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994)

Results

The present results show that individuals with ASD are vulnerable to suicidal ideation and that the severity of autistic traits, depression, and alexithymia are important factors in its occurrence.

Because of the high risk of suicidality in ASD, interventions that take into consideration depression, and particularly alexithymia, could potentially benefit people with ASD.

References

Bagby, R. M., Taylor, G. J., & Parker, J. D. (1994). The severity of autism spectrum disorder traits and depressive symptomatology were significant predictors of suicidality.

Alexithymia played a moderating role in the relation between autistic traits and suicidality.

A significant relation was found between autistic traits and suicidality on participants with high levels of alexithymia [b=1.61, SE=0.31, p<.001], but not on low levels of alexithymia [b=-0.54, SE=.45, p=.24].

Conclusions