“I feel like people do not really understand me...”: A Phenomenological Study of How People with Autism Experience Conversations About Suicidality

Suicidal ideation is highly prevalent among people with autism (34-37%), yet little is known about how conversations are subjectively and embodied experienced within relational contexts. This study explores how autistic adults experience conversations about suicidality with significant others and with healthcare professionals.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 16 autistic individuals receiving care at a Dutch mental health institution. Verbatim transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Four experiential themes emerged based on the interviews: *Needs*, *Experiences with significant others*, *Experiences with healthcare professionals*, and *Stigma and taboo.* Participants described how conversations are often marked by a lack of understanding from significant others, frequently accompanied by feelings of being a burden or having their own distress overshadowed by others’ emotional reactions. At the same time, moments of openness could generate relief, recognition, and a sense of shared presence. In clinical contexts, healthcare professionals could provide structure, safety, and stability. However, protocol-driven responses and fear of consequences could inhibit openness.

These findings suggest that conversations about suicidality are not merely informational exchanges but fragile relational practices. Close attention to communicative differences, affective attunement, and the balance between structure and autonomy is essential for more responsive and person-centred care.