

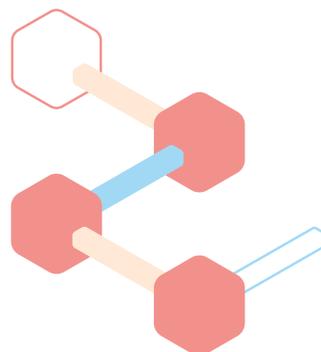
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narrative assessment for suicide risk
fact sheet

OTARC | La Trobe University

Narrative assessment (sometimes referred to as narrative interviewing) is an approach to suicide risk assessment that centres an **individual's own account of their experiences**. This approach differs from using structured screening tools, instruments or checklists to assess for suicidal thoughts and behaviour. While narrative interviewing is increasingly being used in clinical practice, it's efficacy and use with autistic people has not yet been studied.

During a narrative assessment, the healthcare professional typically invites the individual to describe, in their own words, how distress, suicidal thoughts, behaviours, and contextual stressors developed over time. This approach is intended to **prioritise the individual's own account of their experiences**, and their meanings, while allowing risk factors, protective factors, and unmet needs to emerge through conversation as a therapeutic alliance is established.



Narrative Assessment

Is Narrative Assessment Effective?

There is emerging evidence to support the use of narrative-based assessment with adults in the general population. Narrative approaches may reduce the risk of suicide attempts when they are employed as part of a structured, multi-session therapeutic intervention, rather than as a one-off assessment.

The effectiveness of narrative assessment has not yet been systematically evaluated or validated in autistic populations. Importantly, because communication differences are common in autism and may be affected by distress or crisis, we cannot conclude with any certainty whether a narrative assessment will be beneficial, harmful, or simply unreliable at identifying suicide thoughts and behaviour among autistic adults. Because of this uncertainty, narrative assessment should be considered an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, established screening and assessment approaches that have been specifically developed with and for autistic people.

In all instances, however, aiming to stratify or predict suicide risk (e.g., 'high', 'medium', or 'low' risk) with either narrative assessment techniques or the use of standardised tools is not recommended. There is increasing evidence that many risk formulations do not capture autistic people's experiences consistently, and may under- or over-estimate the level of risk an individual is experiencing.

Limitations and Cautions

Narrative assessment techniques rely heavily on the judgement and skills of individual practitioners, which can introduce inconsistency across settings and clinicians. Narrative approaches may:

- Lack clear and explicit language and questions about suicidal thoughts and behaviours that many autistic people find helpful.
- Provide limited guidance about how suicide risk should be interpreted and acted upon.
- Depend on an autistic person's ability or willingness to unmask or disclose in ways that may not feel safe or accessible.

Given these limitations, narrative interviewing should be used cautiously and within a clearly defined clinical framework that supports consistent, safe decision-making and aligns with professional standards and organisational policies.

Using Narrative Assessment in Practice

Healthcare professionals are encouraged to use their professional judgement when determining whether narrative interviewing, structured screening tools, or a combination of both is most appropriate for a given individual and context. Factors to consider include communication preferences, sensory sensitivities, prior experiences with healthcare systems, and current distress levels. Where narrative assessment is used, it should be integrated with:

- Explicit follow-up questions addressing suicidal thoughts and behaviours, including any previous suicide attempts or current plans the individual may have.
- Clear documentation of identified risk and protective factors.
- Established pathways for escalation and support where elevated suicide risk is identified.

Regardless of assessment format, all autistic people should be screened for suicide risk, and a safety plan should be developed where indicated. Narrative assessment does not remove the responsibility to ensure that suicide risk is appropriately identified, documented, and responded to in line with best-practice guidelines and organisational policies.

Using Narrative Assessment in Practice

- Suicide Prevention Australia. Learnlinc: <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/learnlinc>
- Suicide Prevention Australia. Suicide Prevention: A Competency Framework. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/competency-framework/>
- Janssen, W. C., Mérelle, S. Y., Van Ballegooijen, W., Gilissen, R., & Bockting, C. L. (2025). Cognitive Behavior Therapy With and Without Narrative Assessment and Suicide Attempts: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *JAMA Network Open*, 8(11), e2544632. <http://www.doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.44632>

