



Co-designing an Accessible Suicide Prevention Digital Platform for Autistic Adults

14

Autistic Testers (N)

3

Testing Phases

115k+

Platform Engagements

3,000+

Resource Downloads

53

Countries Reached

INTRODUCTION

Traditional crisis and mental health platforms often fall short of meeting the sensory and communication needs of neurodivergent populations. The "Here to Help" project developed an online suicide prevention hub specifically for autistic people, their families and professionals.

Our primary objective: to evaluate the user experience (UX), interface comprehension and navigation pathways using live testing co-designed with autistic people.

METHODS

We conducted a qualitative usability study using a three-stage testing framework: pre-test baseline questions, during-test navigation tasks, and post-test feedback.

Autistic testers engaged with the prototype while observers measured navigation pathways, task completion and user comprehension regarding layout, terminology and visual accessibility.

FINDINGS

Baseline testing indicated that users access content primarily via mobile phones. Post-test feedback confirmed that a dark blue theme was accessible. To prevent sensory overload, the platform was tailored based on user feedback to provide information only: no advertisements, no background music and no moving videos. Accessibility was further enhanced by attaching a toggle to make the interface less vibrant. The platform is enriched with tailored resources: toolkits, easy-read guides and factsheets for autistic individuals, parents/carers and professionals.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that digital suicide prevention spaces must be validated through active user feedback to bypass neurodivergent accessibility bottlenecks.

This poster visually showcases the testing questions, mapping pathways, and subsequent interface transformations, offering a practical blueprint for developers and third-sector practitioners.

Research question

How can we evaluate the user experience, interface comprehension, and navigation pathways of a digital suicide prevention hub through live, co-designed usability testing with autistic adults – and use those findings to build a more accessible, crisis-ready platform?

ACCESSIBILITY WAS FURTHER ENHANCED BY ATTACHING A TOGGLE TO MAKE THE INTERFACE LESS VIBRANT.

BACKGROUND

Autistic adults face a profound and largely unmet mental health crisis. Research shows **1 in 4 autistic people** report a suicide attempt in their lifetime (Hedley & Uljarević, 2018), and 11–66% have experienced suicidal ideation. Yet only 11% of localities provide autism-informed services – leaving individuals and families to navigate crisis without adequate support or adjustment.

Autistic men are **6× more likely** to die by suicide; autistic women **13× more likely**. Masking, late diagnosis and sensory differences mean warning signs are frequently missed. Middlesbrough – the core catchment area – carries the **highest national suicide rate** at 17.4 per 100,000.

Standard digital crisis platforms compound this inequity through sensory-heavy interfaces, ambiguous navigation and neurotypical communication assumptions – creating barriers precisely when frictionless access is most critical.

The **Here to Help project** (SJOG, co-developed with autistic young people, families and carers from 2024) was built to close this gap: a co-designed digital platform combining direct community support, a specialist resource hub and a digital space developed with and for autistic people.

RESULTS & KEY FINDINGS

Baseline: device & access

- 10 of 14 primarily access via phone – mobile-first essential
- Browsing confidence avg 9–10/10; platform friction still significant
- Warning-sign confidence ranged 3–9/10 – confirms need for on-platform education
- Prior support: Google, NAS, Samaritans, NHS intranets – no autistic-specific hub

Sensory & design

- Dark blue validated as accessible and calming
- Orange praised for signposting sections
- White on orange – low contrast (Users 3, 12)
- Navy/white "austere" – brighter colours requested
- Icons preferred over photos; diverse representation requested

Navigation barriers

- Burger menu on desktop – up to 10 minutes to locate sections
- Menu at bottom consistently missed
- "Your Stories" unlocatable for 9 of 14 without help
- Helpline missed on first visit – small font, no prominence
- "Family member" vs "worried about someone" – confusing (6 testers)

Strengths identified

- Toolkits, easy-read guides, employer toolkit: highly valued
- Learning & Events visually distinctive, easy to find
- Concept rated 8–10/10 by 11 of 14 post-changes
- SJOG/NAS partnership lends project credibility
- Content described as comprehensive and accessible

01 PRE-TEST BASELINE

Digital confidence (1–10), device preferences, support-seeking pathways, and confidence identifying autistic warning signs recorded per tester.

02 LIVE NAVIGATION

Four timed tasks: professional/family section; Your Stories; crisis helpline; Learning & Events. Paths and completion times observed.

03 POST-TEST FEEDBACK

Structured reflection on wording, colour, icons, layout; Recommendation scores (1–10). Feedback logged verbatim and thematically analysed.

Participants

A qualitative usability study was conducted with **N=14 autistic testers**, reaching data saturation for identifying interface barriers. Participants included mental health professionals, autism practitioners, family members, and autistic individuals – including a psychiatric care worker, a suicide prevention professional, and an autistic adult with personal experience of suicidal thoughts.

The platform is a great idea but needs to be more user-friendly. Once changes were made, it felt so much more accessible and calming to use.

AUTISTIC ADULT TESTER – PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SUICIDAL THOUGHTS (USER 5)

The front page must have 'are you at immediate risk?' – someone in crisis may not have cognitive capacity to navigate deep menus.

HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL TESTER (USER 3)

There is nothing like this out there. When it's ready I would actively promote it – a 10 out of 10. This will save lives.

SUICIDE PREVENTION PROFESSIONAL (USER 4)

CO-DESIGN IN ACTION: FROM TESTER FEEDBACK TO PLATFORM TRANSFORMATION

BARRIER IDENTIFIED	DIRECT USER FEEDBACK (VERBATIM THEMES)	PLATFORM TRANSFORMATION APPLIED
Crisis helpline not prominent	"Doesn't stand out – not eye-catching. Text too small, not highlighted." (Users 1, 2, 7, 9)	Helpline elevated, bold, high-contrast on every page
Unconventional desktop navigation	"Burger menu – couldn't locate sections, took up to 10 minutes." (Users 6, 7, 8)	Standard top navigation; menu moved from bottom to prominent placement
Overlapping category labels	"Family member and worried about someone – confusing, interchangeable." (Users 1, 2, 4, 6)	Labels redesigned with distinct intent; colour-coded homepage sections
Sensory overload risk	"Too dark and depressing – too many clicks. Needs calming colours." (User 5)	Adverts, music & moving videos removed. Vibrancy toggle added
Contrast and colour issues	"White text on orange – hard to read. Light blue difficult in bright conditions." (Users 3, 12)	Dark blue primary theme validated; contrast reviewed; muted mode added
No immediate crisis pathway	"Front page needs immediate risk option – crisis users lack navigation capacity." (Users 3, 4)	"I need emergency help" on homepage; urgent pathway in one interaction

1 in 4

AUTISTIC PEOPLE REPORT A SUICIDE ATTEMPT IN THEIR LIFETIME

11%

OF LOCALITIES PROVIDE AUTISM-SPECIFIC SUICIDE PREVENTION SERVICES

8-10/10

RECOMMENDATION SCORE FROM 11 OF 14 TESTERS POST-REDESIGN

Conclusion

Co-designing with autistic people is not optional – it is the only method capable of uncovering hidden accessibility barriers that prevent life-saving platforms from reaching those who need them most.

Standard UX approaches would have missed the navigation barriers, sensory overload risks, and label ambiguities that lived experience surfaced. The result is a project platform that is **calmer, clearer, and genuinely crisis-ready**.

The Here to Help project now serves as a **replicable, evidence-based blueprint** for developers, clinicians, commissioners, and third-sector organisations.

THE PLATFORM IS ENRICHED WITH TAILORED RESOURCES: TOOLKITS, EASY-READ GUIDES, AND FACTSHEETS FOR AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS, PARENTS/CARERS, AND PROFESSIONALS.

RESOURCES DELIVERED

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Sensory toolkits • Easy-read guides • Mood support factsheets

FOR FAMILIES & CARERS

Family wellness plans • Sibling support • Crisis signposting

FOR PROFESSIONALS

Autism & Suicidality Fact Sheet • Employer toolkit • Crisis operative guides

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