



Tip Sheet: Supporting Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Seeking Help Through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are a group of conditions that affect a person's cognitive functioning, communication abilities, or social skills and can often impact how they process and express emotions. About **30 million** Americans are impacted by IDD, with many individuals presenting mild impairments that can be difficult to identify (Chen et al., 2017). Common IDD diagnoses include but are not limited to autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. During a crisis, individuals with an IDD may experience challenges in communication and emotional regulation, which can make the crisis more difficult to navigate. It's essential for 988 Lifeline crisis counselors to recognize these challenges and adapt their approach to provide effective support. Every individual with an IDD has unique needs, and their symptoms or behaviors may vary greatly.

Tips for Identifying and Responding to Help-Seekers with IDD on the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Understanding how individuals with IDD communicate and express emotions is the first step in providing effective support.

Flat Affect or Limited Emotional Expression

What it might be: Individuals with IDD may have difficulty expressing emotions verbally or nonverbally due to challenges in emotional regulation or communication skills. This could be misinterpreted as disengagement, disinterest, or lack of urgency (Merrick et al., 2006).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Use open-ended questions and validate their feelings.	<i>"It's okay if you're feeling quiet right now—I'm here to listen when you're ready."</i>



Disorganized Speech or Thought Patterns

What it might be: Individuals with IDD may have difficulty organizing their thoughts, which could result in fragmented or repetitive communication. This might appear as confusion or evasiveness (Steenfeldt-Kristensen et al., 2020) and may impact how the help-seeker engages with a 988 counselor.

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Gently guide the conversation by summarizing or repeating what you heard or read from the help-seeker.	<i>"It sounds like you're trying to tell me [repeat key idea]. Is that right?"</i> <i>"Let's take things step by step. First, can you tell me what's making you upset?"</i>

Delayed Response Times

What it might be: Cognitive processing delays associated with IDD may result in slower responses to questions or prompts. This could be misinterpreted as inattentiveness or noncooperation (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Allow extra time and avoid rushing, even if the 988 interaction is taking longer than average.	<i>"Take your time—I am here and listening."</i> <i>"I'll give you a few moments to think before we move forward."</i>

Repetitive or Echolalic Speech

What it might be: Some individuals with IDD may repeat words, phrases, or questions as a form of self-regulation or to process information. This might be mistaken for avoidance or misunderstanding (Morgan et al., 2018).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Acknowledge the repetition and gently refocus.	<i>"I hear you repeating that, and it's okay. Let's work together to figure out what's next."</i>



Distinctive Voice Tone or Volume

What it might be: Individuals with IDD may have unique speech patterns, such as monotone delivery, high-pitched voice, or fluctuating volume. This could be misinterpreted as insincerity or emotional distress (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Focus on the content of their message rather than the tone. Offer reassurance.	<i>"I hear what you're saying, and I want to make sure I understand how you're feeling."</i>

Difficulty Articulating Words

What it might be: Speech challenges, such as from a co-occurring condition like apraxia or dysarthria, may affect clarity but not the individual's intent (Bradley et al., 2023). This could lead a 988 Lifeline counselor to make inaccurate assumptions about cognitive ability or understanding and substance use/misuse.

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Repeat back what you hear for confirmation.	<i>"I think you said [repeat phrase or sentence]. Did I get that right?"</i>

Difficulty Following Instructions or Questions

What it might be: Challenges in processing complex instructions or questions due to IDD can result in confusion or a lack of immediate response. This might be misinterpreted as resistance or lack of understanding (Bradley et al., 2023).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Break down information, particularly during the safety assessment and safety planning stages, into small, simple steps.	<i>"Let's take this one step at a time. First, can you tell me how you're feeling right now?"</i> <i>"I'll repeat what I heard, and you can tell me if I got it right."</i>



Addressing Suicidal Thoughts in Individuals with IDD

Nontraditional Warning Signs

Individuals with IDD may not always express suicidal thoughts directly. Instead, signs might include the following:

- Avoiding communication or suddenly disengaging from conversations.
- Expressing feelings of being a burden or not belonging (Morgan et al., 2021).
- Increased verbal repetition of distressing topics.

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
Pay attention to verbal cues and patterns rather than relying on emotional tone. In a chat/text context, this may include significant shifts in language style, emphasis, and repetition.	<i>"Are you feeling like you want to hurt yourself?"</i> <i>"I noticed you mentioned feeling like you don't belong. Can you tell me more about that?"</i>

Echolalia or Repetitive Speech on Death or Suicide

What it might be: Some individuals may repeat suicide-related phrases without direct suicidal intent but should still be assessed (Morgan et al., 2021).

<u>Tip for 988 Lifeline Counselors</u>	<u>Sample Language</u>
If repetition occurs, clarify intent.	<i>"I hear you mentioning death a lot. Can you tell me what that means for you?"</i> <i>"Are you saying that because it's on your mind, or are you feeling like you want to die?"</i>

Effective Crisis Communication with Individuals with IDD

1. Clarify your role and approach:

- Introduce yourself clearly and explain your role and the goal of the 988 Lifeline intervention, especially if the individual may have difficulty processing information.
- Be patient and be prepared to introduce yourself multiple times throughout the conversation (Chen et al., 2017).

Example: *"Hi, my name is [state name]. I'm a counselor with the [state crisis line], and I'm here to help you talk through what's going on."*

2. Use literal language:

- Avoid idiomatic expressions, metaphors, or abstract language. Stick to simple, direct language.
- Recognize that individuals with IDD may not fully understand figurative speech (988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 2023).

Example: Instead of *"It sounds like the things you're expressing to people are going in one ear and out the other,"* say, *"It sounds like you feel like people aren't really listening to you."*

3. Provide space for processing:

- Individuals with IDD may require additional time to process information and respond. Wait for them to reply before moving on to the next question.
- It is important to give at least 5–10 seconds of silence to allow them time to gather their thoughts and respond.

4. Engage with direct, simple questions:

- Break complex information into smaller, manageable pieces. Rephrase questions if necessary to gauge understanding.

Example: Instead of *"What's going on right now?"* try, *"Can you tell me what happened before you called?"*

5. Validate emotions, even when unclear:

- Even if the help-seeker struggles to name their feelings, offer them validation.

Example: *"It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed. I understand that it can be hard when things feel like too much."*

6. Offer coping mechanisms:

- Suggest activities that might help them manage overwhelming emotions, like deep breathing or using a stress ball. If possible, offer to guide them through these techniques.

7. Engage with third parties:

- If a caregiver is available, they may provide useful information about the individual's routine and needs.

Resources

- **The Arc:** National and community resources for individuals with IDD.
 - <https://thearc.org/>
- **Project Connect:** A 24-hour support line linking people with IDD to available resources.
 - (888) 847-3209
- **National Center for START Services:** Specific tip sheets and guidance for counselors interacting with individuals with IDD.
 - <https://iod.unh.edu/national-center-start-services>
- **Autism Resource Center:** Toolkits and resources for working with individuals on the autism spectrum, including considerations for recognizing warning signs of suicide.
 - https://www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Autism_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

Key Terms

- **Neurodivergent:** Refers to individuals whose brain development and functioning are atypical. This includes people with conditions such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and intellectual disabilities.
- **Intellectual disability (ID):** A developmental disorder characterized by limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, affecting conceptual, social, and practical life skills.
- **Developmental disability (DD):** A group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas, typically identified before the age of 22.
- **Co-occurring disabilities:** The presence of more than one disability or condition, such as both an intellectual disability and a sensory impairment (e.g., blindness or deafness).
- **Sensory overload:** A condition where an individual's senses (sight, hearing, touch, etc.) are overwhelmed by excessive input, often leading to distress or difficulty in coping.

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