Twitter Thread by Pete Wharmby



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Autism and meltdowns - what are they and how can you help?

A thread. Please read and share widely. As always, based on my own experiences.

#autism #autistic #Meltdown

Autistic people are stressed. *Very* stressed. Take it from me - our existence is generally peppered with moments of calm on a backdrop of continual tension and intense stress. The reasons for this are complex. /2

Our senses are often way too sensitive, meaning we live assaulted by intense sensory input - sound, vision, smell, touch and so forth. This means our base level stress is always much higher than most folks. /3

We are also usually struggling to make sense of social communication in a way neurotypical people don't need to worry about. Often we have to put actual brainwork into every interaction, as nothing seems to come naturally to us. Even with friends or loved ones. /4

So our glass of stress is very frequently filled to the absolute brim, and it doesn't take very much for us to spill over into a kind of 'post-stress' state, and I guess that's what we call meltdown. /5 #autistic

The thing is, I'm pretty sure all humans meltdown if they reach the required stress levels. All humans have that limit that, once reached, leads to a sort of explosion of stress energy. It's just that for neurotypicals this is a relatively rare event. /6 #autistic

Whilst we #autistic folk are pushed (and I want to emphasise that transitive verb) into meltdown frequently as our base stress is so high. Once that threshold is reached, an autistic person will 'meltdown', which can present in several ways. /7 #autistic

Sometimes a meltdown will manifest in very obvious, loud, energetic ways. Shouting, screaming, groaning in some cases (though this is rather stereotypical), flapping our hands, rocking, pacing, lashing out, crying, shaking - any or all of these may be present /8 #autistic

But it really is different for everybody. I, for example, tend to shake a lot and shout, often in frustration and even fear as it can feel very involuntary. If it *is* controllable, I haven't mastered it at all. /9 #autistic

But we can also 'shutdown' which is a more passive form of meltdown, and it seems to be one that can be learned, as it is more 'socially acceptable' than a noisy meltdown snd can be hidden more easily. /10 #autistic

This is where you essentially just stop. Go very quiet, very still, zone out, act vavantly like you've retreated inside your head which, in many ways, you have. You may not respond to anyone, to the point that folks can get frustrated with you (not very helpful). /11 #autistic

Both states are responses to being fundamentally over-stressed, and both are unpleasant to experience for the #autistic person. Active meltdowns are exhausting and often embarrassing, and shutdowns are disorientating and frightening. Both can take days to recover from. /12

So how can non-autistic people help? Well the most obvious way is to help us regulate our stress. Recognise we are perpetually very stressed just by existing, and that this is just how it is, and not a failing of ours. /13 #autistic

Help us reduce any extra stress. Listen if we tell you we're overwhelmed, and act. Remove us from stressors or take stressors away. Don't force us into unnecessary stress. Be empathetic when we're stressed, rather than annoyed and frustrated. /14

Sadly it's often the case that meltdowns are triggered by how *others* react to our stress levels. We pick up on that frustration and annoyance and it can fill us with shame and fear as we know what's inevitably going to happen. /15 #autistic

So try to nip that in the bud. Tell us you are aware of our stress levels and assure us it'll be OK.

If a meltdown happens, then what? /16 #autistic

It's different for everybody but generally, try to give us space. Don't crowd us or push into our space. Allow us to remove ourselves from the stress. Keep an eye on us and move things away so we won't hurt ourselves if necessary. /17 #autistic

Don't push someone in shutdown. Don't demand they talk or force eye contact. Give us things we find comfort in, put some music on, give us space and talk reassuringly but not patronising. Let us work through it and afterwards, be kind. /18 #autistic

Bare in mind we'll have a kind of hangover afterwards, and probably be very tired and sad. This is the time where empathy and compassion are most powerful. Remember that we don't intend to cause upset. /19

I hope that is useful. As always I'm leaving this here as I'm trying to support myself with this writing and advocacy, so thanks for reading.

https://t.co/qonxXX3C91