Twitter Thread by Andy Johns



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This thread is about mental health. A decade ago, I was overwhelmed by panic and depression. On the surface, I seemed fine. Inside, I was a bunch of bandaids. I want to share what I've learned about mental health (from a patient's perspective) in case it helps others. Let's go ■

What makes us unique as a species -- our remarkable memory and tremendous imagination -- is also the root cause of most of life's suffering.

A worm doesn't have a traumatic memory of being stepped on yesterday. It also doesn't anxiously think about if it will get stepped on tomorrow. But we don't have worm brains. We tend to think about the past and the future. A lot. And we suffer because of it.

Consider the military veteran with PTSD that is haunted by memories of war. Or the sexual assault victim that is overwhelmed by fearful thoughts of if the perpetrator will come back in the future. Our memory and our imagination can work against us. It often does.

Put succinctly, thinking in the past is depression. Thinking in the future is anxiety. And thinking in the present is peace. Our aim is to have a present mind as much as possible. With a present mind, we exonerate ourselves from most of life's suffering.

There are a few things that can exacerbate our suffering.

(1) Trauma
(2) Separation from others
(3) Separation from Nature

It's more about how we're living and less about a chemical imbalance, which is an outdated and simplistic understanding of mental health.

Trauma is the main cause. Trauma gets stored in the "feeling" part of the brain, manifesting physically (changes to brain componentry), manifesting cognitively (recurring negative thinking), and manifesting behaviorally (recurring self-destructive patterns).

Reducing trauma-based suffering requires a comprehensive treatment protocol that addresses biology, cognition, and behavior. A combination of multiple treatment modalities is most useful versus any single modality.

Treatment happens in three stages:

(1) Symptom Control
(2) Awareness
(3) Transcendence

There are overlaps in these stages so it's not as clear cut as this. But it's helpful to frame it in this way.

Symptom Control is about getting acute symptoms (e.g. panic attacks or suicidal ideation) under control. With the symptoms reduced, you're more capable of investing in other treatment modalities. For example, it's hard to engage in talk therapy during a panic attack.

Medication can be very useful for acute Symptom Control. I used medication for 4 years so that I could better engage in other forms of treatment. But medication does not address the root cause of trauma, which is essential for a deeper sense of recovery.

Exercise can also temporarily reduce acute Symptoms. In my case, I ran ultra marathons. I needed to run 50 miles a week to burn off panic attacks. But that isn't sustainable. My joints started to reject the volume of running. Again, the root cause must eventually be addressed.

Other treatments for Symptom Control can include consistent sleep, a healthy diet, yoga, companionship, time in Nature, and meditation (or another form of spiritual practice). Your depression is not a glitch in your brain. It's a signal that something in your life must change.

The Awareness stage is about digging into the source of trauma to understand the various ways it is manifested in your biology, cognition, and behaviors. Developing Awareness also acts as a symptom reducer so it builds on top of the other Symptom Control mechanisms.

Awareness can take many forms. Studying medical literature to learn about what's happening to your body and brain. Talking to others and discussing shared experiences. Revisiting prior traumas and understanding how they've influenced your current behaviors. All are beneficial.

Meditation + Psychedelics + Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are the three legs of the Awareness stool. All three work to peel back the layers of the trauma-storing mind to arrive at epiphanies regarding how past trauma has shaped your present condition.

Transcendence is about awakening beyond your history and your life situation to find freedom from suffering. This is when new patterns of behavior become adopted in light of everything you've learned at the Awareness stage, creating a path to your new sense of Self.

It's essential to eventually move on from the Awareness stage b/c one can identify themselves too closely with their trauma, thereby binding their sense of Self to their trauma e.g. "I was assaulted by a parent therefore I'll never be capable of trust in a romantic relationship."

The Transcendence phase can be enhanced with more meditation (or other spiritual practices), psychedelics (when administered appropriately), and the mindful practice of adopting new patterns of behavior that condition self-love versus self-sabotage.

A simple tool one can use daily during the Transcendence phase: when confronted with a life decision, ask the question: "What is the path towards love for myself or love for others?" If you choose the path towards love, you'll remain on the path towards Transcendence.

Altogether, treatment takes time and dedication. It took me 4 years to get through the Symptom Control stage such that I no longer needed medication. I built Awareness over 6-7 years. And, finally, 10 years into my journey, I began the Transcendence phase.

The Transcendence phase will last for the remainder of your life. It's a wonderful pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's worth committing to the work needed to return to a calm, peaceful mind.

To those that are suffering, things can get better when you make changes to how you live.

- Find your tribe. Connect with others.
- Return to nature. Go outside. Get dirty.
- Do purposeful work. Don't be a drone.
- Be active. Eat clean.
- Practice mindfulness. Tame your mind.

I fear that many of you are quietly living painfully inside, hiding the pain by burying yourself in the pursuit of achievement, which is the only socially acceptable addiction, especially in our industry. I can say this from experience. I'm here to talk. My DMs are open.

Thank you to everyone that's messaged me. It means a lot to me that you've found this thread helpful. I'll do my best to respond to all of you but it may take a few more days ■