



By Katrina Kear-Wood

Katrina Kear-Wood, who is neurodivergent with ADHD, will be sharing a series of articles with the Worcester News promoting inclusion and celebrating neurodiversity.

This following article is a reminder of how Christmas can be a time of high emotions.

For many people who are neurodivergent, what 'ought' to be a time of celebration and fun can be completely overwhelming, leading to meltdowns, withdrawal and immense stress. There are constant changes everywhere.

Changes in routine and heightened expectations during the festive period can contribute to increased stress and anxiety. Being hyper vigilant as individuals anticipate something they perceive as danger can cause a constant state of anxiety. The pressure to have a 'perfect' Christmas. Focussing on things that are the same may help, as well as being mindful about what you enjoy at Christmas.

Autistic differences, social, emotional, sensory and cognitive impact the way we perceive the world, form values and interact.

During festive periods the social battery (the amount of energy they have to cope with different social situations) for those with autism and sensory tolerances will likely be pushed beyond what is comfortable, whilst wanting to spending time with loved ones, neurologically not able to handle it. Feeling like they have to perform. Stress of buying cards and presents, small talk, say thank you for gifts they don't like or didn't want. The stress of having to lie, I liked the present etc. Feeling the family don't like or understand them.

Individuals may mask their true selves, adding to the heightened stress. Masking is a survival strategy, where a neurodivergent person recognises something important hinges in being perceived as neurotypical, to compensate difficulties in social situations and reactions to sensory overload. Masking is suppressing the characteristics of autism.

This will be exhausting, increase stress levels and decrease the ability to cope for



'You don't have to be 'perfect' this Christmas'

CHRISTMAS can be magic - but also is a sensory overload. Picture: Unsplash

the duration.

For those who struggle with sensory processing difficulties, Christmas can be challenging.

Sensory regulation is how our body processes and regulates all the sensory stimuli it encounters. Our body has eight senses auditory (hearing), oral (taste), olfactory (smell), visual (sight), tactile (touch), interoceptive (heart rate, thirst), vestibular (movement and proprioceptive body awareness). Our body is constantly taking in different senses outside and inside our body. With so much sensory input coming in, it is a considerable task to regulate these senses. Sensory regulation takes place in the nervous system, which is responsible for processing sensory input and telling your body what to do and how to react to this sensory input.

It can be overwhelming and uncomfortable if the body processes the sensory input incorrectly. It can be difficult to figure out what the body needs to calm down which can result in behaviours including sensory seeking, anxiety, breakdowns and aggressiveness. It can be difficult to work out what the body needs.

Christmas is a sensory overload, with visitors, increased noise, different foods, tastes and smells. As well as crowded rooms,



homes are filled with bright decorations.

Christmas in schools can be overwhelming due to the loss of routine sensory overload, social anxieties, sensory food aversions, loss of structure, pressure to follow social norms of dress code, food choices, gift expectations, texture of wrapping paper, unexpected visitors, stranger in a red suit, writing expectations, reading aloud and sitting still for what seems like forever as rehearsals take place.

How to support

Think ahead, be prepared, involve them, play to the individual's strengths, introduce the changes, give notice, plan and share your plan, be aware of sensory triggers, adapt parts, allow sensory accommodations, create a time out option and

CHRISTMAS doesn't have to be a struggle, says Katrina Kear-Wood

skills such as creativity.

For individuals with ADHD difficulties Christmas can be a logistical nightmare, especially surrounding organisation and changes in routine. Remembering dates and presents, planning ahead, turning up on time and the pressure to keep up with everyone else, overindulgence.

Ideas to manage

Be aware and plan, so not to overwhelm and avoid the feeling of you've failed. A physical schedule or on a phone may help with organisation of time. Exercise can help stimulate the mind and aid the feeling of positivity. Include something for yourself to feel good. Keeping a sleep routine as sleep deprivation can have a really negative effect on people with ADHD.

While Christmas can be overwhelming and draining for neurodivergent individuals it can also be a really fun time by ensuring planning ahead, flexibility and adaptations at Christmas to meet the needs of individuals, what ever that looks like.

support difficulties. Feeling safe and comfortable is paramount.

Building in quiet breaks to include regulation strategies, finding a quiet space and reducing the time spent in the noisy environment, providing things to help calm for example a fidget toy, head phones and other distractions such as art, construction etc. Going for walks, breaks from the busiest place, turning down the lights may help.

Dyslexic and other neurodivergent individuals may feel under pressure to write lots of cards, the pressure of perfection, of writing and of the need to spell correctly. Reducing this pressure can be through finding an alternative method, for example online cards, a voice message, enhance other

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