

Protesting as an autistic person: important tips and information.

Due to our sensory processing, communication, and emotional processing differences, autistic people need to be mindful of many things when attending protests. I will be separating tips into these categories: *background information, clothing, supplies, social support, and self-regulation.*

Background information

There are several key things you need to know about a protest before you attend.

1. *What is the nature of the protest?* Is it a vigil, a local event in a small town, or a large protest in a city?
2. *What are the chances that you will experience police violence?* Will you be exposed to tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, etc.?
3. *Are there different events occurring throughout the day?* Is there a schedule you can look at, to plan what actions you want to attend and which ones you don't?
4. *Is there at least one other person you know who is going to the protest with you?* It's strongly recommended to only attend protests with a buddy, or a group of people you're well-aquainted with.
5. *If you need sign language interpretation, or if you're physically disabled, is the protest accessible to you?* If there are speakers, will you be able to understand them clearly? If you need to get somewhere quickly, will you be able to?

Clothing

As a general rule, especially if you'll be attending a larger protest where there's more of a risk of police violence and surveillance, you should *wear dark, nondescript clothing that obscures your body shape and covers up identifying features like tattoos or birthmarks. Don't wear necklaces, dangling earrings, or loose bracelets.*

You should also be wearing a face mask, to protect you from coronavirus as well as police surveillance & public identification.

Here are some autism-specific tips:

- *Try to wear clothing that doesn't cause sensory issues.* If tags bother you, make sure you cut them out. If certain types of fabric bother you, try to replace them with other kinds of fabric.

- *If you have an ID bracelet that lets people know you're autistic (or that you're otherwise disabled), make sure you're wearing it.* If you're at a large protest and you get injured, medics need to know if you have any health conditions or if you have specific communication needs. Being injured makes it more likely that you'll enter a meltdown or shutdown state, which means it might be difficult for you to speak or communicate. That's why it's important to wear your ID if you have one.
- *If you have ear defenders or noise canceling headphones, make sure you wear them.* If you don't want to wear them, at least bring them. They will offer you sensory relief during chanting, and they will protect your ears if police end up shooting rubber bullets and tear gas canisters.
- *Don't wear a chew necklace.* If you need to bring a chewy, make sure it's hand-held or clipped to something. Wearing a necklace could be dangerous, as it could get caught on something when you need to be moving quickly.

Supplies

You should bring a plain/dark colored backpack with you to the protest. Here are some of the things you need to have inside your backpack:

- *A full, large water bottle.* You need to stay hydrated, especially because protests often involve lots of walking, and it's currently summertime in the northern hemisphere.
- *Protein and carb-filled snacks.* Granola bars, energy bars, peanut butter pretzels, and trail mix are all good options. If you have specific dietary or sensory-related needs, make sure you account for those.
- *Your fully-charged phone.* You need to be able to contact friends or other people in your protest group, in case you get separated.
- *Clearly labeled medical information.* If you get injured, it's important for medics to know if you're autistic or otherwise disabled. That knowledge will help them meet your sensory & communication needs. Even if you have a medical ID bracelet, it's good to have backup information in your backpack.
- If you think it might be necessary, create your own *tear gas remedy* and keep it in a clearly labeled water bottle inside your backpack.
- *Goggles to protect your eyes,* if you're going to a large protest where the police might use tear gas or pepper spray.

Social support

When going to protests, it's important to have a buddy. That buddy is the person you stay with the entire time, no matter what. Even if you're within a larger group, you should always stay right next to your buddy.

Here are some other tips for social interaction and communication at protests:

- *Learn some chants before you go.* That way, even if you have auditory processing difficulties, you'll understand what the chants are and you can participate.
- *If you use an AAC device, make sure it's fully charged and protected.* If you can, it's also a good idea to pre-program certain phrases, like "Where is the medic station?" ahead of time.
- *Make sure that you tell your buddy and anyone else you're with that you're autistic,* and that you might need to take a break during the protest. Preparing them for this will make things go more smoothly if you end up having a meltdown or a shutdown.

Self-regulation

Protests can be very overwhelming and emotional. I've cried at many protests, out of joy and out of profound empathy for those who are suffering. They can also be extremely loud, confusing, and disorienting. Because of this, it's important for autistic people to have coping strategies to self-regulate.

Here are some of those self-regulation strategies:

- *Stimming.* If you need to flap your hands or vocal stim, and you feel safe doing so, go for it. Chances are, since you're among like minded people who are also feeling intense emotions, nobody will bat an eye.
- *Deep breathing.* If you feel yourself getting anxious and overwhelmed, take ten or more deep breaths and then regroup.
- *Taking breaks.* Sometimes, you might need to take a break. Whether it's because things were too loud, too crowded, or because you just experienced or witnessed police violence, walking away from the main protest and sitting on the sidelines is sometimes necessary. Make sure you're hydrating and eating, and that your buddy stays with you during breaks.

I hope you all found this helpful, and I wish you the best of luck if you're going to protests. I can't because I'm immune-compromised and my sensory issues are too severe for me to be able to deal with tear gas & rubber bullets. But I know many of you are going to them, so please stay safe!

In solidarity,

Eden 🐸