

Meltdowns and Shutdowns Guide

What is a meltdown?

A meltdown is an involuntary response from the nervous system which the individual has no control over and happens when an individual is in survival mode. Meltdowns are often triggered when the brain cannot process all the sensory information it is receiving. The way that autistic individuals process sensory information means they are more likely to experience 'sensory overload' and thus experience meltdowns.

Common misconceptions about meltdowns:

- People can control their behaviour during a meltdown
- People 'use' meltdowns to get what they want or attention seek
- People who are having meltdowns are 'naughty' or not properly disciplined.
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How can you help someone having a meltdown?

- Meet the individual 'where they are'
- Encourage self-regulatory behaviours such as stimming, and provide resources to support stimming
- Be empathetic and validate their experience
- If they are happy to be touched, provide sensory support or comfort
- Once an individual has come out of the meltdown, discuss it with them openly but do not lecture them. You want an open dialogue.

Remember that you cannot prevent all meltdowns, but the following are proactive approaches you might take:

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- Use behaviour logs to identify potential triggers. Action can then be taken to minimise these triggers or provide further support.
- Ensure that co-existing conditions such as IBS or epilepsy are managed and treated
- Create a good sensory environment where possible
- Be open and transparent about plans, and involve the individual where possible

What is a shutdown?

A shutdown often has the same cause as a meltdown, it is just a different way of communicating. Shutdowns may be more likely to occur if someone is very tired or has had to deal with an emotionally draining situation or had to socialise for too long. Sometimes, a shutdown may occur after a meltdown. When someone is experiencing shutdown, they may be unable to communicate or move. They may need to lie down and be in a room without much sensory stimulation.

Common misconceptions about shutdowns:

- They are less serious than meltdowns
- People are being awkward by not communicating- they're not helping themselves
- Shutdowns are less distressing than meltdowns for individuals

What are the signs that someone is heading towards shutdown?

Physical Signs: Fatigue; reduction in motor coordination; noticeably slower movements; inability to communicate or responding in monosyllables (if this is different to the individual's baseline). Tension headaches.

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Emotional Signs: Becoming uncharacteristically passive; withdrawal, appearing apathetic (although this is not the case). Feeling of confusion or disassociation. Increased anger/irritability or conversely numbness

Behavioural Signs: Reduced interest in socialisation; decrease interest in environment; increased sensory seeking behaviour.

How can you help someone having a shutdown?

- Reduce sensory stimulation in the environment
- Maintain personal space
- Respect an individual's right to silence as long as they are not in immediate danger

Remember that you cannot prevent all shutdowns, however you can take the following proactive steps:

- Identify stresses and triggers and create a Stress management plan (resource on our Here to Help platform).
- Talk to the individual about what they are experiencing and why they are experiencing it.
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General triggers for a meltdown or shutdown include:

- Sensory triggers
- Co-existing conditions (especially flare ups and taking new medication)
- Feeling a lack of control, or experiencing frequent change
- Being unable to communicate needs
- Lack of sleep

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- Hormones
- Life events (positive and negative)

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