

Meltdowns and shutdowns

What are meltdowns and why do they happen?

Many neurodivergent people report having meltdowns. They are extreme emotional and behavioural responses to stressful situations. They may include crying, screaming, kicking, flapping, slamming doors, throwing items. They can last for a few minute but sometimes for much longer.

Triggers may be

- Sensory and feeling "sensory overload" e.g. too much noise, lights, smells
- Social pressure, e.g. new places or people, too many people, lots of people talking
- Unexpected change to plan or routine
- Vague instructions, open-ended questions
- Times pressures
- Sometimes can be "the last straw" after a build-up of small things

When these triggers occur, the neurodivergent brain may interpret this as a "threat". The brain and body go into "fight or flight mode". Adrenaline is released. In meltdown, the adrenaline may be released too quickly and therefore cause these extreme behaviours.

- Meltdowns help clear the system of pent-up adrenaline; may feel physically better afterwards and recover quickly
- Can result in embarrassment, remorse or shame however
- Distressing for others to see

Tips to prevent meltdowns

- Learn your triggers
- Learn to "listen to your body" and identify the warning signs you may be getting overwhelmed
- Reduce unwanted sensory input where possible, e.g. wear head phones, sunglasses
- Feed your sensory needs, create a sensory toolbox with your favourite sensory items
- Plan exit strategies from social situations with the help of family or friends
- Create a routine that works for you and stick to it
- Make a meltdown plan for friends/family to use, e.g. what do you need from them in that situation? what should they/not say; what should they do/no do?

Supporting yourself after a meltdown

It is important to practice self-compassion when you have a meltdown. This will also enable you to manage better next time.

- Remind yourself you are a neurodivergent person who was feeling overwhelmed by the demands placed on you by your environment
- You are allowed to ask for reassurance and comfort from others after a meltdown
- Having a meltdown does not mean you are a bad person
- Having a meltdown does not cancel out your strengths, qualities and skills

(with thanks to www.livedexperienceeducator.com)

What are shutdowns?

Shutdowns can also occur when someone is feeling stressed or overwhelmed. Triggers for shutdowns are the same as those for meltdowns.

In shutdown, you may drop to the floor, stop speaking, moving, engaging with those around you. The length of a shutdown is also variable: from a few minutes to even a few days.

Shutdowns are another type of threat response, where the body freezes (instead of fight/flight).

Tips for managing shutdowns

- Same as meltdowns, try to reduce chances of this happening by knowing your triggers
- Reduce any demands on you and any unwanted sensory input
- When in shutdown, people will need to reduce any demands on you, people may be best not to speak to you or ask you questions at this time (e.g. not asking “what’s wrong?”)
- Plan ahead how to cope with a shutdown, what you’ll need around you and from others so they can do this without speaking with you
- Have some space to rest and recover
- Acknowledge that this is your body’s way of coping and what it needs to do at that moment, be patient and make yourself as comfortable as possible

Further resources

- The National Autistic Society <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/meltdowns/all-audiences>
- Ambitious about Autism meltdown video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zseDI1V-BqU&t=5s>