

Understanding meltdowns



Understanding meltdowns and how to help

Meltdowns are one of the most well-known stereotypes of autism. Picture a small child throwing themselves around on the floor of a supermarket aisle, screaming loudly with their parent or carer apparently unable to do anything about it at all. Other shoppers stand around tutting and agreeing that such poor parenting and failure to prevent temper tantrums is shocking.

This is the image many people have of autism, and based on that, think of it as an extension of bad behaviour brought about by inadequate discipline by parents. While a meltdown may look like this from the outside, what is really happening could not be more different.

What is a meltdown?

A meltdown happens when an autistic person completely loses control of themselves through an inability to cope with a situation. This loss of control may show itself physically in terms of what may seem like quite violent actions such as kicking out and arm waving (though usually not consciously directed at anyone or anything in particular), verbally through screaming, shouting, or crying and sobbing, or a combination of the two.

Just as all autistic people are different, the ways in which they experience and behave in a meltdown are also all different.

It is very important to be clear about what a meltdown is not. A meltdown is not in any way a temper tantrum, even if the outward appearance may sometimes be similar. Temper tantrums are a response to being denied something that is wanted and then exhibiting bad behaviour in the conscious or unconscious belief that it will deliver a change in the situation and secure the thing that is wanted.

Autistic meltdowns are a response to an overwhelming stimulation or circumstances which the person can no longer cope with – they are not intended in any way to gain any benefit at all.

Autistic people report that having a meltdown is a dreadful experience and nobody would ever voluntarily choose to have one. As we shall discuss later, many autistic people take great precautions to avoid situations where a meltdown may occur.



It is also worth knowing that some autistic people may respond to being overwhelmed by appearing to completely shut down and becoming non-responsive rather than by having a meltdown. This is simply an alternative reaction to being overstimulated, and autistic people are not able to choose which response they experience in a given situation.

What triggers a meltdown?

The triggers for a meltdown will depend on the person concerned and will generally involve a build up of pressures and stimulation ahead of reaching a point of no return when the meltdown takes place.

Many autistic people are hypersensitive in certain ways, and over stimulation in these areas may very well cause a meltdown. For example, some autistic people are unable to filter out many voices all heard at once to focus on just the person speaking to them or on none at all. Their autistic brain may try to comprehend all 20 or 30 conversations they can hear at once, and quickly become overwhelmed by this, possibly triggering a meltdown.

Another autistic person may be hypersensitive to smell, and find the aroma left by the cleaning products used in a certain place overwhelming even if others cannot smell them at all. Bright lights could be an issue – some autistic people find a very bright situation physically painful, and this may trigger a meltdown in some.

Meltdowns may also be triggered by changes to routine or surprises. Many autistic people, including young children, rely on routines to find their way in what seems like a very strange world to them. If a routine changes, even for a perfectly fair and unavoidable reason, this may cause distress as the autistic person may not have the time and information they need to adapt to the new situation. If this is a big, sudden change, or a series of smaller but significant changes in quick succession, it could leave the autistic person overwhelmed and trigger a meltdown.

What can be helpful is that meltdowns are rarely triggered immediately – there tends to be at least a short period of build-up, sometimes referred to as rumbling, as the autistic person begins to become overwhelmed and distressed.

An adult may be able to recognise these signs and remove themselves from the situation causing the problem, but a child may not have this understanding or be able to communicate that they are becoming overwhelmed. It is important, therefore, to look for signs of growing distress, which may frequently involve stimming behaviours such as hand flapping, head shaking and so on.

Autistic people stim to help regulate their sensory stimulation, so an increase in stimming may well be a sign that a meltdown is possible without a quick change in circumstances. The fact that you cannot tell what could be overwhelming the autistic person because everything seems normal is not relevant – autistic people sense the world in a very different way from others. Remember, there are some foods that you don't like the taste of but others do, because you respond to those tastes differently. Autistic people have a wider variety of sensory experiences and may be stimulated to a much greater degree by certain things than you are.



What a person with autism experiences during a meltdown

Meltdowns are not a pleasant experience to have. The autistic person loses control of their body and many of its systems for a period, and in many ways is just as much a spectator to what is happening as others present, but with the added pressure that they are aware that this is happening to them but powerless to do anything about it. It can feel like being stuck in a car accelerating down a steep hill with the brake pedal always out of reach.

The physical and verbal actions that take place in a meltdown are the body and mind taking over in a kind of automatic mode to try and deal with the overstimulation or distress that has triggered the episode. In some ways, they are an elongated reflex response similar to the way you automatically raise your hands to protect your face if something suddenly comes toward it.

Over time the symptoms ease as your body and mind wear themselves out and begin to give you back conscious control, which is a relief, but can also then bring with a sense of guilt and embarrassment about what has happened, especially if witnessed by others.

A meltdown will also usually leave the autistic person absolutely exhausted. A huge amount of energy is used in both trying to manage the problem ahead of the meltdown and then in the automatic reactions in response.

How best to respond to and support someone who is experiencing a meltdown

In short, keep them safe, give them time and do not judge them. Be ready to take care of them as they recover and listen to what they tell you they need if and when they are able to do so.

Children in particular may need protection when having a meltdown. Avoid trying to move them physically unless they are actually in danger of harming themselves or you need to get them away from the cause of the meltdown. You will know what helps your child best in these situations - it may be cuddling them, or they may prefer not to be touched. Perhaps some dark glasses to remove the overstimulation from a bright space or headphones to protect them from sounds which are causing the problem.

Another key thing that you may need to do for a child having a meltdown in a public place is to protect them from judgment and unhelpful comments from others present. These comments may also be hurtful to you as a parent or carer.

Some parents and carers of autistic children now carry with them cards that explain what is happening to hand out to others witnessing a meltdown to educate them about what is happening and make them aware that this is not a temper tantrum. It may be much easier to give these out than try to explain verbally while also caring for your child.

The best way to deal with meltdowns is to learn what triggers them and try to avoid those situations or exit them swiftly if the signs of a possible meltdown start to appear. Again, autistic adults can often do this for themselves, but need support and understanding when they need to leave a noisy workplace, for example. Children will need more help and someone looking out for them. Try to avoid difficult environments, and if plans have to change explain this and allow as much time as possible to come to terms with it.

Autistic meltdowns are almost impossible to completely eliminate, but their occurrence can be managed through careful planning and learning from experience, and the events themselves can be well-handled through non-judgmental understanding and support.

