



Strategies and Resources

Autistic Meltdowns and Shutdowns

Autistic Meltdowns

An autistic meltdown is an intense response to overwhelming sensory, or emotional stimuli. This can result in loss of control over emotions and behaviours, as well as impact our ability to cope with stimuli we might otherwise be able to manage. For example, lights may seem excessively bright, nothing tastes good, and touch may be overwhelming.

Hyper and Hypo-arousal



For autistic people, our nervous system works harder. This can put us in states of hyper/hypo-arousal.

Symptoms of hyper-arousal include: high heart rate, dilated pupils and increased sweating.

Symptoms of hypo-arousal include emotional numbness, emptiness or paralysis.

Shutdowns



Some people may experience Autistic Shutdowns, which is similar to meltdowns, but can be more internal and last for a longer period of time.

When someone is in a shutdown, they may withdraw and struggle to communicate in their usual method, for example, by using verbal speech or with their AAC.

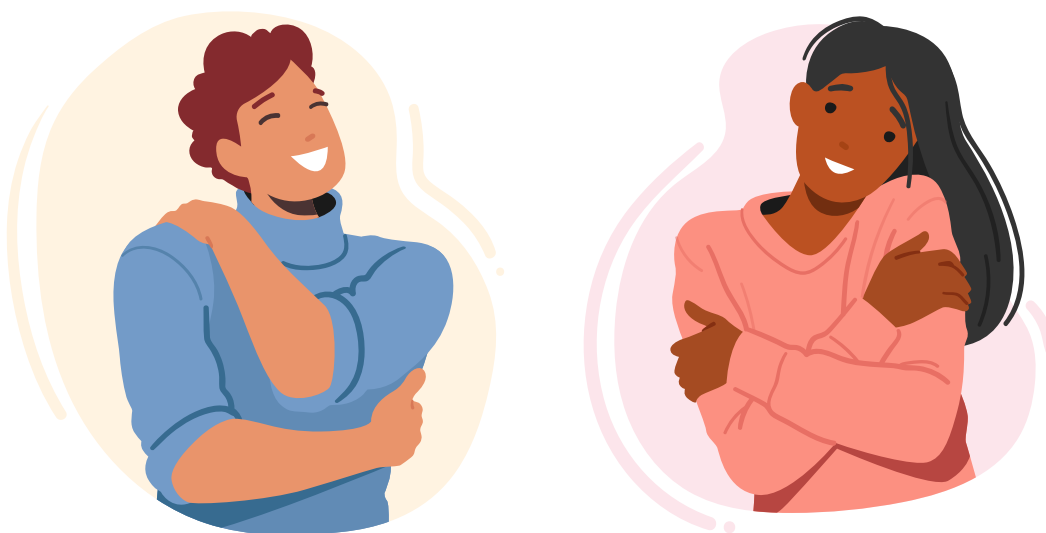
Autistic Experiences of Meltdowns and Shutdowns

Although the term meltdown, as well as Shutdown has already been in use in non-autistic terms, we will explore our experiences with autistic meltdown and shutdown in this guide.

Autistic people can have universal and unique experiences relating to meltdowns and shutdowns, so we are here to offer solidarity and community in our lived-experience in this guide.

We can find ways to meet sensory and stimming needs which can help us to understand meltdown and shutdown triggers, as well as supporting emotional regulation and our mental health needs.

However, there are specific barriers to regulation caused by external stressors, and we will discuss some of the ways to address these, as well as implement reasonable adjustments to reduce sensory and emotional overwhelm in daily life.



This guide shares lived experiences of autistic people relating to meltdowns and shutdowns, including reasonable adjustments to support. We hope this guide will help to destigmatise the topics of meltdowns and shutdowns, empower us to understand our autistic needs and foster self-compassion.

Autistic Barriers to Sensory and Emotional Regulation

There are a number of barriers that autistic people face when meeting their sensory and emotional regulation needs, and while these may vary from individual to individual, many have systemic and societal wide sources:



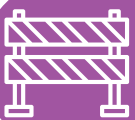
Inaccessible Design

The inaccessible design of public and private spaces can mean that autistic people cannot meet their sensory, or emotional regulation needs. For example, lighting in hospitals.

Unsupportive Work



Work environments can be unsupportive to meet autistic people's needs. This can lead to masking of traits, burnout, overwhelm, as well as eventually shutdowns/ meltdowns.



Limited Access to Tools & Aid

Autistic people can face barriers when accessing funding for tools and adjustments that would reduce overwhelm, and decrease likelihood of meltdowns, or shutdowns. Examples of this could be exhausting PIP processes, or appeals.

Neuro-exclusive Social Practices



Social expectations and norms are often centered around neurotypical needs, and practices, which can exclude, or isolate autistic people. This exclusion whether intentional, or not can be a trigger for meltdowns/ shutdowns. E.g. eye contact expected.



Lack of Autism Understanding

Autistic people can face ignorance on a daily basis in numerous environments, needing to explain our needs, experience or ways of expressing. This can be exhausting and othering.

Limited Recovery Time or Support



Recovering time is important for autistic people, especially if we are in environments that don't meet our sensory, or emotional needs. Fatigue can be a meltdown trigger.

Example Triggers for Meltdown and Shutdown



**Unexpected
Changes**



**Relationship
Dynamic Shifts**



**Lack of Support, or
Rest Time**



Sensory Overload
E.g. loud alarms



Loss & Grief



**Masking & Unsafe to
be Authentically
Autistic Self**

Autistic Meltdown & Shutdown - Triggers

Use this page to track any triggers that you notice around meltdowns and shutdowns. This can help you to prepare for any events where you may encounter triggers, plan in recovery and choose different techniques, and/ or tools to help self sooth and prevent, or manage meltdowns and shutdowns.



Feel free to come back and add to this as and when needed. Our triggers may disappear, worsen or evolve over time:

My meltdown triggers include:

My shutdown triggers include:

Regulation Challenges for Autistic People

Sensory and emotional regulation with its own set of unique challenges for autistic people, impacting on mental health and coping strategies, often due to the inherent lack of autism specific adaptation, or understanding from society. Below is a list of autistic challenges relating to exercise that some people may experience:

A list of autistic challenges to consider for meltdowns & shutdowns:

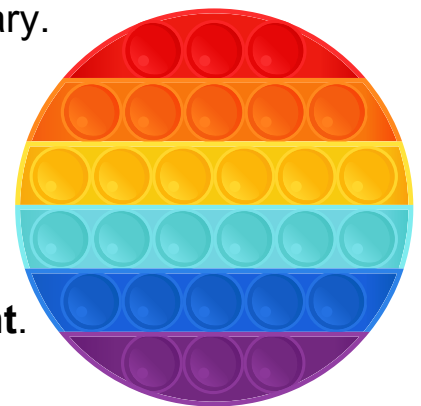
- **Unsuitable Sensory Environments** which can lead to overwhelm whether delayed, or in the present moment can create layers of sensory input that is dysregulating for autistic needs. Increasing the likelihood of meltdowns and shutdowns.
- **Lack of autism training for professionals**, which can lead to stigma or poor understanding of autistic needs, increased overwhelm and barriers in daily life that make meltdowns and shutdowns more common.
- **Alexithymia**, where autistic people may not be able to name physical and emotional states, as well as sometimes masking, or being unaware of them. For example, not knowing when you are reaching exhaustion.
- **Co-occurring conditions** that affect energy, emotional or sensory needs, for example Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, ADHD, or epilepsy, which can increase overstimulation from physical and sensorial exhaustion.
- **Need for non-verbal guidance and visual supports** as verbal instructions alone may not be sufficient for many autistic individuals, and could be overwhelming to us if we are unable to process verbal communication, for example due to an auditory processing delay.
- **Overload from multitasking instructions** and other directions or activities
- **Conflicting Needs** with other people in your household, work, school, or family can result in overload and layering of overstimulation.

Regulation Support and Sensory Needs

Sensory regulation can help your body find its way out of fight or flight. These examples, which can be found in more detail in our Sensory Needs Guide offer support for sensory calm and regulation to better meet your needs and recovery before, after and during meltdown/ shutdown.

Examples of sensory regulation for meltdown support:

- **Stimming**, for example, rocking, clapping, fidget toys etc.
- **Breathing** - mindful, slow or square breathing.
- **Physical exercise** - dancing, flapping hands, or yoga.
- Going to a **sensory soothing space** - removing sensory stimuli.
- **Intentionally activate your senses**, for example, go for a walk, listen to music or smell a candle.
- **Total rest** - do nothing in a comfortable position.
- Splash **cold water** on your face, behind your neck or on your wrists.
- **Safely hold ice in palms to soothe** with barrier to avoid cold burns e.g. cloth, towel, or cooling gel ice pack made for contact with skin.
- Go to a **quiet space**, or familiar safe space.
- **Deep pressure** can be helpful and comforting, for example a weighted blanket, vest or hug.
- Remind yourself that this experience is temporary.
- **Play loud music** through headphones.
- Putting on a **comfort show, movie or song**.
- **Tactile play** e.g. putty, acupuncture ring etc.
- **Communicating boundaries** and overwhelm.
- **Swinging**, or **skipping** for **swaying movement**.
- **Turning lights off**.
- **Smelling** something comforting and familiar.



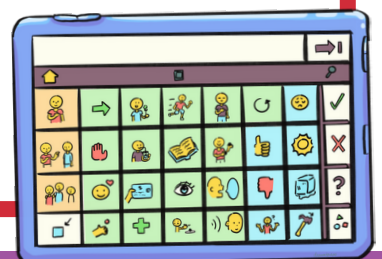
Reasonable Adjustments for Communication

We will now explore communication and information processing adjustments that may help you when experiencing shutdowns and meltdowns. As our communication needs change when overstimulated, or burnt-out.

Meeting our communication and information processing needs is integral to our mental and physical wellbeing. We hope that these suggestions will help you to think of new, or different ways to better meet your communication needs. This not an exhaustive list, please add more:

Suggestions and Prompts of Relevant Reasonable Adjustments:

- **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**, which can include **no-tech** sources, such as **British Sign Language**, **low-tech** formats such **flashcards with primary needs**, or **high-tech** with software on tablets with **text to speech** for example.
- **Written summaries** to help with auditory processing delay in overstimulating settings, or when fatigued and ensure that all information is available for you to review at a later date.
- **Processing time**, which gives us time to think and respond, and accounts for any sensory distractions, and our monotropic processing.
- **Check for clarity and consent**, as autistic people if we are used to masking our needs we may give false consent and answer affirmatively when unsure, an adjustment asking people to check can be helpful.
- **Not policing tone, eye contact or facial expression**, this is important for friends, family and professionals to understand and give us space to be our authentic selves. This could include letting colleagues now that you give minimal eye-contact and would not like to be penalised for it.
- **Clear instructions** and **avoiding open, or misleading questions**, this reduces risk of confusion, distress and a lack of shared understanding.

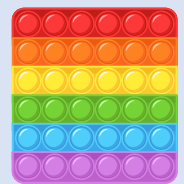


Meltdown Tips - Before a Meltdown

The Rumbling Stage

Before a meltdown, you may experience what is often referred to as the “rumbling stage”. This is the early phase where signs of rising stress, anxiety, or overwhelm may begin to show - and where there may still be an opportunity to prevent a full meltdown or reduce it’s intensity.

Support strategies to consider at this stage include using distraction or diversion techniques, engaging with sensory tools, listening to calming music, or trying to remove or reduce potential triggers from the environment. This may sometimes mean leaving the environment to be able to ground yourself.



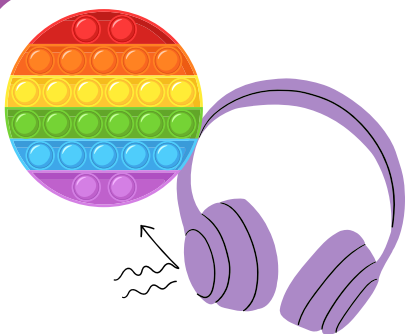
Creating Support and Exit Plans Beforehand



Reasonable Adjustments and Travel Plans



Understanding and Spotting Triggers



Having a Sensory Toolkit



Going to a Quiet Space



Using Breathing Tactics to Help Ground

Meltdown Tips - During a Meltdown

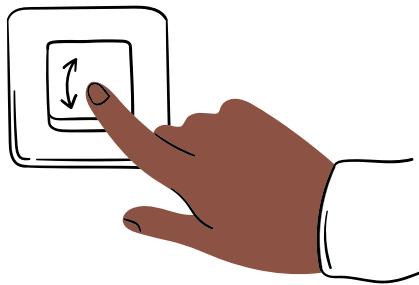
During meltdowns

Even when we try to intervene early, sometimes, a meltdown may still happen - and that's okay. They are natural responses to overwhelm. Having strategies ready that can help you support yourself through the experience ensures you are safe during the meltdown.

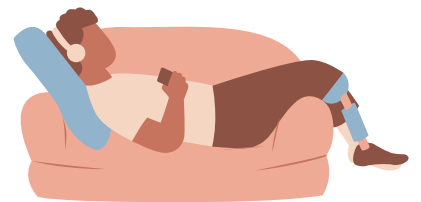
Use page 7 (Regulation Support and Sensory Needs), as well as the additional tips below to help put together your personalised in-meltdown support. Feel free to explore and adapt these ideas to suit your own needs.



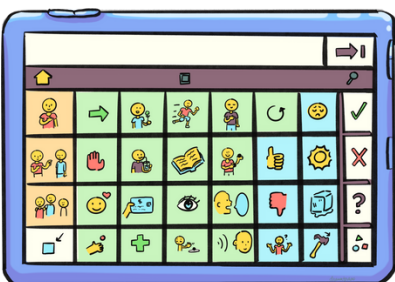
Use any Comfort Items
you May Have



Reduce Sensory
Inputs in the Room



Go to a Quiet Space, If
Available



Use Other Non-
speaking
Communication, If
Needed



Reduce Decision
Making Responsibilities



Using Breathing
Tactics to Help
Ground Yourself

Meltdown Tips - After a Meltdown

After meltdowns

Autistic meltdowns can be overwhelming, and the recovery period afterward can also bring its own challenges. It is common to feel disoriented, exhausted, and emotionally drained.

You may also experience difficult feelings such as shame, embarrassment, anger, or fear. These emotions are completely valid, and it is important to approach yourself with compassion and understanding at this time. Talk to yourself as you would a friend, or family member you like.

Focusing on calming, restorative activities can support your recovery. Quiet alone time, gentle movement, and soothing sensory input can all help you gradually regain a sense of balance and safety.



Use Self-soothing /
Stimming Tools



Give Yourself
Decompression Time



Check in with a Support
/ Safe Person



Utilise any Safe / Quiet
Spaces



Avoid Rushing Decisions
or New Senses



Engage in Calming
Activities

My Meltdown Support Plan

Use this page to add any other additional coping strategies that you feel can help support you before, during or after a meltdown.

Use the suggestions mentioned, as well as any additional sensory regulation tactics.

What Helps Me Before at the Rumbling Stage of Meltdown:

What Helps Me During a Meltdown:

What Helps Me After a Meltdown:

Adjustments to Support during Shutdown



**Setting Boundaries
on Social Needs**



**Contacting Support
for Help**



**Recovery Time e.g.
Annual Leave**



**Sensory Tools e.g.
Sunglasses**



**Use Visual Aids e.g.
Flashcards**



**Burnout Plan e.g.
Disposable Plates, or
No Chop Meal Plans**

Regulation Reasonable Adjustment Checklist:

Plan a Safe and Quiet Space for Access

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Sensory Toolkit for Sensory Regulation

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Exit Plan and Word to Signify Overwhelm

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Use AAC, or Visual Aids for Communication

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Respect my Silence and Give Me Space

☐

Please Do Not Touch Me, Unless Asked

☐

Safe and Easy Prepped Snacks/ Meals

☐

Nonverbal Reassurance E.g. Pass Stim Tool

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Sensory Inputs Reduced E.g. Lights Off

☐

Sensory Stimulation Provided E.g. Music On

☐

Transition Time Between Tasks/ Events

☐

Clear Communication E.g. Building Map

☐

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Bradford & Craven Autism AIM - 1-1 Autistic Peer Support, such as post-diagnostic support to discuss diagnosis, as well as autistic traits, history, rights and needs. This is a space to chat to another autistic person about your lived-experiences, barriers and strengths.

Scope - Disability charity offering support implementing reasonable adjustments at work, education or for events. They can support with self-advocacy resources.

Citizens Advice - Provide support with workplace and educational adjustments, as well as rights and setting legal boundaries for shutdown/ meltdown recovery.

Neuro-Queer Group by Yorkshire MESMAC - This is a supportive group space for autistic LGBTQIA+ people to discuss their queer and autistic needs in safe and friendly environment.

Further sources of support can be found at Bradford and Craven Autism AIM's website:
<https://bradfordautismaim.org.uk/>

Contact Us



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Please leave a message for the AIM Mental Health Equity Project team.



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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.