

Meltdowns

Many autistic people will experience meltdowns. The public often finds it hard to tell autism meltdowns and temper tantrums apart, but they are different things. You can help by [understanding autism](#), the person and [what to do](#) if you see someone having a meltdown. If your family member or the person you support has meltdowns, find out how to [anticipate them](#), [identify their causes](#), and [minimise their frequency](#).

What is a meltdown?

A meltdown is '[an intense response to overwhelming situations](#)'. It happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (eg shouting, screaming, crying), [physically](#) (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or in both ways.

Autism meltdowns are not the same as temper tantrums

A meltdown is not the same as a temper tantrum. It is not bad or naughty behaviour and should not be considered as such. When a person is completely overwhelmed, and their condition means it is difficult to express that in appropriate way, it is understandable that the result is a meltdown.

Meltdowns are not the only way a person on the autism spectrum may express feeling overwhelmed. Other behaviours that may appear are less explosive but are equally common, such as refusing to interact, withdrawing from situations they find challenging, or avoiding them altogether.

What to do

If someone is having a meltdown, or not responding to you, don't judge them. It can make a world of difference to someone on the autism spectrum and their carers.

- Give them some time - it can take a while to recover from an information or sensory overload.
- Calmly ask them (or their parent or friend) if they're OK, but bear in mind they'll need more time to respond than you might expect.
- Make space - try to create a quiet, safe space as best you can. Ask people to move along and not to stare, turn off loud music and turn down bright lights – whatever you can think of to reduce the information overload, try it.

Anticipating a meltdown

Many autistic people will show signs of distress before having a meltdown, which is sometimes referred to as the "rumble stage". They may start to exhibit signs of anxiety such as pacing, seek reassurance through repetitive questioning or physical signs such as rocking or becoming very still. At this stage, there may still be a chance to prevent a meltdown. Strategies to consider include distraction, diversion, helping the person use calming strategies such as fiddle toys or listening to music, removing any potential triggers, and staying calm yourself.

Identifying the causes

A meltdown is a reaction to an overwhelming experience. If your family member or the person you support has meltdowns, identify what is overwhelming for them. Complete a [diary](#) over a period of time. Record what happened before, during and after each meltdown. Patterns may emerge. You may find that meltdowns occur at particular times, in particular places, or when something particular has happened.

Minimising triggers

Once you have a clearer idea what may be triggering meltdowns, think about ways you might minimise that trigger. Everyone autistic person is different, but **sensory differences**, **changes in routine**, **anxiety**, and **communication difficulties** are common triggers.

Sensory considerations

Many autistic people have **sensory differences**. They may be over-sensitive to some senses, under-sensitive to others and often a combination of both.

For example, for someone who is over-sensitive to touch and sound, people brushing past them and a loud announcement at a train station could cause pain and sensory overload, leading to a meltdown. In this situation, it could be helpful to listen to calming music on headphones to block out loud noises and to wait until everyone has got off the train before approaching the platform to avoid crowds of people.

In other situations, consider creating a low arousal environment (eg remove bright lights, soundproof walls) or using sensory equipment (eg glasses with dark or coloured lenses, ear defenders, a weighted blanket).

Change in routine

Consistent, predictable routines and structure are very important for autistic people and a **change to routine** can be very distressing.

For example, the panic caused by needing to drive a different route to school due to roadworks could trigger a meltdown. In this example, a clear **visual support**

explaining the change, reassurance that the rest of the routine remains the same and adding extra support such a calming/comforting activity to do in the car could help.

For an unexpected change, there can be a particular plan in place, such as the use of a picture symbol to explain the change, reinforcement of the rest of the day being the same (if that's the case), a chance to express any frustration appropriately (such as hitting a pillow, ripping paper) followed by an activity that is known to calm the person such as taking deep breaths, listening to calming music, going for a walk, or squeezing a stress ball.

It may help to increase structure around ordinary transitions, helping the person to navigate the change from one activity to another throughout the day. Using a clear timetable explaining when the transitions will be, using timers to countdown to transitions, using a favourite toy or character to be part of the transition, can all help.

Anxiety

With its unwritten rules and unpredictable nature, the world can be an extremely challenging environment for autistic people and many experience **anxiety**. If a person does not have the tools to calm down when anxious, they may have a meltdown.

Develop strategies to manage anxiety, such as introducing our **Brain in Hand** app.

Have a plan beforehand of what to do if the person feels anxious, such as a calming play list to listen to at the shops or a stress ball in their pocket.

Build relaxation time into the routine. The person will generally feel calmer and therefore better able to cope when something that could trigger a meltdown, occurs. What that means will vary from person to person, and may consist of quiet activities,

eg taking a walk, listening to music, reading, doing puzzles, using fiddle toys, or more strenuous activities, eg jumping on a trampoline, going to the gym, playing a computer game.

In the case of more strenuous activities, observe whether the activity really does calm the person down. If it doesn't, but is just an activity they really enjoy, still build in time for that activity but also try and find an activity that does genuinely calm them down and make time for that as well.

Communication difficulties

Autistic people can find it difficult to express their wants and needs, from a non-verbal child struggling to express their need for a drink to a teenager finding it hard to express their emotions. This can result in overwhelming feelings, such as anger and frustration, leading to a meltdown.

Support the person to find ways to understand and express their emotions appropriately before they get overwhelmed, and find ways to make your own communication more easily understandable. Verbal communication can be challenging to autistic people due to the potential to misunderstand body language, tone of voice, irony and sarcasm.

Things you can try include:

- visual supports
- social stories
- Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS)
- worry books

- written information
- modifying your verbal communication
- using technology such as tablets and voice software, instant messaging etc
- increasing understanding of emotions and social skills.