
Autism Survival Kit for helping to
Manage Meltdowns



Tips and tools to help manage and overcome a
meltdown

Autism Survival Kit for Meltdowns

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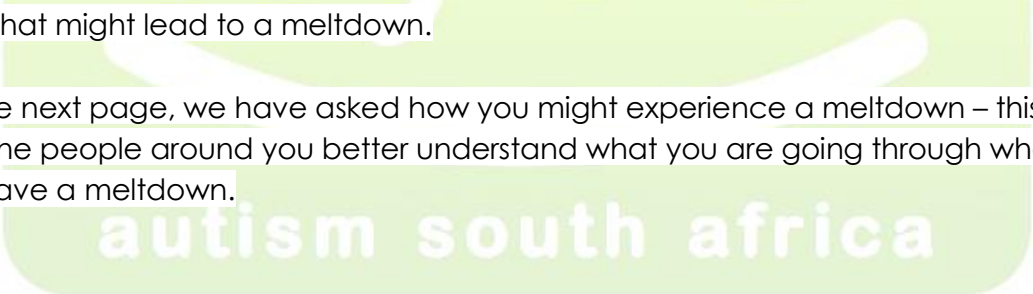
1. What is a meltdown?

“It is the complete loss of emotional control experienced by an autistic person. It doesn't last long but once triggered, there's no stopping it. Meltdowns are emotional avalanches that run their course whether you or the autistic person having it likes it or not. They can happen at any time and can be caused by a number of factors including: environmental stimuli, stress, uncertainty, rapid and impactful change and much more. It really depends on the individual.” (Ashley McKay <https://medium.com/@AshleaMcKay/the-m-word-we-need-to-talk-about-adult-autistic-meltdowns-fec98f60157b>)

A meltdown is not a choice, it is not a person being difficult and trying to get their own way. It is a complete overload of information, and the autistic person can no longer take in information. As hard as the autistic meltdown might be on a non-autistic person who is seeing the meltdown happen, it is much much harder for the autistic person – they do not like and they do not want to have a meltdown.

Every autistic person will have a different experience of a meltdown. What is important is that non-autistic people are able to help them recover from the meltdown, and try help work out the triggers in order to put together an action plan for the next time a meltdown happens. Ultimately, we want to avoid a meltdown, and the best way to do this, is to be aware of the triggers and be able to look for the cues that might lead to a meltdown.

On the next page, we have asked how you might experience a meltdown – this will help the people around you better understand what you are going through when you have a meltdown.



How do you experience a meltdown?

2. The difference between a meltdown and a tantrum

Many people see meltdowns and tantrums as the same thing, and often they look very similar. But, there are differences. Below are some of the differences.

Tantrum	Meltdown
<p>Goal Oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration from not getting what you want • Might be more frequent if a child is tired, angry or not feeling well 	<p>Overload</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling of being overwhelmed • It is sensory, emotional, informational overload • Can also be as a result of too much unpredictability
<p>External behaviours – crying, screaming, yelling or lashing out</p>	<p>External behaviours like a tantrum (these might be self-injurious)</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Complete shutdown or withdrawal</p>
<p>Tantrums need an audience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually stops when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The behaviour is ignored ○ The individual is removed from the public space ○ The individual gets what they want 	<p>Meltdowns will happen whether there is an audience or not.</p> <p>A meltdown can happen when the person is completely on their own</p> <p>It's a response to external information and leads to an emotional explosion or complete withdrawal</p>
<p>Angry or frustrated outburst</p>	<p>Reacting to too much information – overwhelmed</p> <p>There is no control</p>
<p>Can reduce the tantrum with hugs, distractions, incentives for better behaviour</p>	<p>A meltdown will not stop with incentives for better behaviour, distraction or hugs</p>
<p>Looks for reactions of those around them</p>	

3. Tips for your family to help you **DURING** your meltdown

- Try remove any stimuli that might be causing distress OR try move the person to an environment that is less stimulating
- Don't leave the person alone
- If there are any social pressures, try and remove them
- It is not the time to process what is happening
- Talk in a calm and reassuring voice
- Don't ask questions that might make the individual more emotional. I.e. Why are you acting in such a horrible way?

- Use the person's name and acknowledge what they are going through
- If they have a harmless behaviour during a meltdown, don't try to discourage it
- Don't talk about what the behaviour might be doing to someone else
- Don't humiliate or shame the person – they have no control over their behaviour
- Show that you are there to support them, and acknowledge what they are going through
- Develop a strategy to help the person – don't use a generic strategy
- Work with the individual (not during the meltdown, but when they are calm) to develop an action plan

4. Tips for your family/support system to help you **AFTER** your meltdown

- Think about the sensory challenges the individual has – have these impacted them at all? (Hear, smell, touch/feel, taste, see)
- Look at what might have triggered the behaviour – remember that all behaviour is communication
- ONLY once the individual has fully recovered: Talk to them and make the individual aware of how you feel when they portray the inappropriate behaviour. Make sure that you teach them another way to express themselves
 - E.g. if they are overwhelmed, teach them to use a break card

5. Working out the triggers and cues

Below are a few questions to better understand what might trigger your meltdown, and what some of the warning signs might be so your family and those around you can better support you.

Triggers

Put an x (or any method you prefer) next to each statement that might be true for you, we have also left a few rows open for you to put in your own triggers:

	Sudden change, and not understanding why there is a sudden change
	Getting answers to questions I don't understand
	Surprises
	Sensory overload
	Too many choices
	Open ended tasks or questions
	Tasks that don't have clear instructions

Cues

Cues are the warning signs that you might be heading towards a meltdown. Put an x (or any method you prefer) next to each statement that might be true for you, we have also left a few rows open for you to put in your own cues:

	Pacing (back and forth or in circles)
	Self-stimulatory behaviour increases
	Perseveration on a specific topic
	Echolalia (repeating words or phrases)
	Difficulty answering questions
	Resistance to requests to disengage from a routine
	Not talking or communicating – becoming mute
	Lack of persistence and motivation
	Recent moving away from usual every day patterns and routines

6. Putting together my survival kit

It is important to develop a plan that you can share with others to help you when you have a meltdown.

Here are a few tips to help:

- Take charge in implementing, monitoring, and revising a plan
- Make your plan available to all those in your life
- Practise your plan
- If your plan doesn't work, it's OK to look at it again and make changes to it

Try to identify what works for you when you are having a meltdown, and make a list of items that might help you. Below is a list to help you:

Items that might help me	
	Dark sunglasses
	Hat/cap
	Earplugs
	Headphones
	Music
	Water
	Snack (list the type of snack)
	Book
	Medication
	Stim toys (list the type of toy)
	Stress ball
	Video of interest

Other things might include what the person with you can do to help; we have also left space for you to add your own:

What can someone else do for me?	
	Using my name
	Physical contact – where would this be most beneficial? (e.g. my shoulder)
	Calm tone voice
	Not trying to reason with me
	Don't try to teach me coping skills
	Reassurance that I will be alright

7. Autism Alert Card

Below is an autism alert card that you can cut out and keep in your purse or wallet (It is the size of a credit card). There is space for you to fill out an emergency contact details.



References

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