The Super Useful Guide To
MANAGING MELTDOWNS

UNDERSTANDING
INTERVENTION
PREVENTION

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Welcome!

If you’re the parent or teacher of a child who is prone to meltdowns, or you experience them yourself, you know just how challenging they can be to manage. Meltdowns are a frightening, confusing, frustrating and exhausting experience for everybody involved.

The key to managing meltdowns is understanding why and how they happen, when you should intervene and how you can plan ahead to reduce the fallout. This guide will help you through all of that and show you how to create an individualized action plan for managing your own meltdowns or those of someone in your care.

The guide has four sections:

- Understanding Meltdowns
- Planning & Prevention
- Creating An Action Plan
- Handy Resources

You won’t find the magical solution to eliminating meltdowns forever (because there isn’t one), just all the information you need to understand them better and manage them successfully.

Okay, enough with the boring introduction. Let’s go!
Welcome!

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SECTION 1:
UNDERSTANDING MELTDOWNS
What are meltdowns?

Put simply, a meltdown is a state of neurological chaos where the brain and nervous system overheat and stop working properly. It’s called that because it’s the body’s equivalent to a meltdown in a nuclear power plant, in which the fuel in the reactor core becomes so hot that it melts and releases energy.

Sometimes it gets so hot that it causes an explosion, and the energy is released outside of the core. It’s this explosive reaction (crying, screaming, lashing out) that most people refer to when they talk about behavioral meltdowns, but that’s just the bit that you can see. There’s a whole lot more going on inside during a meltdown.
Meltdowns and tantrums can often look the same on the outside, but that’s where the similarity ends. A tantrum is a voluntary battle of wills to try and gain control over a situation. It’s designed to draw attention for the sole purpose of satisfying a want (like refusing to leave the supermarket without candy), so once that goal has been met the outburst quickly resolves itself.

Meltdowns on the other hand are almost the complete opposite - an involuntary physical and emotional reaction to being placed in an overwhelming situation from which there is no easy escape. The person isn’t in control or trying to get attention, in fact they’re often unaware of things happening around them.
Why do some people have meltdowns?

Anybody can have a meltdown - child or adult, neurotypical or autistic - if they find themselves trapped in a situation that is difficult to cope with. These situations tend to happen more frequently for people who have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Hypersensitivity to sensory input
- Sensory integration dysfunctions
- Low frustration threshold
- Low frustration tolerance
- Difficulty identifying and controlling emotions
- Resistance to change
- Rigid or inflexible thinking
- Difficulty understanding cause and effect
- Executive functioning disruption
- Communication delays or challenges
- Difficulty with social comprehension

These characteristics are often descriptive of people with sensory processing and autism spectrum disorders, so it’s not surprising that meltdowns are common amongst these groups. In addition, children are usually more susceptible to meltdowns than adults because they have less control over their emotions and environment.

A low frustration threshold means being more easily frustrated than most

A low frustration tolerance means not coping well with the feeling of being frustrated
What happens during a meltdown?

When we find ourselves in a stressful situation from which we can’t easily escape, the brain becomes flooded with emotional, sensory or cognitive input which jams the circuits and kicks off the ‘fight or flight’ responses associated with panic. Executive functions like memory, planning, reasoning and decision making start to shut down, which makes it even more difficult to find a way out of the situation.

The neurological pressure builds to the point where it trips internal circuits (like language) or is released externally as an outburst of physical energy (crying, screaming, hitting, running away). Although this explosive reaction often seems to come from nowhere, meltdowns happen in stages that are fairly easy to recognize once you learn the signs.

Understanding the differences between these stages is the key to managing meltdowns. Identifying the triggers can help to prevent the cycle starting, and knowing the signs of escalating pressure allows you to take steps to reduce the chances of an explosion. So let’s look at each of these stages in more detail.
Stage One: THE TRIGGER

Triggering a meltdown is like lighting a fuse - it starts a chain reaction that will lead to an explosion unless you take steps to put it out. The trigger is the point at which the pressure starts to build, and is the easiest part of the meltdown cycle to deal with. If you know what the triggers are, you can do your best to try and avoid them.

Everyone has their own individual set of triggers. These might differ between environments and over time, but they all have one thing in common. Meltdowns are triggered by events that cause a state of internal tension - an imbalance between the demands coming in and the body’s capacity to handle them.

Imagine that your processing capacity is a bucket, and the sensory, emotional or cognitive demands coming in are the water being poured into it.

If the flow of water is too fast or too heavy, or if the bucket is too small, the water can’t be contained and spills over. This signals the body to panic.

Problem solving, memory and decisions become impaired, making it difficult to find a way to get out of the situation - to stop the flow of water or increase the size of the bucket. If the balance between input and coping ability isn’t restored, the internal tension rises and a meltdown is triggered.

Potential triggers are not just those things that produce extra input for your brain to deal with (increase the flow of water), but also those things that reduce your capacity to handle existing demands (make the bucket smaller).
What are some common meltdown triggers?

Sensory overload
People who are hypersensitive to sensory input or have trouble modulating their response to it often experience a great deal of cognitive stress. Being constantly bombarded with sensory input is tiring and takes your attention away from other demands, which can greatly increase the kind of internal tension that sparks a meltdown.

Confusion
When things happen that we don’t understand our brains work overtime to try and make sense of what’s going on. Not only that, confusion triggers the fear responses that put us on high alert and eventually build to panic. Social misunderstandings, literal misinterpretations and reduced awareness of surroundings can all cause confusion and flood the brain with extra demands, making conditions just right for meltdowns.

Frustration
The sense of being blocked from something you need or want is at the emotional core of what meltdowns are all about - an inescapable situation. Communication difficulties, clumsiness, making mistakes and hearing the word ‘no’ are just some of the things that can prevent the fulfillment of desires and trigger the build up of internal tension.

Pain
When the body experiences pain, it reacts by diverting resources away from non-essential functions to focus on the possible source of injury. The brain is inundated with extra input and it becomes almost impossible to think about anything else, which of course dramatically reduces your ability to cope with other tasks.
What are some common meltdown triggers?

Lack of sleep
The side effects of sleep deprivation (fatigue, clumsiness, inattention, confusion, increased sensitivities, reduced working memory, irritability and a flood of stress hormones) create internal tension by reducing the brain’s capacity to deal with input. They upset the balance by making the coping bucket too small to handle both existing and incoming demands.

Diet
A lack of variety in the foods we eat or too many of the wrong foods can lead to an imbalance that impairs body functioning or increases sensitivities. Food allergies and intolerances can cause pain, hyperactivity and irritability. These are all things that can reduce our ability to cope and create a lot of extra work for the brain to do.
What triggers meltdowns in autism?

Looking at that list, it’s no surprise that autistic kids as a group are particularly vulnerable to meltdowns. Sensory processing disorders are common for them, as are food aversions and disrupted sleep patterns. They also tend to experience more sources of frustration, confusion, stress and anxiety:

- Transitions
- A need for sameness
- Making mistakes
- Communication difficulties
- A strict adherence to rules
- Hypersensitivities
- Difficulties with motor skills
- Social misunderstandings
- Underdeveloped sense of danger
- Literal thinking
- Hyperfocus
- Food aversions
Stage Two: ESCALATION

Once a meltdown is triggered, the sequence of chain reactions is like a runaway train. As the coping bucket starts to shrink or the trickle of water becomes a flood, the mounting panic sets off the body’s survival mechanisms - fight or flight responses start to kick in, thinking becomes impaired and defense systems are set to high alert.

Each of these reactions feeds off the others as the pressure begins to build. When there is no control over the stressor and escape from the situation is impossible, this pressure soon becomes intolerable - which in turn only feeds the body’s panic responses, creating a snowball effect.

Compounding these reactions is the stress and panic that is triggered in the people surrounding the one having the meltdown. The tension spreads and adrenaline starts to flow as everyone struggles to get the situation under control, which just adds to the whirlwind of pressure for the person stuck in the middle of it all.

There’s no set rate of escalation during this stage. Sometimes the gap between trigger and explosion seems almost non-existent, and at others the escalation will appear more like a slow burn. While longer escalation stages provide more opportunity for intervention, it can also make it more difficult to identify the original trigger event.
How do you know when the tension is escalating?

During this stage of escalating internal stress, there are external clues that the body may be struggling to cope. These will differ for everybody, but usually include at least some of the following:

- Not thinking clearly - unable to make decisions, not following instructions
- Becoming physically agitated - clearing throat, tapping foot, fidgeting
- Inattention or hyperfocus
- Communication struggles - mumbling, unable to find the words
- Anxiety - asking a lot of questions, talking about fears
- Attempting to shut out sensory input - covering eyes or ears
- Stimming - repetitive self-soothing actions
- Refusal to participate or cooperate
- Withdrawal or escape - running away or trying to hide
- Dissociation - shutting down or zoning out
- Emotional outbursts - crying, yelling
- Physical reactions - palpitations, pounding or accelerated heartbeat, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, choking sensation, nausea, chest pains, dizziness, falling asleep, toileting accidents

Look for this poster called Signs of Escalating Meltdown in the Resources section
How do you manage the escalation stage?

A large part of handling the escalation phase of a meltdown is managing your own reaction to it. The person melting down feels scared, helpless and vulnerable. They can’t think properly and need you to be a reassuring centre to the storm raging within them.

Once a meltdown has been triggered, remaining calm will be your most effective tool for intervening. It’s like being in a plane that’s losing altitude - in order to help others, you need to first put on your own oxygen mask.

Take a moment
The first reaction when you see a meltdown coming is usually panic. Your heart rate rises, stress levels go through the roof and it’s almost impossible to think clearly or respond calmly. So before you jump in and try to stop the meltdown from happening, step back and bring your own panic under control.

Don’t take it personally
When someone’s having a meltdown they don’t think or behave rationally. They’re not trying to make your life harder, they’re experiencing an involuntary reaction to unbearable internal tension. Keeping this in mind will help you control your own anger so you can stay calm and supportive.
How do you manage the escalation stage?

Use a mantra
At the risk of sounding all new-agey, having a phrase that you repeat to yourself when the panic sets in can really help to focus your mind in the midst of the chaos. Use them to keep a lid on your reaction and remind yourself that you’re the one in control.

Stay calm
Cool the system
I am the one in control
It’s okay to need help
This will pass

Have an action plan
When a meltdown hits, your own stress reaction will impair the ability to think clearly and remember what to do. Developing an action plan ahead of time will give you something to refer to in the heat of the moment, so you can stay calm and take action. It will also let those around you know what they can do to help.

Click here to jump ahead to the section about action plans
How do you manage the escalation stage?

Once you have your own oxygen mask in place, you can get to work on taking control of the situation. The goal is to try and stop the pressure from escalating to prevent the meltdown from reaching the explosion stage.

If that’s not possible you can at least try to minimize the build-up of energy that’s going to be released, by both increasing the size of the coping bucket and reducing the amount of water being poured into it.

Look for the signs
The key to putting out the fire is to try and spot it early before it takes off. Become familiar with the hallmarks of rising stress in your kids or students and watch closely for them. These signs can often be subtle, and for some kids the outward emotion might not match their inner turmoil. This is particularly true for autistic kids, whose facial expression and tone of voice might not reflect just how upset they really are.

Reassure
Having a meltdown is scary, so become a partner and not an adversary. Talking in calm, soothing tones will show that you understand how hard it if for them, that you’re in control and can keep them safe. Don’t become another threat to react to - keep your voice low, move slowly and get down on their level by kneeling or sitting on the floor next to them. Stay close by, but remember to respect the physical boundaries that they find comfortable.
How do you manage the escalation stage?

Enable calm
Remember that meltdowns are a panic response to some kind of stressor, so the most important response should always be to provide relief. The person having a meltdown is not trying to be difficult or disobedient, so anger or discipline won’t help (in fact it will only make the tension escalate more quickly). Be aware that even if you can remove the trigger, the distress it caused might hang around for a while longer. Try calming techniques like down time in a chill-out zone (bedroom or quiet corner of the classroom), deep pressure, singing, massage, sitting in a rocking chair or swinging.

Reduce demands
When that bucket is overflowing, any extra water is just going to spill over and be lost. Keep input to a minimum, especially the sensory kind. Speak softly. Use concrete and simple verbal instructions that emphasize what to do (rather than what not to do). The focus here is on cooling the system, so rethink anything that you’re asking them to do. Is it important? Can it be delayed, or is there room to offer a choice?

Keep communication open
The language centers of the brain are amongst the first affected by stress, making it difficult to get help and increasing the feelings of panic. When you notice the signs of mounting tension, provide an outlet for them to communicate how they’re feeling. Show that you understand what’s going on by putting a voice to their distress. “It hurts when so many people are talking at once, doesn’t it. Let’s go somewhere more quiet.”
How do you manage the escalation stage?

Make space
Physically lashing out, pushing you away or trying to run can all indicate a need to be alone. Often our first reaction to these behaviors is to give more attention - offering comfort, trying to restrain or asking what’s wrong - which only increases the need to escape. Try and find a safe place to let them run or retreat to a quiet spot where they can have time to themselves and regroup.

Be patient
The fight or flight responses that get triggered during a meltdown interfere with cognitive skills like attention and memory. Someone in this phase will need more time to notice and process instructions, remember what to do and complete tasks. Feeling hurried will only increase the stress reaction and grind thinking skills to a halt, so try to be patient and allow more time than usual when asking them to do something.

Add structure
When the world around you is spinning out of control, you need something solid to grab onto. Visual supports, schedules and routines can act as signposts amidst the chaos, providing predictability and certainty. So talk about what’s coming up next, show where you’re up to on visual activity schedules and stick to routines.
How do you manage the escalation stage?

**Interrupt**
The sudden flood of input that follows a meltdown trigger can be like a power surge that trips the brain’s circuit breakers. The flow of information is temporarily suspended, which only adds to the stress and panic. Sometimes you can reset the circuit breaker or find a bypass around the broken connections by injecting some humor, distracting with another task, switching thought tracks or giving them an errand to do.

**Persist**
Sometimes it can feel as if none of the things that you try are working, but remember that meltdowns are the result of an internal imbalance that you can’t see. As the fire inside is subsiding, it can take a little longer for the external release of energy to dissipate. Remember too that even if nothing is working and the stress is still escalating, the person in the grips of panic still really needs to hear those calm reassuring words.
Stage Three: EXPLOSION

If the internal tension continues to escalate, the pressure builds to a point where it can no longer be contained and must be released. Sometimes this burst of energy happens externally (screaming, crying) and other times the explosion is internal (an inability to process language or complete mental shutdown).

People who reach the explosive stage continue to need reassurance, calm and focus, but there’s something else they need too - protection. At this stage of the meltdown they’re finding it difficult to maintain control. Their thinking isn’t rational or coherent, and they may become destructive and aggressive. Once you reach this point of no return, the goal is no longer about trying to prevent the eruption but riding it out and keeping everybody safe.
How do you manage the explosion stage?

Isolate and protect
Move the person somewhere safe and quiet. If they’re destructive, remove any objects that could cause harm or damage if thrown. Don’t forget to protect yourself as well - if they’re physically or verbally aggressive and it’s safe to remove yourself from the situation, do so.

Calm and reassure
Using a soothing voice and body language, let them know that the storm will pass and everything is going to be okay. If you’re not feeling calm enough to do that, let someone else step in to help at this point.

Keep things simple
Eliminate all demands. Don’t try to reason, reprimand or ask what’s wrong - in fact, stop talking altogether. Turn down the lights if possible and cut out any unnecessary noise. Make sure that only one person is trying to help the person who is having the meltdown - ask any bystanders to step away or provide assistance to the person who is intervening.

Wait
This is the hardest part of all. Once you’ve done what you can to make sure that the person is secure, reassured and safe from harming themselves or others, there’s nothing more you can do to stop the inevitable release of pressure. The best you can do once a meltdown has reached the explosion stage is to try and reduce the fallout while you ride it out.
Stage Four: RECOVERY

Once the energy has been released, the system slowly begins to cool down. Although the storm has passed, the person might still be scared, crying or feeling intense emotions. Coherent thinking starts to return, and can also bring with it feelings of embarrassment and regret, as well as intense physical and mental exhaustion.

This is a time for restoration. Don’t bombard them with questions about what happened, or talk about ways in which they could have handled it better. The recovery phase can take as long as 24 hours and during this time the ability to cope is still compromised, so it can be easy to set off another meltdown. Talking about what went wrong or even trying to fix it can reignite the spark, so save any debriefing for another time.

Help the person to regain control by returning to structure and routine as soon as possible. Try and provide opportunities for calming activities, offer a drink or food and if possible allow time for a nap. Reassure them that the crisis is over, that you’re not angry and that they won’t be punished.

If you do get a chance to discuss the meltdown later, talk about how hard it was for them. Let them know the things they did that were good, and figure out stuff that they can try next time.

If they seem ready and open to discussing the meltdown, try and figure out what triggered it or made the tension escalate so you can work towards making things easier in the future.
Jodie pulls into the parking lot and glances anxiously at her three year old son in the back seat. Ben has Sensory Processing Disorder and trips to the grocery store are usually an overwhelming experience for him. The noise, flickering lights, brightly colored packets and chemical smells flood his senses with too much information at once, and his body reacts with panic. It almost always results in Ben melting down - lashing out at his mother, pulling things from the shelves, screaming to go home. It’s traumatic for both of them, and Jodie’s already tense as she helps him into the shopping cart.

As they enter the store she notices that he’s covering his ears and wriggling a bit more than usual. After only a few minutes he stands up and tries to climb out of the shopping cart. Jodie asks him to sit down but he’s not listening - his breathing is fast and he starts kicking the side of the cart.

People start to stare and Jodie can feel the tension rising. She takes a deep breath and reminds herself that Ben isn’t being naughty, he just needs help.

So she wheels the shopping cart to a quiet corner of the store and squats down to his eye level. In a calm voice, she reassures him that they will be leaving soon and gives him one of those firm bear hugs that he likes so much. She finds his favorite cap in his backpack, the one that helps shield his eyes from the glare, and hands it to him along with her iPod. The headphones block out the noise, and his favorite songs calm him enough that she can grab the most important things on her list and head home.
Casey taps his pencil on the desk. On Wednesdays after lunch his fifth grade class always goes to the library, but not today. The library is closed. Being autistic, unexpected changes like these can be upsetting for him. Other things make him anxious too, like trying to find somewhere to sit at lunchtime and when the cafeteria is out of pizza. Break times are exhausting, and now that he’s back in the classroom he’s feeling tired and stressed.

Tapping the pencil makes Casey feel better, but the teacher asks him to stop. He tells her again that they have library on Wednesdays, but she says “not today” and asks him to finish his worksheet. He looks at the page but can’t read the words because he’s too worried about what’s going to happen now that there’s no library. What will they do instead?

“Two minutes, class!”
Casey rushes to finish but his sweaty hands make a mistake. He rubs and rubs with the eraser to try and get rid of it, but the paper just crinkles into a big mess. Sobbing, he rips his work into pieces and throws it all onto the floor.

A classmate asks what’s wrong, but Casey can’t find the words to explain. Recognizing the signs of a meltdown, his teacher takes him to a quiet area where he can sit on his own and calm down. After a few minutes she brings him a drink and shows him the visual schedule of activities for the rest of the day. She tells him that in 15 minutes he will return to class, where they will be doing quiet reading at their desk instead of going to the library. She knows that puzzles are calming for him, so she sets a timer and leaves him to work on one.
SUMMARY:
UNDERSTANDING MELTDOWNS
Meltdowns are not tantrums
Tantrums are voluntary demands
Meltdowns are involuntary panic responses

Anybody can have a meltdown

Kids and those with autism or sensory disorders are particularly susceptible
THE STAGES OF A MELTDOWN

Trigger
An event that creates internal tension which overwhelms the body’s ability to cope

Escalation
Rising internal tension sets off panic responses
Defuse by calming and partnering to find solutions

Explosion
Mounting pressure is released internally or externally
Soothe and protect as you wait for the storm to pass

Recovery
The crisis has passed and the system is cooling
Offer reassurance and a chance to regain control
TIPS FOR MANAGING MELTDOWN ESCALATION

- Watch for escalation signs
- Get your panic under control
- Don’t take it personally
- Use your action plan
- Keep communication open
- Reduce demands

- Offer reassurance
- Give them space
- Enable calm
- Add structure
- Be patient
- Keep trying

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SECTION 2:
PLANNING & PREVENTION
Planning Ahead For Meltdowns

It’s really difficult to think clearly during the stress and panic of a meltdown. Planning ahead while you’re calm will enable you to put together a coping strategy for when the going gets tough, and spread your resources so you’re not just dealing with meltdowns when they happen. In other words, it gives you an opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive.

Play meltdown detective

To make an effective meltdown plan you need to first figure out the where, when, why and what.

- What kinds of situations cause the most tension?
- Are there things that consistently act as triggers?
- What signs are there that the tension is escalating?
- What happens during the explosion stage?
- What techniques work for calming and restoration?

There’s a meltdown investigation worksheet in the Resources section that you can use to prompt your data gathering. Once you understand more about the ins and outs of the type of meltdowns that you, your child or your student experience then you’ll have a better idea of what you’ve got to work with.

Create an action plan

After you’ve analyzed the signs, triggers and behaviors you can put all of that information to good use by developing an action plan that will help you to remember what to do in the heat of the moment.

Click here to jump ahead to the section about action plans
Planning Ahead For Meltdowns

Make an emergency kit

Meltdowns often strike when you’re away from home and the things that can help you to prevent or manage them. So prepare an emergency kit of stuff that calms, distracts and soothes packed into a small backpack or empty container that you can easily carry around with you.

![EMERGENCY KIT](image)

IN CASE OF MELTDOWN
BREAK GLASS

The items in your kit will depend on what works for you and your kids, but here are some things you might want to include:

- A drink
- Crunchy or chewy foods
- Stuffed animals or soft toys
- Stress balls and fidget items
- Ear plugs or headphones
- Sunglasses or wide brimmed hat
- Your meltdown action plan
- Tissues and wet wipes
- Timer or stopwatch
- Toys that distract
- Cushion or pillow
- Small blanket
- Change of clothes
Deal with your feelings

Are your emotions about meltdowns adding to the problem?

It’s totally understandable to feel embarrassed, frustrated, helpless, angry, anxious and even despairing when you, your children or others in your care are susceptible to meltdowns. The trouble is that these are exactly the types of feelings that add to the pressure and stress that you experience when a meltdown starts.

The good news is that understanding your feelings in advance can help you to find ways to modify that reaction, and avoid working against yourself as you try to tackle the situation. So be honest when you think about how meltdowns make you feel, and why.

- Are you angry at yourself or your child for having meltdowns?
- Do you hate being the centre of attention?
- Does it feel like your parenting or teaching skills are being judged?
- Are you resentful of the fact that even simple outings can be a challenge?
- Are you at a loss to understand why they’re happening?
- Do you wish that you could do more to help?
- Are you sick of having to walk on eggshells all the time?

When these kinds of thoughts flood your mind at the start of a meltdown it triggers your own panic responses as your brain scrambles to cope with all the extra demands. Luckily this is one area that you can work on in the downtime between meltdowns that can really have a positive impact on your ability to cope with them.
Planning Ahead For Meltdowns

Finding ways to work through these emotions or plan ahead for them will give you a much better chance of staying calm in the heat of the moment.

If you hate the attention that meltdowns bring, work on building confidence in your own knowledge and skills to bullet-proof yourself from those judgmental stares and comments.

As time goes on and the meltdowns become less frequent, taking time to acknowledge the success can help build your confidence and reduce the sense of frustration and anger you feel when one does happen.

The more you understand about meltdowns and what you can do to help, the less resentful you’ll feel when they happen.
Obviously the ultimate goal in managing meltdowns is to prevent them from happening in the first place, but that’s easier said than done since meltdowns are triggered by internal tensions that aren’t always noticeable. So the key to prevention is to tackle both sides of the imbalance that creates this tension - keeping input at a manageable level and nurturing the body’s capacity for coping with and processing that input.

Avoid known triggers
It goes without saying that identifying the things that are most likely to set off meltdowns and doing your best to stay out of their path is the first step to prevention (but I said it anyway).

Add structure
A predictable environment where things make sense will help keep the fight or flight panic responses at bay. Structure and supports like picture schedules, social stories and transition countdowns will reduce confusion and anxiety.

Stay regulated
A sensory diet can help those with sensory processing disruptions to keep a steady level of modulation throughout the day. If you think of the brain as a nuclear reactor, steady sensory input is like the coolant that keeps the fuel at a safe and stable operating temperature.

Tips For Preventing Meltdowns

A sensory diet is a set of activities designed to provide a controlled amount of sensory input, to help maintain an optimal level of stimulation.
Tips For Preventing Meltdowns

Reduce frustration
Open up access to needs and wants by providing communication options and choice. Teach kids how to identify and communicate feelings like tension and confusion, and use supports to help with motor skill difficulties.

Let off steam
Provide outlets to release energy every now and then so it doesn’t build up. Tension-busting activities like dancing, laughing, jumping and running can act like a pressure valve to reset the system.

Eat, sleep and be merry
A body that’s not operating at optimal levels is always going to be more prone to melting down. Adequate sleep and diet are important tools in enabling the brain to cope with the amount of input it must process each day.

Be a model
Show your kids and students by example how to self-manage their own tension. Take yourself off to your room for a few minutes if you feel angry, laugh off mistakes or accidents instead of getting worked up and count to ten before speaking when you need to calm down.

Look after yourself
Having kids with special needs often means that your needs come second, but being tired, hungry and stressed out will make it harder to pay attention to the signs of an impending meltdown and follow through on things you need to do to nip it in the bud.
Tips For Preventing Meltdowns

Practice calming techniques

We’re not born knowing how to soothe ourselves when we’re upset. Some techniques we stumble upon (thumb sucking) and others are taught to us (taking a deep breath when you feel nervous). Teaching yourself, your kids or your students how to relieve the tension can stop the pressure from building and turning into a meltdown.

¬ Deep breaths
¬ Counting to ten
¬ Removing yourself
¬ Warm baths
¬ Deep pressure or massage
¬ Going for a walk
¬ Fidget toys
¬ Swinging
¬ Soft music
¬ Squeezing a toy or pillow
¬ Comfort objects
¬ Laughter
What is a meltdown action plan?

Taking control in a meltdown requires a clear and calm response, which can be almost impossible to come by when your brain is panicking or trying to deal with all that stress and commotion. That’s where an action plan comes in.

You can think of your action plan like an emergency evacuation map - it reminds you where the exits are and how to get to them.

Why should you make one?

Having a written action plan will help you and those around you to:

- Avoid potential triggers
- Recognize the signs of an impending meltdown
- Intervene to prevent escalation
- Stay calm during explosions
What does an action plan look like?

The action plan really has two goals:

- To help you remember what to do when you’re under too much stress to think clearly
- To help the people around you to understand the meltdowns too, so they can help you or intervene when you’re not available

So it needs two parts - a quick and easy guide for you and a more detailed set of information for others.

A plan for you

There’s no right or wrong way to go about making yourself an action plan. We all have different strengths when it comes to processing information - some of us think in words and others in pictures, while some may do better with auditory input. So take a few moments to figure out the most efficient way to help yourself think when you’re under stress... is it a series of trigger words? Images? Audio prompts? Remember that at times of panic our higher level thinking skills start to shut down, and processing input becomes difficult. So no matter which format you choose, the key is to keep it simple and tailor it to the way in which your brain works best.

A plan for others

In addition to the quick memory triggers part of the action plan, you can create a more detailed one-sheet summary of the information you've gathered so it can be easily shared and understood by others who might need to intervene during a meltdown - family members, babysitters, relief teachers.
What do you put in an action plan?

Your action plan needs to cover the information that’s most important to the types of meltdowns you or your child has and the most effective ways to manage them.

Some of those things might include:

- Known meltdown triggers
- Signs of escalating internal tension
- Things that help to defuse the pressure
- Potential explosive behaviors
- Reminders that help you stay calm
- Effective soothing techniques
- Ways to encourage recovery
Tips for making a meltdown action plan

Make it personal
Individualize the information to you, your child or your student.

Make it portable
The action plan needs to go wherever you or your child does, and it can’t help you if it’s stuck away on your computer when you need it. So print it out and keep it somewhere handy like the fridge or student file cover. Turn it into small laminated business cards to keep in your wallet or handbag. Make a digital copy or take a photo and upload it to your phone. Or if you do better with auditory input, you could record a series of audio prompts on your phone or iPod.

Practice, practice, practice
When a meltdown hits it will really help if you can switch over to autopilot mode. Run through the action plan like a fire drill, both in your mind and in real life, until you know it well enough to respond automatically.

Involve others
Meltdowns require all hands on deck, so teach the action plan to anyone who can help prevent them, assist you when you’re in the thick of one or step in when you’re having trouble staying calm.

Give it time
It might take a while to get the hang of using an action plan, for the steps in it to work or just to iron out all of the kinks to get it right. So don’t lose hope, and keep practicing!
This type of action plan acts as a quick reference guide to remind you about what you should be doing during each stage of a meltdown. It’s color-coded and uses only a few key words to quickly trigger your memory of the previously rehearsed response actions.
A sample ‘detailed summary’ action plan

This type of action plan is a more detailed summary of known triggers and warning signs, together with effective strategies for dealing with each stage of the meltdown.

Individualized to the child or student

Information split into stages

Signs and behaviors to watch out for

Things to do which might help

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That’s all, folks!

I hope that this guide has helped you to understand a little more about the ins and out of what meltdowns are all about, as well as giving you some ideas about how to manage and cope with them.

For more tips and information on helping kids with autism or sensory needs in the classroom and at home, visit my blog at

www.snagglebox.com

See you next time!

Bec Oakley
How to spot a...

**Meltdown**

- Feeling OVERWHELMED?
  - ✔
  - ✘

- REDUCED CONTROL of behavior?
  - ✔
  - ✘

- Looking to RELIEVE TENSION?
  - ✔
  - ✘

- Having DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING?
  - ✔
  - ✘

- Trying to ESCAPE OR WITHDRAW?
  - ✔
  - ✘

**Tantrum**

- Feeling OVERWHELMED?
  - ✘

- REDUCED CONTROL of behavior?
  - ✘

- Looking to RELIEVE TENSION?
  - ✘

- Having DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING?
  - ✘

- Trying to ESCAPE OR WITHDRAW?
  - ✘
Signs of Escalating Meltdown

BRAIN LOCK
Can’t make decisions
Not following instructions

AGITATION
Fidgeting
Clearing throat

SPEECH STRUGGLES
Mumbling
Can’t find the words

ANXIETY
Asking a lot of questions
Talking about fears

INPUT BLOCK
Shielding ears or eyes
Zoning out

STIMMING
Repetitive self-soothing actions

NON-COMPLIANCE
Refusal to participate or cooperate

WITHDRAWAL
Trying to hide
Running away

OUTBURSTS
Crying, screaming or yelling

PHYSICAL REACTIONS
Fast heartbeat
Sweating
Trembling
Shortness of breath
Choking feeling

Falling asleep
Nausea
Chest pains
Dizziness
Toileting accidents

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Meltdown Investigation Worksheet

1. MELTDOWN BASICS

   Where do most meltdowns happen?
   Is there a particular time of day when they’re more frequent?
   What happens just before the meltdown?

2. MELTDOWN TRIGGERS

   Do you know which events or circumstances trigger the meltdowns?
   Are there things you can do to prevent them?
   Are there supports you can put in place to help reduce frustration?

3. THE ESCALATION STAGE

   What are the signs that tension is escalating?
   Are there things that you can do to defuse the tension?
   What techniques are the most effective for calming or distraction?

4. THE EXPLOSION STAGE

   What happens during an explosion? Are they usually internal or external?
   What words or phrases are the most reassuring?

5. YOUR REACTION

   How do meltdowns make you feel?
   Are there things you can do to modify or manage those feelings?
Sample Action Plans

The sample action plans on the next few pages are also available as individual images in the zip file that came with this guide.
# MELTDOWN ACTION PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT'S NAME:</th>
<th>TEACHER:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLASSROOM:</td>
<td>DATE:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BREATHE. PARTNER. DEFUSE.

PROTECT. REASSURE. WAIT.

SOOTHE. RESTORE.
ESCALATION

Breathe
Partner
Defuse

EXPLOSION

Protect
Reassure
Wait

RECOVERY

Rest
Soothe
Restore

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If you found this guide helpful, why not check out these other handy resources available on the **Useful Stuff** page of the Snagglebox blog!