


# Understanding Meltdowns & Shutdowns

A gentle guide to sensory overwhelm and nervous system safety 

When the nervous system becomes overwhelmed, overloaded or exhausted, some autistic people may experience meltdowns or shutdowns. These are not choices – they are signs that the body and brain have reached their limit and need safety, support and recovery.



## MELTDOWNS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

Meltdowns often happen when the nervous system is overwhelmed by too much input, stress, or demand.

- ♥ Crying, screaming or shouting
- ♥ Feeling angry or distressed
- ♥ Pacing, moving or needing to release energy
- ♥ Difficulty communicating
- ♥ Big emotions that feel hard to control
- ♥ Needing space, movement or intense support
- ♥ It can look different for every person



Meltdowns are a sign of overwhelm, not manipulation or attention-seeking.



## SHUTDOWNS MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

Shutdowns often happen when the nervous system overwhelm turns into exhaustion and the body needs to close down to cope.

- ♥ Going very quiet
- ♥ Zoning out or spacing out
- ♥ Difficulty speaking or responding
- ♥ Withdrawing or wanting to be alone
- ♥ Feeling numb or disconnected
- ♥ Needing to hide, rest or escape
- ♥ It can look different for every person



Shutdowns are a sign of overload and exhaustion, not ignoring or refusing.



## IMPORTANT REMINDER

Meltdowns and shutdowns are not “bad behaviour.”  
 They are signs the nervous system needs safety, support and recovery.



## BEFORE THEY HAPPEN, THERE MIGHT BE SIGNS:

Everyone is different, but early signs of overwhelm can include:



Noticing early signs can help us respond with support before overwhelm becomes unmanageable.

## GENTLE REMINDERS FOR ADULTS

- ♥ Regulation comes before problem solving.
- ♥ Safety matters more than getting through the moment.
- ♥ Overwhelm is not a choice.
- ♥ Recovery can take time – and that is okay.
- ♥ Co-regulation and connection help the most.
- ♥ Your calm presence can make a big difference.



You don't have to fix it. You just have to be there.

## WHAT CAN HELP DURING OVERWHELM?

What helps will be different for everyone. Try what feels safe, supportive and low-pressure.



Support, not solutions, is what helps in the moment.

## AFTERCARE MATTERS

After a meltdown or shutdown, the nervous system needs time, kindness and gentle support to recover.



Recovery is not a race. It is a chance to feel safe again.

