



Meltdowns and shutdowns are generally signs of distress and occur when a person is completely overwhelmed or overstimulated.

Have a plan in place,
especially if meltdowns are common or potentially unsafe

When it starts:

Identify a safe place to go during a meltdown or shutdown

Keep a sensory friendly place where they can have time and space, and consider including objects like safety items, weighted blankets, sensory toys

Reduce sensory input ways like turning off loud music TV, overhead lights, or asking others to temporarily leave the room

Maintain warm, neutral acceptance and remember: They are doing the best they can with the tools they currently have

During:

Sit quietly next to the person

Use few verbal instructions when possible

Use communication cards or visual signals to take a break or use the safe place

Remain calm and monitor your voice volume when speaking

Use the person's name when talking and use simple statements

Use calming strategies

Facilitate an activity they like: like playing with fidget toys, listening to calming music, or participating in a preferred interest
Breathing is **not** typically helpful during extreme distress and can be invalidating

Simplify the task

"This seems really hard, let's do it one step at a time" or
"Let's solve this problem together"

When it's over:

Proceed slowly when re-engaging

Remember that the person may be continuing to process the situation, or may remain on "high alert," long after a meltdown has ended

How NOT to Respond



Do not use a lot of questions and avoid getting into a debate

Do not demand non-essential tasks for the time being

Return to task and process afterwards

Do not ask how they are feeling or what is wrong

Help them understand by describing for them with simple terms in mind: "I see you are having strong emotions"

Do not tell the person to "calm down," as no one can do this on command and saying this can escalate the situation

Do not tell the person to "relax" or "just breathe"

Instead, try planned calming strategies or do them yourself as an example (e.g., "let's walk together")

Do not expect the person to use a strategy they have never practiced before during a crisis

Do not use punishment or reward to force "calming down"

(e.g., "if you don't calm down, you can't do X")

This puts pressure on the situation and can make it harder for the person to calm

Do not discuss or threaten consequences in the moment

This can be discussed afterwards

Do not demand eye contact or prevent stimming

Avoid physical contact unless known to be helpful to the person

This can be well intentioned but overstimulating to many