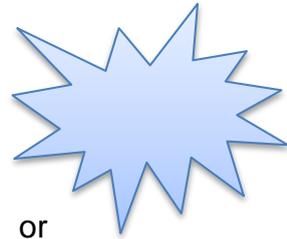




## Meltdowns

### **What is a meltdown?**

A meltdown is when a person has an intense response to an overwhelming situation. This happens when the person becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and *temporarily* loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying), or physically (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or both verbally and physically.



### **Autism meltdowns are not the same as temper tantrums**

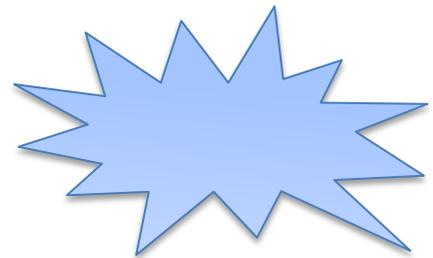
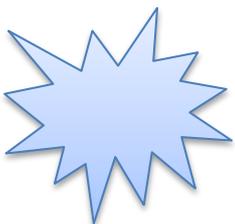
A meltdown is **different** to a temper tantrum. It is not "bold" behaviour. A meltdown happens when a person is completely overwhelmed, and sometimes a child or teenager with autism can have difficulties expressing their feeling of being overwhelmed and this can result in a meltdown.

### **Anticipating a meltdown**

There are often signs that can tell us if someone is going to have a meltdown before it happens. They may start to show signs of anxiety such as pacing, seeking reassurance through repetitive questioning or physical signs such as rocking or becoming very still. You are the expert on your child. You will know the signs that your child shows to indicate that they are beginning to become overwhelmed. 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 fidget toys or listening to music, removing any potential triggers, and staying calm yourself. See also Occupational Therapy guidelines on supporting your child's regulation to minimise the likelihood that they may experience sensory overload.

### **Identifying the causes**

A meltdown is a reaction to an overwhelming experience. Complete a diary over a period of time to help to identify potential causes or triggers for a meltdown. Record what happened before, during and after each meltdown. Patterns may emerge. Jot down notes afterwards in a diary to help you remember what was happening before, during and after the meltdown. You may find that meltdowns occur at particular times, in particular places, or when something particular has happened. Identifying patterns to the behaviours help you to understand how best to support your child and avoid or minimise triggers for a meltdown if possible. See also the resource on Understanding Behaviour which has further tips on identifying the function or purpose of a behaviour.





## Minimising triggers

Once you have a better idea of what may be triggering meltdowns, think about ways you might minimise that trigger for your child.

### 1. Sensory considerations

Many people with autism have sensory needs or differences. They may be **over-sensitive** to some senses, **under-sensitive** to others and often a combination of both. Here are some things to consider in relation to supporting your child's sensory needs:



- Consider creating a low arousal environment (e.g. remove bright lights, have a quiet space)
- Use sensory equipment (e.g. ear defenders or listen to calming music)
- Avoid situations that may cause a sensory overload (e.g. going shopping at quieter times of the day if a crowded supermarket with bright lights is overwhelming for your child).

Please see Occupational Therapy resources on our website which give more information on supporting your child's sensory needs.

### 2. Change in routine

Consistent, **predictable routines** and structure are very important for children and teenagers with autism, and changes to the routine can be very distressing.



Change of routines can be managed by:

- Use of a picture symbol to explain the change, or a visual schedule.
- Reminding your child that the rest of the day will follow the usual routine (if that is the case)
- Give your child a chance to express any frustration appropriately (such as hitting a pillow, or ripping paper for example), rather than by inappropriately (e.g. hitting).
- Follow the change to routine with an activity that is known to calm your child, such as taking deep breaths, listening to calming music, going for a walk, or squeezing a stress ball.

### 3. Anxiety

With its unwritten rules and **unpredictable** nature, the world can be an extremely challenging environment for people with autism and many experience anxiety. If a person does not have the tools to help themselves to calm down when anxious, they may have a meltdown. Here are some ideas to support your child with anxiety:



Have a plan beforehand of what to do if the person feels anxious:

- Have a relaxing or calming playlist for them to listen to at the shops, or a stress ball in their pocket, particularly if going somewhere that you know may be more challenging for them (e.g. busy supermarket, waiting for a doctor's appointment).



- b) Build relaxation time into their everyday routine. The person will generally feel calmer and therefore better able to cope when something that could trigger a meltdown, occurs. This varies from person to person, and may consist of quiet activities, e.g. taking a walk, listening to music, reading, or more strenuous activities, e.g. jumping on a trampoline, going to the gym, playing a computer game. Again, consider Occupational Therapy guidelines for your child, or look at the OT resources available on our website.
- c) Please also see the Anxiety Management document prepared by the St. Joseph's Foundation Psychology department on our website's Covid-19 resources page:

[https://www.stjosephsfoundation.ie/Portals/0/adam/FAQ%20with%20Categories/ZYWBHqfWk6\\_5fCTah9-hw/Link/Anxiety%20Management%20Tips.pdf](https://www.stjosephsfoundation.ie/Portals/0/adam/FAQ%20with%20Categories/ZYWBHqfWk6_5fCTah9-hw/Link/Anxiety%20Management%20Tips.pdf)

#### 4. **Communication difficulties**

People with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder 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 people with a diagnosis of Autism due to the potential to misunderstand body language, tone of voice, irony and sarcasm. Consider advice from the Speech and Language Therapy department in relation to supporting your child's communication.



#### **What to do if your child with autism has a meltdown:**

1. Give them some time - it can take a while to recover from an information or sensory overload. If you can, remove any potential triggers for their meltdown from their immediate area (e.g. loud noises/bright lights).
2. Calmly ask them if they're OK, but bear in mind they'll need more time to respond than you might expect. Do not use too much language when talking to them, keep your words to a minimum and consider using a visual to support their understanding. Use a calm and reassuring tone of voice.
3. Make space - try to create a quiet, safe space as best you can. Ask others 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.
4. Your child may need reassurance after a meltdown—sometimes a hug when they are ready can be very reassuring. A child who has had a meltdown is likely to be tired afterwards—consider this and reduce demands on them until they have recovered.

**Adapted from:** <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx>