

We all experience varying levels of stress in our daily lives. Many autistic people experience higher levels of stress and anxiety, which can make things even more difficult. This means they may reach crisis point more quickly. Sometimes, this crisis point is visible through either a meltdown, or shutdown. Each person will experience this crisis point differently.

Meltdown

During a meltdown, a person may show extreme behaviours like shouting, self-harm, aggressive behaviour and repetitive behaviours.

During meltdowns, there may be a risk of harm to the person themselves or to others. Meltdowns can be very distressing for the autistic person, as well as the people supporting them.

Shutdown

During shutdown, a person may either partially or completely withdraw from the world around them. They may not respond to communication anymore, retreat to their room or lie down on the floor. They may also no longer be able to move from the situation they are in, no matter what it is (for example, a shopping centre or a classroom). Shutdowns tend to be more discreet than meltdowns, and may sometimes go unnoticed. However, like meltdowns, they are a person's response to reaching crisis point.

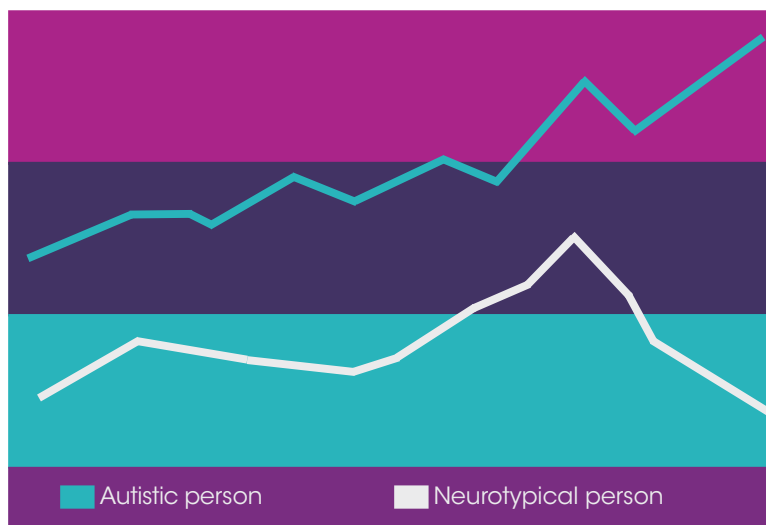
Sometimes, meltdowns can turn into shutdowns. A person may show outward expressions of stress to begin with, then withdraw until their stress levels have reduced. In these cases, it is important to remember that the withdrawal itself isn't a sign that stress levels are reduced, but may be a necessary step for the autistic person to recover from the situation.

What causes meltdown and shutdown?

Meltdown and shutdown are usually caused by high levels of stress, to a point where the autistic person is no longer able to cope. These can be triggered by any situation, and can be the result of an accumulation of stressful events over a period of time (hours, days or even weeks).

What causes meltdown and shutdown? (continued)

We are all able to deal with a certain amount of stress. Our days tend to be a combination of stressors and opportunities to de-stress (see diagram). Autistic people tend to start their day with a higher level of stress and anxiety, leaving them with less room to cope with additional stress. So, they may reach crisis point more quickly than others.



Common triggers may include:

- Too many demands placed on the autistic person, especially if they are not related to each other.
- Unexpected changes in plans or routines.
- Sensory overload.
- Social overload (being exposed to too much social interaction, this is particularly relevant to shutdown).

It is important to remember that the final trigger may not be the most significant issue, and may appear 'trivial' without fully understanding the stress and anxiety the autistic person is experiencing.

It is also worth bearing in mind that meltdowns and shutdowns are actually quite similar. Both are extreme reactions to everyday stimuli, both tend to be a result of an accumulation of issues over a prolonged period of time, and both are out of the control of the autistic person.

How do I support an autistic person during a meltdown?

- Know the person you are supporting, as each person will need to be supported in their own way.
- If they are not at risk of harming themselves or others, can you leave them alone?
- Keep calm.
- Do not ask them too many questions.
- Don't tell them to calm down, instead give them guidance on how to.
- Consider whether you can use their special interests to help them relax.

How do I support an autistic person during a shutdown?

- Know the person you are supporting, as each person will need to be supported in their own way.
- Give them the time to withdraw and recover.
- Consider whether you can use their special interests to help them come out of their shutdown.
- Some autistic people may like some contact during a shutdown, like a hand on their shoulder, or a quiet word. This is entirely up to the person. Discuss with the autistic person when they are not stressed how they would like to be supported.

After the incident

Spend some time discussing what happened with the autistic person, if they are able. Find out what caused it (they might mention the final trigger to start with, so you may have to go back further with them), and what they would like you to do if this happens in the future. If they showed behaviours which may have caused them or others injury, try and help them find safer ways of relieving the stress. For example, give them a glove to bite instead of biting their hand.

If the person you are supporting has limited communication, ensure that you have given them every opportunity to communicate their needs (through pictures, apps, sign language etc.). Make detailed records of the situations before, during and after the incident and discuss these situations with others who know the person well. Always ensure that the autistic person is central to any discussions on their health and wellbeing.

Useful resources

'Managing stress and anxiety: supporting autistic people'

Autism West Midlands information sheet available from:

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/online-resources/information-resources

'Autism and behaviours of concern'

Autism West Midlands information sheet available from:

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/online-resources/information-resources/