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& ASSOCIATES**



# MELTDOWNS & SHUTDOWNS

INFOSHEET

**Meltdowns** are visible, outward/external emotional behaviours.  
**Shutdowns** are the inward direction of emotions almost like paralysis.

## What is it Like to Experience a Meltdown?

### Actions

pacing, stomping, banging, yelling, pursed lips before the outburst to silence, rocking, self-injury, crying non-stop. Very verbal - fixated on topics,

### Body Sensations

anger seething through veins, heart palpitations, feeling like the containment of emotions will burst, sweating, sobbing, can feel like panic attack

### Emotions

overwhelmed, angry, confused, inner commotion, intense emotions, not sure of one's emotions

### Thoughts

raging angry thoughts, confusion, brain shutting down, coping strategies not accessible

## What is it Like to Experience a Shutdown?

### Actions

pacing, rubbing hands, withdrawing from the environment, lack of eye contact, losing one's own words or inability to speak, not eating or disordered eating. Meltdown can occur afterwards.

### Body Sensations

sensory overload, animation drained out of one's body, loss of control of senses, fatigue, sweating immobile

### Emotions

withdrawal of emotions, despondent

### Thoughts

paralysis of thoughts, dissociation, brain fog, confusion

I like to think of autistic shutdowns as an out-of-service phone. You might be able to use the phone for basic, emergency function, but using it as you normally do is out of the question. Sometimes you can operate with the 1% you have left, but at others, it runs out right when you need it the most, leaving you completely drained and shut off from the rest of the world.

- **Rebeka Gillian**

## What Can Trigger a Meltdown or Shutdown?



An accumulation of stress from sensory exposure, information overload or interpersonal issues or one large event causing distress. Unexpected changes in expectations or situations. Facing exploitation, injustice and authority figures. Feeling misunderstood or misperceived. Sensory or emotional overload. Situational trauma. Behaviours that are rude, confusing and hurtful from others.

## What Helps?

### What you can do

- Check in with your needs (e.g. are you hungry, thirsty, tired, etc.)
- Find a quiet place where you can sit and be alone
- Use a mindfulness app
- Distraction through music, watching a video, or looking at soothing pictures
- Bringing a small bag of sensory items with you when you go out, such as fidget toys and ear plugs
- Planning ahead and being mindful if a situation or place will be overwhelming, so you can have things to support you (e.g. earplugs)
- Some people become nonspeaking during meltdowns and shutdowns. It can be helpful to carry a card with you that explains the situation, so that you can let someone know how they can help you

### What others can do

- If someone is having a meltdown, help them find a quiet place to sit or lie down
- Understand that an experience can be distressing for an autistic person even if it does not bother you
- After someone has a meltdown, you can reassure them if they feel embarrassed or upset by what happened

### What society can do

- Having more quiet spaces and sensory rooms for people in public places, such as airports, train stations, and malls
- Quieter public spaces, to decrease sensory overload for people

# Resources



[Rebeka Gillian: The difference meltdowns vs shutdown](#)



[The autistic life instagram My experiences with Shutdowns](#)



[Understanding Shutdowns and Autism](#)



[Overload, meltdown, shutdown, burnout So, you're autistic](#)



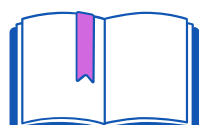
[How does it feel to have an autistic meltdown and how you can help? BBC Social](#)



[How I Explain the Clarity I Feel After an Autism Meltdown The Mighty](#)



[From Anxiety to Meltdown \(2011\) Deborah Lipsky](#)



[The Autism Discussion Page on Stress, Anxiety, Shutdowns and Meltdowns \(2019\) Bill Nason](#)



[Amythest Schaber What are Autistic Meltdowns?](#)



[Amythest Schaber What are Autistic Shutdowns?](#)



[Souls of the feet exercise help autistics Mindfulness Institute Jefferson](#)



[Dori Zener ACT 2017 Practical Strategies for Supporting Mental Wellness of Teenage Girls and Women with ASD Part 3: Meltdown, Shutdowns and Emotional Regulation](#)

## References

1. <https://www.actcommunity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Dori-Zener-Practical-Strategies-for-Supporting-Mental-Wellness-of-Teenage-Girls-and-Women-with-ASD.pdf>
2. <https://rebekahgillian.co.uk/meltdowns-vs-shutdowns/?fbclid=IwAR1RHwemwd-Q28klAvt-9kNncD0CeRmjDBcaFMUA6II9uLkmYfsfEI3F-pl>