

# Autism and emotional regulation



If you experience issues with emotional regulation, anxiety, feelings of overwhelm or depression, you're not alone. Autistic people are more likely than other people to experience mental health issues. They're also more likely to experience mental health issues that might have different roots to many other people and may be triggered by specific situations and events.

Here are some of the issues which autistic people commonly experience and how you can learn to support your mental health needs whilst improving emotional regulation.

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## Meltdowns

"Meltdowns" means something slightly different to everyone who experiences them, but what most autistic people commonly agree on is that a meltdown is an extreme response. Some people experience meltdowns as crying, shouting or screaming. Others might find themselves breaking objects or becoming violent to others. Some people might bang their head, pull or cut their hair, or engage in self-harming behaviours. What these responses have in common is that they have an element of feeling out of control and extreme.

Meltdowns are most commonly triggered in response to sensory or emotional overwhelm. Autistic people often have a history of experiencing meltdowns in childhood. It can be helpful to think of the brain as having a very primitive centre responsible for keeping us alive and taking care of basic functions such as breathing. It also has an emotional centre, which is responsible for our fear response, bonding, and emotional connection. It also has a more logical centre, that evaluates whether situations really are threatening and how to respond to particular triggers. If we imagine the emotional and more rational parts of the brain as communicating all the time, what happens in the autistic brain is that the logical brain appears to take longer to communicate to the emotional brain that a situation is ok. As a result, autistic people seem to get "stuck" in their emotional state for longer and find it harder to calm down.

Autistic people often find it very difficult to cope with a change in plan or a disruption to their routine. They have strong expectations of how things "should" be, and cannot respond easily when things go wrong. These types of events are often triggers for meltdowns. People often have meltdowns after a build-up of events which, one on top of another, eventually lead to a feeling of being unable to take any more.

## Shutdowns

In contrast to meltdowns, some autistic people experience shutdowns. Like meltdowns, people experience shutdowns differently from each other. Many people describe shutting down as feeling completely drained to the point where they cannot communicate or take in information. They feel as if their senses are shutting down. Some people describe it as feeling as if they are blank, or there is nothing there, as they stop processing information

around them. Most people feel as if they have reached a point where there is nothing left and can only respond by being silent.

Like meltdowns, shutdowns can be triggered by sensory, emotional or social overload and may represent the end point in a build-up of stressful or overwhelming situations. Autistic people tend to shut down when there are no alternatives, and they have reached a point where the only coping mechanism available is to be there without processing things any further.

## Anxiety

Autistic people commonly experience anxiety, which often goes back to childhood. It can be challenging to determine what triggers anxiety as there are so many triggers and it points to your brain working slightly differently than many people's. One model which could help to understand why you experience anxiety is the "Predictive Brain" model, which has been supported by research.

As humans, we take in information through our senses, which we have to make sense of. But we also learn about what is threatening or safe based on past experience; we make models of what "should" happen based on what we already know to be "true". These models can respond to adaptations – if we expect our bus to turn up at 3.10 and it's a few minutes late, we know this is a reasonable adjustment. But autistic people find it hard to respond to differences in their models. They think there's something wrong if they expect the bus to turn up at 3.10 and it's late. It causes anxiety. They're always taking in new information, which becomes exhausting and worrying, as they try to make sense of the world around them. This is one of the reasons autistic people tend to like having routines which help them feel safe and why they feel so anxious when things don't go according to plan or they're faced with new situations. They don't have the same safety net as many others to make sense of the world around them.

Becoming overwhelmed as the result of too many demands, social anxiety and sensory overload all contribute to feelings of anxiety. The lack of sleep that many autistic people experience and patterns of over-thinking, particularly concerning social issues that is common in autistic people, all contribute to feelings of anxiety.

## Depression

Autistic people may experience depression for many reasons, including feeling isolated and overwhelmed. The roots of depression may not always be understood and may go back to childhood experiences or be related to how someone's brain works. Many autistic people, however, find that their depressive symptoms are worse sometimes than others, including when they feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to cope with life. Depression is a complex condition to describe, but many autistic people feel that their symptoms are rooted in difficulties with managing everyday life.

## Self-care measures

### The way your brain processes the world is different

Many autistic people feel a sense of failure because they struggle to manage their emotions or experience anxiety or depression. It's important to remember that if you are autistic, you have a brain more prone to overthinking, worrying, becoming overwhelmed and being less able to remain calm in certain situations. You're simply starting from a different point than most people. Judging yourself harshly for this will only make your mental health issues seem worse.

### Emotional timeline

When you have reached a state of meltdown or shutdown, there is little you can do except wait for it to pass. Once you're in that state, it's difficult for you or anyone else to talk you back to a state of calmness or interaction.

You can learn to become more aware of the earlier signs that might signal you are heading towards a meltdown or shutdown state. Do you tend to lose emotional control after feeling agitated? Are there certain behaviours, such as pacing, talking more quickly or loudly, or becoming more active, that you can recognise as earlier stages in an emotionally dysregulated state? If so, what measures can you implement to help avoid triggering a full-

blown loss of emotional control? Is it possible to withdraw from seeing people at this earlier stage? Can you cut some of your duties for the day? Is it helpful to tell people close to you to give you some space or talk through what is bothering you? Thinking about an "emotional timeline" can help identify the earliest stages and, sometimes, avoid them leading to a heightened sense of distress, upset, overwhelm or anxiety.

### **Moving on from a meltdown**

Meltdowns are not your fault. That doesn't mean they're easy for you or anyone else to deal with, but it is important to work on letting go of the shame or embarrassment you might experience following a meltdown. Explaining to other people why they happen and apologising for any hurt caused is all you can do before choosing to move forwards and looking after yourself, whilst learning more about your triggers and what you need in the aftermath of an intense emotional response.

### **Identify what helps you in a distressed or anxious state**

What helps you feel calmer when you are distressed or anxious? Some people find it helpful to discuss their feelings and any worries they might have. Some find it useful to completely switch their attention to a task which is absorbing. If you have a practice which helps you feel more balanced emotionally, such as practising mindfulness, making time to acknowledge and sit with your feelings can be helpful. Your solutions to feeling calmer may be very different to someone else's. What's important is identifying what you find useful and finding ways to practice that.

### **Sleep and rest**

Autistic people are often exhausted. They have a mind which always feels "on". Sleep issues are common in autistic people, and becoming engrossed in special interests can lead to extreme tiredness, especially if those interests keep you up half the night. Anxiety, low mood and intense emotional reactions can all be worsened as a result of tiredness and stress. Engaging in an interest or activity can seem like a solution to anxiety or low mood, and it

may help take your mind off your thoughts for a while, but if it starts interfering with sleep and your mind gets no "downtime", it could be making you feel more stressed, anxious or overwhelmed. Creating a healthy sleep or rest routine is vital in supporting your mental health.

### **Rumination and talking things through**

When something has gone wrong, many autistic people find it difficult to move beyond it and are prone to rumination. Often, they need to talk things through until they have reached a conclusion. If you need to do this, and have someone close to you who can listen, explain how important it is to keep talking until you have worked through an issue, even if talking includes repeating yourself or going over the same detail more than once.

### **Being unable to communicate**

On the other hand, some autistic people cannot communicate when they are stressed. They struggle to identify or name their emotions, and even if they know the problem, trying to verbalise this to anyone else feels impossible. Autistic people often need space and peace to recover from feeling overwhelmed, distressed or upset. The people around you may not understand what you need when you're feeling bad, so take some time, during calmer moments, to explain to them what is helpful and what is unhelpful.

### **Emotions wheel**

You might find it helpful to work with the "Emotions Wheels" provided, which can help you identify and name some emotions at the root of meltdowns, shutdowns, anxiety and low mood. These emotions wheels have been specially adapted to the needs of autistic people, whose feelings may be experienced and expressed differently to many other people's.

Working with a therapist initially can be helpful, and following on from that, you can keep a copy of your emotions wheel to help you identify what you are feeling at any given time. It can also provide a helpful way of explaining to others what you're feeling without having to verbalise your emotions.