

What are meltdowns?

So meltdowns happen to autistic people when they get to a point where information overload occurs, where things just feel too much. They might have had too much sensory information to process, too much emotional information to process, or just too much verbal information to process. And this can happen over a short period of time and happen quite suddenly, or it can be a build-up over a longer period of time, where there's one final thing that causes the meltdown to happen. So it's important to recognise that every autistic person tends to have meltdowns, whether they're a child or an adult. But meltdowns look very different for each and every individual.

Meltdowns are different from a tantrum. A meltdown is a complete overwhelm of emotion that results in a change in behaviour. The feelings change the behaviour, and these can be seen in things like throwing toys, hiding away, running away, screaming, and emotional outbursts. Meltdowns are a response to an environment that's highly stressful or highly anxiety-provoking, which can feel like it can't be escaped.

There are three responses: you've got the fight, the flight, and the freeze response. A meltdown is also known as the flight response. So when an autistic person is having a meltdown, it is a very external form of expression of their anxiety, feelings, and emotions. It's very outward. It can be misinterpreted as frustration, having a tantrum, or an aggressive panic attack.

For someone like me, I used to have meltdowns quite a lot growing up. It would mean to me start lashing out, kicking around, punching, I'd be throwing things around. I'd be screaming really loudly! Everything was just too much. And instead of, some people lock it in, with me no, it all comes out. Yeah, I can't keep it to myself sometimes. Now I have to get the energy away from me. And that's my example to describe what meltdown is because it's very vocal. You see it again when you see the eruption of a volcano. That's something everyone notices.

What could somebody do if someone close to them is having a meltdown to help?

More often than not, they suggest that you leave them to it. Just make sure they're put in a place where they can't harm themselves. That's because you don't want them anywhere near sharp corners where they can unknowingly start damaging themselves, causing severe injury. So something like a stress room. It could be things like beanbags, just soft items. So even if they do end up hitting them, there's no damage done to the person or to the objects in the room. That's what I was like. But the main thing is to try and recognise the symptoms. What leads up to a meltdown? So for me, well I kind of freeze, I get this death stare. I don't know how to do it right now. So sorry, but my hands start shaking and stuff like this, and you see me start doing that. Like, you can tell I need to go.