

Preventing and dealing with autistic meltdowns

An autistic meltdown is an intense response to an overwhelming situation. It happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their situation and temporarily loses control of their behaviour.

1. Preventing a meltdown



When choosing a venue:

- Identify a quiet space or separate area to withdraw to, away from the main group.
- Choose a low arousal environment, eg no bright lights.
- Ask the venue if therapy dogs are allowed.
- Build relaxation time into the group session, eg puzzles or games.



2. Minimise the causes and identify the triggers



Every autistic person is different, but some common triggers are:

- sensory difference, eg for someone who is over-sensitive to touch and sound, people brushing past them and loud music could cause pain and sensory overload
- changes in routine, eg if the bus was late arriving
- communication difficulties, eg difficulties understanding and expressing their emotions.



3. Managing anxiety



Tools and strategies can help manage feelings of anxiety to prevent a meltdown from occurring. Ask beforehand what strategies work for each member, eg:

- distraction or diversion
- putting on headphones with a calming playlist
- a stress ball in their pocket.

4. Anticipating a meltdown



Many autistic people will show signs of distress before having a meltdown, which is sometimes referred to as the “rumble stage”. They may show signs of anxiety through:

- pacing
- seeking reassurance through repetitive questioning
- physical actions, such as rocking or becoming very still.

At this stage, there may still be a chance to prevent a meltdown. Ask the person if they would like to go to the quiet area and use their calming strategies.

5. What to do if a meltdown occurs



If someone is having a meltdown, they may or may not respond to you.

- Give them time - it can take a while to recover from information or sensory overload.
- Apply any known calming strategies.
- Ask if they would like to go to the quiet space to keep themselves and the other members safe.
- Ask the other members to move, not to stare, turn off loud music and turn down bright lights - whatever you can think of to reduce the information overload.
- Stay calm.