

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.