A fact sheet about

Recovering without shame

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Recovering without shame

Where the shame comes from, and one kind sentence to say afterwards.



Key points

- A meltdown happens when more is coming in than you can take. It is not a moral failure.
- The shame afterwards usually comes from years of being judged by a standard that was not built for you, more than from the meltdown itself.
- Self-compassion (definition below) means being as kind to yourself as you would be to a friend in the same spot.
- One step to try: write down, on a good day, the sentence you would say to a friend after a meltdown. Say it to yourself next time.

What self-compassion is

The meltdown was an hour ago and you are quiet now, but the replay has started. You may be thinking about what the person at the counter thought. Or you keep hearing what your sibling said on the phone, or every other time this has happened. You feel you should be over it by now, and you are not.

Often it is not the meltdown that keeps the evening going. It is the harsh things you say to yourself afterwards. Self-compassion is a different way to talk to yourself, and it has been studied a lot.

Self-compassion means treating yourself, when things go wrong, the way you would treat a friend you care about. It has three parts:

- being kind to yourself instead of judging yourself harshly
- remembering that everyone struggles, so it does not mean something is wrong with you
- noticing the pain clearly, without pushing it away and without being swallowed by it

Where the shame comes from

A meltdown happens when more is coming in than your nervous system can take. Thinking goes foggy, words may go, and the part of you that would choose differently is not there in that moment. It is your body reaching its limit, it is not a choice you made badly.

The shame usually started long before this meltdown. You may have been told as a child that meltdowns were naughty. As an adult, you may have been called too sensitive or too much. Some autistic adults describe keeping their meltdowns inside, so nobody sees, because of how other people react.

Research with autistic adults found that people who come to believe the unkind things said about them have poorer mental health. So do people who spend a lot of energy hiding who they are. Shame after a meltdown can be that same judgement, learned from others and now said in your own voice. Many ADHD and other neurodivergent adults describe the same thing, from their own lived experience.

If the word in your head afterwards is "broken" or "too much", it is worth asking whose word it was first. Your nervous system has not failed. It reached the end of what it could take that day.

After a meltdown you need rest, quiet and fewer demands. Shame keeps the meltdown going in your head, and that uses up the energy you need to recover. Research has found that people who treat themselves kindly after something goes wrong react less harshly to it. They can also look at their own part in what happened without feeling swamped. That helps if someone saw the meltdown, because it is easier to make things right when you are not defending yourself.

Research has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So it may not match your life exactly. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

You can read more about what helps in the hours after a meltdown here.

The one thing to try: one kind sentence, written in advance

On a good day, imagine a friend telling you they had a meltdown in the supermarket. Or imagine they went silent on the phone and could not explain why. Write down the one sentence you would say to them.

It might be something like:

- "A lot came at you at once, and you hit your limit."
- "You do not owe anyone an explanation tonight."
- "It happened, it is over, and you are allowed to rest."

Keep it where you will see it afterwards, such as on your phone, the fridge or inside a cupboard door. Next time, say it to yourself, out loud or in your head, even if you do not believe it yet. You wrote it on a day when you could think clearly, so it is worth saying anyway.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app to write it, and keep the sentence in your notes there.

The kind sentence may feel fake at first. For some autistic adults, being kind to themselves even felt upsetting when they first started. If that happens, go slowly, and come back to it on a calmer day. The sentence will not stop the replay, but it puts a kinder voice next to the harsh one. That leaves more room for the rest, food and quiet you need. Other people may still judge you, but you do not have to agree with them.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point. This matters most if shame is following you most days, or has turned into hating yourself. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can also talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with shame, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

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