A fact sheet about

Meltdowns and shutdowns

Understanding Zoe

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Understanding Zoe

Meltdowns and shutdowns

What happened, why it was not a choice, and what helps in the hours after.



Key points

- A meltdown and a shutdown are the same overload going two ways (definition below). It can go outward, as tears, snapping or needing to get out. Or it can go inward, as going flat and quiet, and finding it hard to speak, communicate or decide.
- Neither one is bad behaviour or a choice. People say they lose clear thinking, and often words, while it is happening.
- What may help afterwards is recovering first: quiet, rest, food, water and as few demands as you can manage. Talking it through can come later.
- It can help to write a three-line plan for afterwards on a good day, because it is very hard to plan in the hour after.

What overload is

You get back to the car after a busy shop, a trolley bumps the door, and you are crying too hard to drive. Or a relative rings while you are cooking and asks a simple question about the weekend. You cannot answer, you cannot say why, and you can only wait for the call to end.

Most of what is written about meltdowns is about children. For adults, it is often more private and better hidden.

Overload happens when more is coming in than your nervous system can take. That can be sound, light, people, demands, feelings, surprises, or a long day of all of them at once.

Overload builds up, so the thing that tips you over is rarely the whole cause. It is the last thing added to a load that was already nearly full. That is why the last straw can look small to other people, and to you afterwards.

When the load gets too big, it tends to come out in one of two ways.

A meltdown goes outward. It can look like sudden tears, a raised voice, swearing, needing to get out of the room, or throwing something.

A shutdown goes inward. You go flat and quiet, and speaking, typing or communicating can get very hard. Decisions can feel impossible, and you may hardly be able to move.

You may know one of these, or the other, or both.

Why neither is a choice

Autistic adults say that during a meltdown their thinking goes foggy and their memory slips. They feel unlike themselves, even while they try hard to stay in control. Many say a meltdown is also a release, a way for feelings that have built up too high to come out.

People describe a shutdown as being frozen, like a computer that has crashed, or as going somewhere deep inside themselves. Many link it to survival, with the body protecting itself from too much.

The parts of you that would explain, say sorry and make a plan were not working during it. Many people also feel very tired once it ends. So the hours afterwards are for recovering, and the explaining can come later.

The words meltdown and shutdown come from the autistic community, and most of the research has asked autistic people. Many ADHD and other neurodivergent adults know them too. The research on neurodivergent adults is still small but many share the same experience. More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So your experience may look a bit different. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: write your after plan on a good day

The hour after a meltdown or shutdown is the hardest time to work out what you need, because deciding is one more demand. That is why it helps to decide now, on a good day.

Write three lines:

What I need first: a dark room, a shower, lying under something heavy, headphones, a walk on my own, or someone sitting nearby without talking.

What I do not need: questions about what happened, being told to calm down, decisions, or a talk about it tonight.

Who to tell, and in what words: one person and one short message, such as "I have had a meltdown, I am safe, I will talk tomorrow." You can say it, text it, or keep it written on a card ready to hand over.

Put it where you will find it without thinking, like a note on your phone, the fridge door, or with someone you live with. You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app to write it, and keep the plan in your notes there.

This plan comes from what autistic adults say helps them afterwards, and ADHD and other neurodivergent adults may find the same things help. It is for the hours afterwards, not for stopping overload. What matters most is learning what helps you.

What helps afterwards

Start by looking after your body. Lower the noise and light, rest, eat something, drink water, and get warm or cool. Then keep demands as low as you can for the rest of the day, and cancel what you can.

Looking back can wait a day or two, and some days you can skip it. When you do look back, ask what came before: it might be noise or crowds, people, a change of plan, too many demands, or a long stretch of holding it together. What you find tells you how full your load was that day.

Once you can communicate again, in whatever way works for you, you can let anyone who saw it know what happened. Speaking, typing, a text, a card you wrote on a good day, or an AAC (communication) app all count. Keep it short: what happened, and what helps if it happens again. They may not respond the way you hoped, and that part is not up to you. If shame stays with you afterwards, you can read more about recovering after a meltdown without shame here.

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, whether this happens often or only once in a while. If meltdowns or shutdowns are coming often, it can mean your load has been too big for a while. 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 sensory load and with how your day is set up. 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.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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