A fact sheet about

Meltdowns, shutdowns and panic attacks

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Meltdowns, shutdowns and panic attacks

Where each one starts, how they differ, and what each may need.



Key points

- Meltdowns, shutdowns and panic attacks can look alike from the outside, but they start in different places.
- A meltdown or a shutdown starts with too much coming in: more noise, people, demands or change than you can take.
- A panic attack starts with your body's alarm going off. Then the alarm itself becomes the thing you fear. This is called fear of fear (definition below).
- So they may need different things. Overload needs less coming in. Panic needs time for the feelings to peak and pass, knowing that they will.

What a panic attack is

You are in a supermarket queue, your heart starts pounding, your hands tingle, and you feel sure something is badly wrong with you. On another day, in the same queue, the beeping and the lights become too much. You leave your trolley and walk out.

From the outside, both can look like someone leaving in a hurry, and both can feel frightening. It helps to know which one it was, because they may need different things.

A panic attack is a sudden wave of strong fear or discomfort in your body, and it peaks within minutes. It usually comes with several of these at once:

- a pounding heart, or a tight chest
- being short of breath
- sweating, shaking or tingling
- feeling dizzy, or feeling unreal
- a fear of dying or losing control

A panic attack can happen to anyone. In one large survey of adults in the United States, more than a quarter had had at least one. Panic disorder is different. It is when attacks keep coming without warning, and worry about the next one starts to change how you live.

A panic attack often starts with an ordinary feeling in your body. Your heart beats faster after the stairs, a coffee or a sudden noise. You read it as a sign of danger, like a heart attack, fainting or losing your mind. That makes you more afraid, and fear makes your heart beat even faster. The faster heartbeat then seems to prove the danger is real.

So the feelings in your body become the thing you are afraid of. That is what fear of fear means. It is also why a panic attack can come in a calm moment, when nothing around you has changed.

How a meltdown or a shutdown is different

A meltdown or a shutdown starts outside you, with load. Sound, light, people, demands, feelings and surprises build up until more is coming in than you can take. The last thing is rarely the whole cause. It is just the last thing added.

A meltdown pushes that load outward, as tears, snapping or needing to get out. A shutdown pulls it inward, as going flat and quiet, and finding it hard to speak, communicate or decide. You can read more about what meltdowns and shutdowns look like, and what helps afterwards, here.

The clearest difference is what came first:

- Panic usually starts with a feeling in your body, and a frightening thought about what it means.
- Overload usually starts with the world around you: noise, crowds, demands, a change of plan, or a long day of holding it together.

In a panic attack, the main feeling is fear. Autistic adults say meltdowns can include fear too, along with anger, sadness and foggy thinking. But people describe shutdowns as feeling frozen or stuck.

Sometimes they happen together. A day of overload can include a panic attack, and fear and a racing body can be part of a meltdown. Panic attacks happen to people of every neurotype.

The words meltdown and shutdown come from the autistic community, and many other neurodivergent adults use them too. More broadly, research has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

What each one may need in the moment

For overload, what may help is less coming in. That means fewer demands, less noise and light, and no decisions. You can read more about cutting down what is coming in here.

For panic, what may help is letting the wave peak and pass. You can tell yourself plainly that this is panic and that it peaks within minutes. Then let the feelings be there, rather than fighting them. This can take practice, because knowing what it is does not switch the fear off straight away.

The one thing to try: note what came first

In the moment, you usually cannot tell which one it is. That is why this practice happens afterwards.

After the next hard moment, once you are settled, write a few words about what came first. Did it start with too much coming in, or with a frightening feeling in your body? After a few of these, you may see that yours tend to start in one place. That tells you which kind of help to reach for first.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app to do this the day after, and keep your few words in your notes there.

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. A GP is a good place to start, especially if panic attacks keep coming or you avoid places in case one happens. 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 panic and with sensory load. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Chest pain always needs checking, because a panic attack and a heart problem can feel alike. If you are in any doubt, call 000 and ask for an ambulance. For health advice at any hour, call healthdirect on 1800 022 222.

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