MELTDOWN SURVIVAL GUIDE

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MOM ON THE SPECTRUM





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WHAT IS AN AUTISTIC MELTDOWN?

Sometimes during times of prolonged stress in autistic individuals, certain senses can stop working as usual and other senses may start working harder than usual. For example, lights might seem excessively bright, nothing tastes good, and touch is overwhelming.

There is evidence to support that the Nervous System works harder for individuals on the spectrum (particularly the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS))*. The SNS functions like a gas pedal. It increases heart rate, dilates pupils, and activates sweat glands. It gets you ready to fight. The Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) helps bring your body back to homeostasis by regulating body temperature, heart rate, and overall making you feel more calm. It's like the brakes. It has been suggested that the PNS may take longer to kick in for those with autism*.

When the SNS is in overdrive pushing your heart rate up and making you feel anxious, it's much easier to become upset and overwhelmed by things that normally don't bother you (or bother you much less).

An **Autistic Meltdown** occurs when the nervous system has been continually overwhelmed by sensory input without rest and begins shutting down. The ability to communicate suffers and may be accompanied by a loss of sense-of-self or confusion about one's own needs.

Living in a state of meltdown for a prolonged period of time leads to an **Autistic Shutdown**, which is similar but more intense, lasts for a longer period of time, and requires a more substantial recovery period.



IMAGE: person sitting down clasping knees with head hanging down signifying exhaustion and fatigue

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POTENTIAL MELTDOWN TRIGGERS

Triggers are things specific to each individual that upset the nervous system and add stress. As triggers compound without being dealt with, it pushes one closer to the point of meltdown. Over time you will learn to understand your own triggers and may even anticipate some before they happen. It may be helpful to keep a list of your triggers to help you learn to navigate stressful situations.

Potential Triggers (the list is endless)

- Not enough sleep
- Itchy clothes
- Too many people talking at once
- Loud noises
- Bright lights
- Being misunderstood/unable to communicate
- Too many events in one day
- Not enough alone time
- Not enough time for special interests



IMAGE: person with lightning bolts above their head signifying frustration

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SIGNS YOU'RE IN A MELTDOWN



IMAGE: Three exclamation points that go from largest to smallest

As you learn to understand and identify your own personal triggers, it becomes easier to acknowledge when you are actually in a meltdown. Accepting that you are in a meltdown is the first step of recovery.

This is another area where it might be helpful to keep track of your own meltdown experiences. You will start to learn more of the "giveaways" that help signal you are in meltdown mode and need to spend time in recovery.

Signs You're In a Meltdown (just a few examples... add your own!)

- Extra sensitive to touch, light, sound, texture, taste, smell
- Lack of communication/eye contact
- Increased irritability
- Mood swings/tantrums
- Uninterested in things you usually like/lack of desire
- Feeling like you want to crawl out of your skin
- Increased anxiety and/or depression
- Unsure of how to help yourself

As soon as you become aware that you're in a meltdown, it's time to focus on sensory regulation and recovery. If you fail to give yourself the necessary time to recover, you will likely enter a period of shutdown which is more intense and prolonged, and requires even more recovery time. Let's figure out how to work with your nervous system to get back to a place of wholeness and strength.

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SENSORY REGULATION

The goal with sensory regulation is to help your body find its way back to homeostasis... a place where you are no longer in fight or flight and are able to more easily navigate your day-to-day responsibilities.

Some of these activities may not be available to you, depending on the severity of your meltdown. Start with what feels easiest and remember that many times, less is more.

Stimming

Any activity that allows physical energy to leave your body.

Ex: Blinking, twirling hair, clapping, repeating sounds, dancing, hitting the floor, jumping on a trampoline, drumming, fidget toys, etc.

Breathing

Mindful, slow breathing.

Ex: Try box breathing: In for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, pause for 4, repeat

Also related, try the **Valsalva maneuver**. Blow against a closed airway by pinching your lips, closing your lips together and blowing out like a puffer fish. This activates the vagus nerve which is key in regulating your nervous system.

Physical Exercise

Anything you can do to engage the Sympathetic Nervous System with quick bursts of energy (think jumping jacks or running up and down your street) will also alert your body to activate the Parasympathetic Nervous System which will help everything come back down. Listen to your body and don't push past what feels safe.

Yoga is a wonderful form of exercise during a meltdown. Focus on breathing and stretching. Inversions like downward dog, legs up a wall, and headstand/handstand are also helpful.

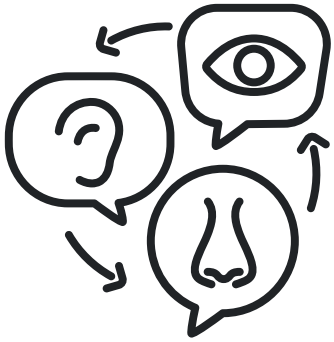


IMAGE: Three speech bubbles connected by arrows pointing counter-clockwise. In the bubbles: an eye, an ear, a nose, representing the senses

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SENSORY REGULATION (CONT.)

Intentionally Activate Your Senses

Experiencing the world through your senses in a way that feels safe can take you out of your thinking brain and into more of an experiential brain. This can take your mind off of anxiety and worry based in the past or future. Bring attention to the present moment by activating your senses in an enjoyable way

Ex: Smell a candle, go for a walk, cuddle with a pet, listen to music, splash cool water on the back of your neck and/or wrists, take a bath

Total Rest

Do absolutely nothing in a comfortable position. If you don't have energy to brush your teeth, shower, or do laundry, don't. The energy will come back eventually, and if you push too hard you'll only prolong your shutdown. If you're unable to eat or take care of your medical needs, seek the help of someone you trust or contact your doctor.

TOTAL SHUTDOWN/PANIC ATTACK HELP

- Seek a quiet place where you feel safe and protected.
- Splash cold water on your face, behind your neck, and on your wrists.
- Bring your arms up and overhead then pull back and down as you take deep breaths. Looking up to the sky and opening your chest makes it easier to breathe.
- For me personally, in these situations I also need deep pressure (firm hug from a partner or heavy weighted blanket) and a completely isolated place where no one is talking to me.
- Remind yourself that you can do hard things. This experience is temporary and will pass.

IMAGE: Spiked-star that resembles a "pop" or explosion to signify panic



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HELPFUL PRODUCTS AND RESOURCES

Click on any underlined product to be directed to Amazon where you can learn more about and/or purchase specific products I use.

Play Dough

Sensory Bins

Weighted Blanket

Weighted Lap Blanket (for use at desk)

Soundproof Headphones

Thinking Putty

Eye Mask (to shut out light)

Beanie (hat) to add compression around your head

Fidget Toys

Chewing Necklace

Trampoline

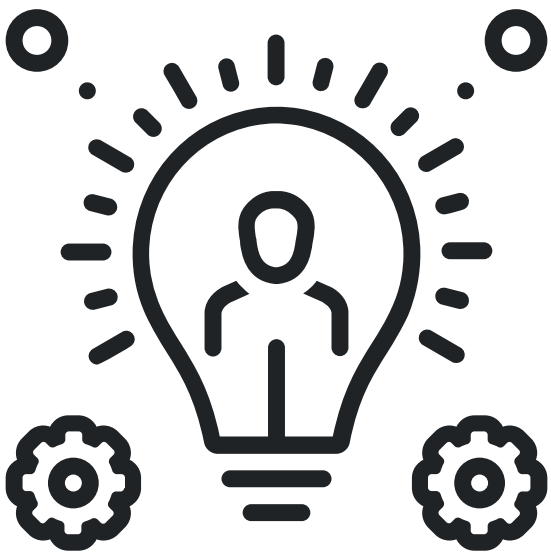
Swing

Visual Schedule System

Mom on the Spectrum Videos

1 on 1 Session with Tay

IMAGE: Light bulb with the outline of a person inside of it surrounded by gears to signify invention and resources



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ANTICIPATING FUTURE MELTDOWNS

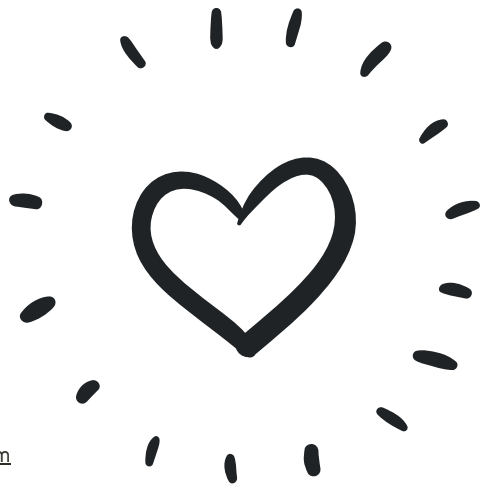
As you learn more about your own unique triggers and what works for you on the road to recovery (keep notes!), you will gain skill in terms of how you manage yourself during a meltdown. It doesn't necessarily get easier, but I believe with practice, you can learn how to show yourself more grace and patience on the road to healing, which can make a world of difference.

Take the time YOU need to feel OK. Do the things YOU need to do to process all of the thoughts and feelings involved. It's ok to think whatever you're thinking and feel whatever you're feeling. Accept it with grace and respect for yourself and allow your body to help guide you towards what it needs next.

I'd love to hear your own ideas and strategies for navigating meltdowns. Please message me using the contact info on the last page. My favorite aspect of this experience is getting to know all of YOU!

And most importantly, remember you're not alone. There's a whole community waiting to connect with you at youtube.com/MomOnTheSpectrum.

IMAGE: One heart surrounded by a circle of small tick marks signifying love being sent out



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FOOTNOTES

Evidence for decreased parasympathetic response to a novel peer interaction in older children with ASD:
https://jneurodevdisorders.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s11689-020-09354-x

How the Autonomic Nervous System May Govern Anxiety in Autism:
https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/how-the-autonomic-nervous-system-may-govern-anxiety-in-autism/

CONTACT ME



Thank you for supporting me! I love doing what I do and YOU make it possible.

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