

UNDERSTANDING AUTISTIC MELTDOWNS

Meltdowns are not caused by being autistic, but are usually due to environments that are not adjusted for the needs of autistic people.

1

UNDERSTAND

Autistic meltdowns are **not** tantrums but an **involuntary fight/flight response**. They are different to panic attacks also. They are triggered by things such as: anxiety, stress, sensory overload, changes, not feeling heard, pain, too many demands, dysphoria, lack of autonomy. The autistic person might stim more; this can indicate increased **distress** (rocking, pacing, hand flapping, even head banging)



2

RESPONSE

To help them, remain as **calm** as possible. Turn off/down any media, lighting, etc, that might be increasing sensory distress. Give them space. Do **not** touch, stare at, stand over them or shout. Do **not** restrain them or tell them to stop. **One** person supporting the autistic person is best if possible. Please always **presume competence**.



3

COMPASSION

Show compassion and **validation** because although the autistic person may appear angry and may shout or swear - they are very scared and **distressed**. High levels of cortisol and adrenaline are being pumped into their bloodstream (due to the fight/flight response). They may not be able to stop without calm, kind and compassionate support.



4

TALK LESS

They are extremely **overwhelmed** and may not be able to hear what you say, see clearly, give eye contact, be able to speak or answer questions. Keep any talking or questions to a bare **minimum** and help them get to a quieter place if needed or possible. Please do not make any demands of them. Do not leave them alone but do not crowd them.



5

TIME

An autistic person cannot snap out of a meltdown. It takes time for adrenaline and cortisol levels to be balanced. Afterwards the autistic person may feel humiliated and ashamed - please maintain **respect** as meltdowns are **not** a choice. They are **not bad or challenging behaviour**. Telling them off is not helpful or necessary. It can take days or more to experience any regulation and they may be **exhausted** or experience shutdown afterwards.

