

MANAGING OVERWHELM

Here are some reflections and tips from some of the Autistic young adults from our team on how they manage overwhelm, including meltdowns, shutdowns & burnouts.



TIPS & SUPPORT FOR OUR YOUNGER AUTISTIC PEERS

- Immersing yourself in your passions and interests can be a great way to destress or bring comfort, as can connecting with pets. Please see our related tip sheet for more details.
- Try to identify things that can set you off, so that you can avoid or minimise them, or ask for help with them if you need it.
- Pick a time when you are feeling calm to let the important people in your life know how they can support you when you are overwhelmed. If you are uncomfortable having this type of conversation, you can write a note or draw a picture showing things that help you.
- If there is an upcoming event or activity that is unfamiliar or one that you think might be overwhelming, identify some ways you can take a break or recharge. For instance, this might be having a quiet place where you can retreat during a busy family gathering or loud school event. Ask someone you trust - like a family member, friend or teacher - to help you create a plan.
- Have a “sensory kit” that you can easily access to help reduce overwhelm, such as ear defenders, favourite music and calming stim toys.
- Many Autistic & other neurodivergent people have difficulty with interoceptive awareness -- identifying and interpreting our body’s internal signals. This can make self-regulation difficult. Simple interoception exercises (see resources) can help build that awareness.
- Look for signs that you might be approaching burnout, like being totally irritated or angered by things that normally are okay, feeling less energy to do things you are typically very interested in or feeling confused about what you need to do. These can all be signs that you need to take a significant break.
- If you’ve experienced a meltdown, shutdown or burnout, you are not alone. Something that might give you reassurance -- as well as some additional ideas for supporting yourself -- is hearing experiences from other Autistic young people and adults. There are some valuable links at the end of this tip sheet.
- You can ask for professional help. In addition to mental health professionals who might be part of your care team, there are also helplines you can access confidentially:

Lifeline: 13 11 14 (www.lifeline.org.au) Beyond Blue:1300 22 4636 (www.beyondblue.org.au)

Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800 (kidshelpline.com.au) Headspace: (headspace.org.au)

TIPS & INSIGHTS FOR THE ADULTS SUPPORTING AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE



- Remember, a meltdown is not a tantrum; it is the involuntary result of a person being unable to cope with their current circumstances.
- Unstructured downtime is really important to balance out demands (academic, social, etc.)
- This might include mental health days, a relaxation of extracurriculars, appointments and/or assignments.
- If you notice that your young person is becoming stressed, try to preempt a meltdown by suggesting they take a break.
- Understand that Autistic people often need time and space to recharge when we become overwhelmed. If your young person signals - with words or body language - that they want to be left alone, please respect their wishes.
- Busy times of the year, like the holiday season, can be particularly overwhelming for many Autistic people. Parents, carers & other trusted adults can play an important role in helping protect an Autistic young person's space.
- If other people (e.g. family members at a holiday event) question why your young person needs a break, please don't "blame" the young person or use negative language. Instead, use it as an opportunity to help others grow in their own understanding (see resources below).
- Normalise sensory toys/fidgets and breaks. Some young people can feel self-conscious about their sensory needs. This is not a taboo subject, and thinking about your own sensory profile and needs can encourage dialogue around what strategies you both use to manage your sensory needs. This can also help to empower your young person to come up with their own strategies that help them to self-regulate.
- Demonstrate recognising your own stress levels and modelling to your young person what you do to safeguard your own wellbeing.
- Invite your young person to have some down time with you, this gives you the opportunity to co-regulate, and might bring opportunities for heart-to-hearts, or just a quiet moment together.

FURTHER READING/RESOURCES BY AUTISTIC VOICES:

- For an Autistic teen's perspective, please see Speaking of Autism - Quincy Hansen: [Understanding Meltdowns & Autism](#) and [Understanding Shutdowns & Autism](#);
- From Amythest Schaber of "Ask an Autistic": [What Are Autistic Meltdowns?](#), [What Are Autistic Shutdowns?](#) and [What Is Autistic Burnout?](#)
- Valuable interoception information and exercises (for various ages) via the [Ready To Learn Interoception Kit](#)
- [The Guide to Good Mental Health on the Autism Spectrum](#) by Yenn Purkis, Dr Emma Goodall & Dr Jane Nugent