



ND Meltdown & Shutdown Support Guides

Quick, practical support for moments of nervous system overload

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

Meltdowns and shutdowns are **predictable nervous system responses**, not behavioural choices.

These guides focus on:

- immediate safety
- de-escalation
- dignity
- faster recovery
- prevention of repeat harm

They are designed for **workplaces, education, healthcare, families, and ND individuals themselves.**

PART 1. Meltdown Support Guide

(High activation / outward expression)

What a meltdown is

A meltdown occurs when emotional, sensory, or cognitive load exceeds regulation capacity and energy **discharges outward.**

This is not loss of control through choice.
It is **loss of access.**

In the moment: what TO DO

Your priorities are:

1. Reduce threat
2. Reduce stimulation
3. Reduce demand

Supportive actions

- Lower your voice and slow your pace
- Reduce the audience (move away from others if possible)
- Use short, concrete language
- Offer space or a pause
- Reassure safety (“You’re not in trouble”)
- Let emotion pass without interruption

Helpful phrases

- “You’re safe. We can pause.”
 - “Nothing needs to be decided right now.”
 - “We’ll come back to this later.”
 - “You don’t need to explain.”
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In the moment: what NOT TO DO

Avoid:

- telling someone to calm down
- asking “why” questions
- correcting behaviour
- referencing consequences
- invoking policy or professionalism
- demanding eye contact
- continuing the discussion

If reasoning feels impossible... that’s the point.

After a meltdown (once regulation returns)

Helpful

- Normalise (“Your system was overloaded”)
- Focus on prevention, not behaviour
- Identify early warning signs
- Adjust conditions going forward
- Keep consequences separate from dysregulation

Avoid

- replaying the incident in detail
 - forcing apologies
 - framing it as unacceptable conduct
 - using it as performance evidence
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PART 2. Shutdown Support Guide

(Low activation / withdrawal / collapse)

What a shutdown is

A shutdown occurs when the nervous system **conserves energy inward** to prevent further harm.

It is not disengagement.

It is not refusal.

It is not defiance.

It is **protective withdrawal**.

In the moment: what TO DO

Your priorities are:

1. Reduce demand
2. Reduce stimulation
3. Protect recovery

Supportive actions

- Remove non-essential expectations
- Offer quiet, low-stimulus space
- Allow silence without pressure
- Use optional, non-urgent prompts
- Allow time without monitoring
- Signal safety and patience

Helpful phrases

- “There’s no pressure to respond.”
 - “We can pause this.”
 - “Take the time you need.”
 - “We’ll check in later.”
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In the moment: what NOT TO DO

Avoid:

- pushing for engagement
- repeated check-ins demanding response
- interpreting silence as attitude
- escalating to formal processes
- asking for explanations
- framing withdrawal as avoidance

Pressure during shutdown extends recovery.

After shutdown (re-entry support)

Helpful

- Gentle re-entry without spotlighting
- Reduced expectations temporarily
- Clear, written next steps
- No retroactive judgement
- Focus on future support

Avoid

- “You disappeared” framing
- performance warnings
- moral language
- rushing back to full demand

PART 3. Early Warning Signs (Prevention Zone)

Meltdowns and shutdowns rarely appear without signals.

Common early signs

- increased irritability
- emotional flooding
- cognitive fog
- heightened sensory sensitivity
- withdrawal or reduced speech
- rigid thinking
- loss of task initiation

Responding here prevents escalation.

PART 4. Prevention is Environmental

The most effective prevention is **system design**, not individual coping.

Protective conditions include:

- predictable expectations
- explicit communication
- reduced sensory load
- realistic pacing

- recovery time built in
- psychological safety
- normalised adjustments

No one should have to collapse to be accommodated.

PART 5. For ND individuals (self-support framing)

Meltdowns and shutdowns do **not** mean:

- you are failing
- you are unsafe
- you are unprofessional
- you are broken

They mean:

- your system exceeded capacity
- something needs adjusting
- earlier care is required next time

Learning your patterns is **self-respect**, not self-control.

PART 6. Key principles to remember

- Regulation comes before reasoning
 - Safety comes before policy
 - Silence can be communication
 - Recovery is not avoidance
 - Behaviour during overload is not character
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A final reminder

Meltdowns and shutdowns are not problems to eliminate.

They are signals that conditions need to change.

When environments become safer, clearer, and less demanding, these responses usually **reduce naturally**... without punishment, shame, or force.

That is success.
