



Empower Autism

Managing a Meltdown

Meltdowns can be scary, frustrating, and embarrassing. In fact, dealing with an autism meltdown is possibly one of the most intense experiences many people have in their entire lives. If you are supposed to be ‘in charge’ while a meltdown is occurring, you may experience feelings of panic, hopelessness, and anger. This is normal, but it is still hard. The best meltdown management is, of course, prevention—through the use of schedules, transition warnings, the gradual teaching of coping strategies, and the setting of clear expectations. However, even if you’ve done your best to prevent them, meltdowns are part of life with autism and we cannot avoid them all.

At Empower Autism, we think most (but not all) meltdowns are based on extreme anxiety and intense feelings. Once those feelings abate, a person can find their way back into their routine in a more even-keeled way. The most successful interventions address the anxiety and intense feelings at their root, instead of addressing the immediate behaviors of a meltdown.

Every meltdown is different, but these steps are a good starting place for coping with someone who is having a meltdown:

1. **Safety check:** Ask yourself, “is this an emergency?” An emergency situation is when someone is in danger. Breaking things, screaming, and even minor self-injury is not necessarily an emergency. Running away is sometimes an emergency, but not always. If the situation is not a true emergency, use this list.
2. **Take a deep breath** and tell yourself “OK. This is not an emergency”. This step is crucial, do not skip it! Most meltdowns are not emergencies, although they usually FEEL like emergencies—and the panicked feeling impairs our judgment.
3. **Decide if you want to do anything at all.** You may be able to basically ignore a meltdown that is not an emergency (because often silence/space is what ends a meltdown). If you are at home, can you just walk away? Can you take a child to their room and walk away? Can you take them to the car and stand outside of it for a few minutes? Can you endure the embarrassment of public scene for a few minutes?
4. **Give space if you can:** Many meltdowns are calmed by 5-7 minutes of complete silence and space. If it’s feasible, leave the room, check the time, and wait 5-10 minutes. If a person destroys their own things in their own room—it’s a lesson all on its own.
5. **When you re-engage:** Have two choices in mind (and written down or visually displayed). The choices should be things that the person likes to do, but not their absolute favorite things. (example: draw or read book). You want to get them back on track of doing SOMETHING, so the meltdown can be officially over. DO NOT try to process the meltdown right away. DO NOT say stuff about whatever set them off. DO NOT bring up your hurt feelings. To process successfully, you need to write something down, and the melt-downer needs to be more stable.
6. **Decide about processing:** While the person is doing whatever they chose, decide if you’re going to process the meltdown or not. If so, use our ‘using written explanations’ sheet to make a supporting document. If not, just make a schedule for the rest of day and move on.

What if the meltdown IS an emergency?

If the situation is an emergency (someone is getting hurt or about to get hurt), you will have to intervene. Once you get a person back to a safe or contained environment, you can go to step 2 above. Remember, most meltdowns are not emergencies, and if they are, the emergency part lasts *less than 10 minutes*. Most meltdowns FEEL like emergencies though, and that panicked feeling impairs our judgment. If you routinely have emergency meltdowns in your life, you will need a professional to help your family on a regular basis.

Here are several **emergency scenarios** that may require some level of physical intervention:

1. **RUNNING AWAY:** I know this sounds crazy, but sometimes it's best *not* to aggressively chase someone. It makes the running worse, especially if a person is faster than you, or far enough away that you will probably not catch them. Only aggressively chase someone if you are within a few steps of them, and/or feel reasonably certain you can catch up and contain them within a few seconds. If you do catch up, see if you can just hold a person's hand and say in a positive firm voice "ok, back to the car". If you are scary and loud, you will not inspire anyone to walk with you. It is scarier and more traumatizing if you have to pick a child up and carry them.

If you are in a big park, a big field, or somewhere without traffic, it may be best NOT to chase someone—and instead to follow at a distance where you can keep your eyes on them. You will be in a panic and this will seem like a terrible idea. However, hardly anyone can 'calm down' while they are being actively chased. Once a person is calm—even if you are far away, you can negotiate and make a plan to get back to your car/house/etc. If you are the planning type, you could keep a limited-access, high interest item in your pocket or purse, so you can use to interest the person in returning to your side once they are a little calmer.

If you know a person has a tendency to run away (usually a child), teach a hand holding routine when they are calm. Hold a person's hand on sidewalks and in parking lots to avoid a running-away scenario.

2. **PHYSICAL VIOLENCE:** If a person is hitting/pushing/kicking/hurting you or someone else at home, see if you can get yourself and/or the other person to a different room and close the door. Wait your 5-10 minutes and write down some choices. If a person is hurting you in public and follows you—go to the car and get them inside. Stand outside the car if you can (for your 5 minutes). If you are in a group setting, like a classroom, see if you can move the person (without restraint) to a chill space. If you can't, see if you can move the other people out of a room instead. Once you have secured the situation, wait a full 5-10 minutes and present your choices. Remember to wait to process a meltdown.

If someone is significantly hurting themselves (things like hand biting, minor scratching, hitting that leaves no marks & head butting that leaves no marks are behaviors that warrant eventual attention—but are not emergencies in the moment), see if you can use clothing to block the injury. You can put a sweatshirt between someone's head and whatever they are hitting it against. You can try to put a shirt over someone's finger nails. These are temporary fixes, so that you can do the next step—which is to give a moment or two of silence and then distract the person with something interesting that THEY enjoy. You can plan this distraction move in advance if you want. It usually doesn't help to grab someone's hands or head to stop them from injuring themselves. It is scary to get grabbed and it is hard to think rationally if you are scared. If self-injurious behavior occurs often, you should consult with a behavior specialist to make a plan.

Ongoing self-injurious behavior may be sensory-based, in which case it might make sense to address the sensory need, instead of treating it as misbehavior.

- 3. DANGEROUS ITEMS & PROPERTY DAMAGE:** If a person is holding a knife or a weapon, and is threatening you—get yourself some space. You may consider calling 911, as you would if anyone was threatening you with a weapon. If you think the person may hurt themselves, keep your eyes on them, from a good distance away, and consider calling 911. As a caregiver for someone with autism, you are not expected to be the sort of action-movie hero that somehow knows how to de-escalate a weapons crisis.

If someone is damaging expensive property like TVs and computers—it is not necessarily an emergency, but it will certainly feel like one. Behaviorally, it's best to ignore and walk away, but you may feel the need to physically remove someone from the situation. Keep the physical contact gentle and brief and don't yell. Just get them to their room or somewhere they can finish the meltdown without physical intervention.

If someone is damaging property that puts them or you in physical danger (like punching a window), you may have to physically intervene—again, keep it relatively silent, gentle and brief. Get to a place you can let go of them and give silent space for 5-10 minutes. Once the person is in a contained space, go to step 2.

Most meltdown situations are not true emergencies. However, the ongoing stress of a potential meltdown can truly wear on a person. If you regularly interact with someone who has meltdowns, whether they are dangerous or not, you might consider various stress relief techniques for yourself. Taking care of your own stress is a good idea for your own mental health, but it will also help you make better in-the-moment decisions. People who expect that they can manage some else's meltdowns without any coping techniques often find themselves having their own meltdowns. Some common stress management ideas:

- Regular Exercise
- Talking therapy
- Walking with a friend
- Time alone

Processing a Meltdown (please see out handout on written explanations to assist you with this)

If you choose to process a meltdown, make sure you plan ahead, and do it at a calm time. Here is one way to do it:

1. **Plan your goals.** Some good goals for processing might be: identifying and naming feelings, understanding the rules, or making a good plan for the future. Write down your goals and the specific plan for the future.
2. **Make a visual.** Write a note, use a comic strip conversation, a list, or picture to explain yourself. Write the rule and the plan for the future down in a way the person can understand.
3. **Give advance warning.** Tell the person you're going to talk about the meltdown (put it on the schedule), but tell them they are not in trouble.
4. **Check for understanding.** After you say your piece, ask questions to see you have been understood. See if the person knows when the new system will start, and what the new plan is.
5. **Make it quick.** Nobody likes to re-hash a bad time for very long. If your visual is good, you won't have talk about the situation too much. If the talk is fairly painless and you move on to regularly scheduled programming quickly, the person will be more likely to have another Talk with you later.