

Managing a Meltdown with Someone on the Autism Spectrum

The following list was devised by the team of psychologists at Minds and Hearts during a clinical training session about how to manage a meltdown (an episode when someone is so angry and emotional that he or she may become violent) in the clinic. Parents, teachers and other professionals may benefit from some of these ideas. During an angry episode, the most important thing to do is to stay calm. There are over 40 other ideas here, but during an angry episode not all will be used, only a few, depending on what works at that time with that person. If the person cannot calm down, acting promptly to ensure safety is important, for eg, call the police.

DO's

- 1 Stay calm.
- 2 Ignore the flash points.
- 3 Be assertive.
- 4 Feel confident.
- 5 Clear the decks – remove anyone who is not needed. Get people to safety.
- 6 One person to take control.
- 7 Give a lot of personal space.
- 8 Let them know that “they can leave when they want” → we are neutral in these situations.
- 9 If you bring them in your room, make sure you are close to the exit, and have a shield easily accessible.
- 10 Get help if need be.
- 11 If parent(s) are the target, advise parent(s) to go to a separate area.
- 12 Say “Take a deep breath and close your eyes please”.
or
give solitude – an area to him/herself.

- 13 Give the reason before the direction and don't say "No".
- 14 Give a clear direction of what to do.
- 15 Acknowledge the emotion and then say the direction.
eg, "I see you are feeling stressed. Now is time to calm down."
- 16 Keep the role of the adult – stay calm and don't justify – be firm and in control.
- 17 As soon as they start to calm down, encourage 'that was the smart and the right thing to do'.
- 18 If in doubt – write – don't talk (eg when severely autistic).
- 19 If talking: Use a slow, low tone of voice, and clear, simple, minimal words.
- 20 Give person a timeframe – you will come back in 10 minutes.
- 21 Don't talk about consequences. Can give new information (ie what has to happen next) 30 minutes later (after s/he has calmed down).
- 22 When giving information, sit to side and look away from the face (ie mid-distance, to side, and down).
- 23 Find a calming activity for him/ her to do, eg Lego.
- 24 Give the person an emergency/calming-down box – twiddly toys, puzzles, trucks, catalogues, radio to listen to, stress balls, spinning things.
- 25 Ask the person to sit down.
- 26 Body language is calm – not imposing.
- 27 Join with the client, eg, "I like cricket too".
- 28 Speak to the person as if you are talking to a 2 year old, regardless of size – but not a patronizing tone.
- 29 Appeal to the Special Interest, even get them to write a list (eg list of cricketers).
- 30 Give a compliment. (You are too smart to be upset.)
- 31 Something to look forward to - divert
- 32 Access a good memory.
- 33 Praise when you get compliance. "That was the smart thing to do. I think you made a good choice".

- 34 If in doubt – listen.
- 35 Use natural distractions.
- 36 Avoid arguments.
- 37 Ask for permission before using touch (and only when it is appropriate).
- 38 Saying “Thank you!” when they calm down.
- 39 Show them you haven’t changed your view of them (that you still admire and respect them).
- 40 Verbalise and validate feelings, eg. “I can see you are upset.”
- 41 Say “Its time to calm down now.’
- 42 Say “I’m going to help you to calm down.’

DON'TS

- 1 Don’t touch the person, unless it is a protective action to stop violence.
- 2 Don’t match the person’s mood with your speech, ie stay low and slow.
- 3 Don’t threaten or use punishment. Use a quiet, calming space rather than “Time Out” which may be interpreted as punishment.
- 4 Don’t try to turn the situation into a lesson, the person’s mind is not available for verbal teaching whilst angry.