

# Understand autism meltdowns and share strategies to minimize, manage occurrences

By Louise Bedrossian

The percentage of students with autism spectrum disorders in higher education is increasing. But they often struggle with greater levels of stress and anxiety than others, making them susceptible to meltdowns.

## About the Author

Louise Bedrossian recently retired as director of the Disability Resource Center at Clayton State University in Georgia and is now engaged in consulting and private coaching and counseling. *For more information, contact Bedrossian at [louisebedrossian@clayton.edu](mailto:louisebedrossian@clayton.edu).* ■

Since disability services providers are usually the primary resource for averting or responding to meltdowns by students on the spectrum, they should be knowledgeable of the underlying issues triggering such behaviors and familiar with strategies to

help students forestall such occurrences.

Meltdowns are an involuntary physical and emotional reaction to a situation from which there is no perceived escape. The person is typically unaware of what is happening, so there is no intention to hurt others. Autism-related meltdowns result from peaking stressors and overload of the nervous system, causing an explosive behavioral release. Stressors sometimes simultaneously preceding a meltdown may include:

- Sensory, emotional or information overload.
- Numerous or overly difficult tasks or performance demands.
- Unexpected life and/or environmental changes or having to deal with the unfamiliar.
- Intense frustration due to an inability to regulate the expected outcomes.
- Typical adult life stressors such as work demands, family, money and health issues.

The person experiencing the meltdown may not be mindful of overload-producing stressors but may nonetheless feel driven to escape the stress-producing situation. If that is impossible, a meltdown may ensue. Once a meltdown is in progress, control will usually not be regained until the episode has run its course.

Adult meltdowns present somewhat differently than those typical in children and may include aggressive behavior or angry outbursts, headbanging, crying, pacing or talking to themselves. Quitting a job, walking out on a spouse or partner, engaging in domestic abuse, yelling and screaming, or displaying road rage may also be indicative of a meltdown in progress.

These occurrences can be embarrassing and

frightening not only to observers, but also to the individual experiencing the meltdown. Appropriate intervention may help him regain needed control.

Meltdowns may occur for anyone when there is no escape, such as during natural disasters. But those with autism often have lower stress thresholds and are thus at higher risk. Students with a history of abuse, bullying or substance abuse, or who have co-occurring mental health problems, are at higher risk. Males in their late teens to mid-20s tend to have meltdowns most frequently. Fortunately, age seems to decrease the likelihood of meltdowns, since adults have developed greater coping abilities and more autonomy.

If individuals learn to become aware of increasing stressors and can escape or manage them, meltdowns can often be avoided. Helping students identify their triggers and signs of distress and then develop personal intervention strategies is critical to minimizing full-blown meltdowns.

Help students with ASD recognize the signs of impending meltdown by teaching awareness of symptoms such as:

- Chest tightness, palpitations, tremors or tingling.
- Headaches or feelings of pressure in the head.
- Irritability, rage or paranoia.

While helping students to become aware of pending problems is critical, so is knowing how to respond once they reach the meltdown stage.

Should a meltdown occur or seem imminent, students should be calmly and assuredly directed to a quiet, more private place or permitted to leave the environment that is escalating their discomfort. Reducing sensory stimulation helps.

Avoid angry or loud responses and do not attempt to restrain or touch students experiencing meltdowns. Don't ask what is wrong or accuse them of being drunk or on drugs. Employing sarcasm, accusing them, or demanding that the behavior stop are ineffective. In fact, you may even escalate or prolong the meltdown by doing those things. Remember that students in the middle of a meltdown are not in control and their senses and emotions are extremely heightened. Calm and deliberate actions to reduce sensory stimulation will work best to manage such situations.

Since you can't always be where an autism-related meltdown occurs on campus, it's critical to provide training for other campus professionals who can then address meltdowns should they occur. ■