

Emotion Regulation

In Autism &
Other Neurodivergent People



Purpose of this resource

This resource is for parents, teachers, and other support people to use common responses to help neurodivergent people manage strong emotions.

The guidelines detailed do not replace referrals to therapy and the use of additional counseling supports in schools.

What is Emotion Regulation?

The ways we react in order to manage the emotions we feel. Emotions can be overwhelming and take up all our brain power, and we need to respond to these feelings one way or another.

These ways of handling emotion can be things we do on purpose, but they can also be things we do without even realizing they are happening.

Sometimes, it takes effort to manage emotions.



Difficulty with emotional regulation can lead to...

- Symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.
- Social difficulties, aggression, self-injury, or even suicidality.

Why are emotion regulation problems often seen in autistic and neurodivergent people?



There is a lot of research happening to answer this question.

Right now, our **best ideas** are:

Neurobiological reasons

Brain connectivity differences

Sensory sensitivity and **overload**

Unsupportive environments

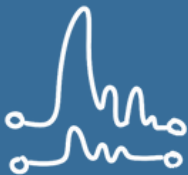
Heightened sensitivity to the experience of **emotions**

Difficulty recognizing and understanding emotions (also called *alexithymia*)

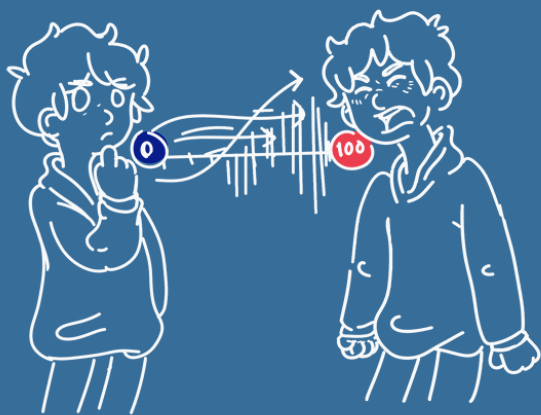
Differences in the **expression and communication of emotion**

Others may not be able to tell when they need help or are distressed

Unhelpful emotion regulation strategies, like avoidance or rumination (*continuing to think about a distressing situation long after it is over*)



What are some signs of emotion regulation difficulties?



Strong emotional reactions that appear to come on quickly. *“I go from 0-100”*

Being stuck- feeling unable to let go of a feeling

Difficulty staying in control of one’s actions when upset

Difficulty calming down, either on own with the help of others

Sadness, difficulty experiencing positive emotions, and struggles with motivation

“Meltdowns” and “Shutdowns”

are terms sometimes used to refer to what happens during intense emotion regulation difficulties

They occur when a person is **totally overwhelmed or overstimulated**

A person can become out of control of his or her actions.

They may scream, cry, become aggressive toward others, destroy objects, engage in self-injury, or run away.

They can become **unable to respond or withdrawn,** such as loss of speech, or lethargy.

These are generally a sign of distress, and **are rarely purposeful or oppositional.**

Sometimes, the individual tries to keep their difficulties or emotions hidden.

The person may appear fine when they are very distressed or overwhelmed

