Emotion Regulation
In Autistic & Other Neurodivergent People

What is Emotion Regulation?

Emotion regulation is the way we manage our emotions in order to meet our goals.

Emotions can sometimes be overwhelming and take up all of our brain power. We need to respond to these feelings one way or another.

Sometimes, it takes effort to manage emotions.

Difficulty with emotion regulation can impact...

- Mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidality)
- Behaviors (e.g., aggression, self-injury, disruptions)
- Social relationships
- Learning outcomes
- Community participation & employment

Purpose of this resource:

This resource is for educators, family members, and other support people to use common responses to help neurodivergent people manage emotions.

The guidelines detailed do not replace referrals to therapy and the use of additional counseling supports in schools or the community.
Why are emotion regulation difficulties often seen in autistic and other neurodivergent people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neurobiological reasons</th>
<th>Brain differences in activity, connectivity, &amp; structure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differences in physiological response to emotion</td>
<td>Heightened reactions and difficulty returning to baseline</td>
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<td>Sensitivity to sensory input, change, and uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficulty recognizing and understanding emotions (also called alexithymia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sleep, pain, and hunger</td>
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<td>Differences in the expression and communication of emotion</td>
<td>Others may not be able to tell when they are distressed or need help</td>
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<td>Unsupportive and unpredictable environments</td>
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<td>Unhelpful emotion regulation strategies, such as avoidance or rumination</td>
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What can difficulties with emotion regulation look like?

- **Experiencing strong emotional reactions** that appear to come on quickly: “I go from 0-100”

- **Being stuck** or unable to let go of a thought, feeling, or situation

- **Having difficulty staying in control of actions when escalated**

- **Having difficulty calming down**, either on their own or with the help of others

- **Having difficulty experiencing positive emotions and/or motivation**

“**Meltdowns**” and **“Shutdowns”** are terms sometimes used to refer to what happens during intense emotion regulation difficulties

They are **generally signs of distress** and occur when a person is completely overwhelmed or overstimulated

**Meltdown:**
- **A person may become out of control of their actions**
  - They may scream, cry, become aggressive toward others, damage objects, engage in self-injury, or run away

**Shutdown:**
- **A person can become unable to respond or withdraw**, such as loss of speech, or lethargy
- Sometimes, the person tries to keep their difficulties or emotions hidden
  - The person may appear fine when they are internally very distressed or overwhelmed

REMINDER: Meltdowns and shutdowns are rarely purposeful or oppositional