

Emotion Regulation

In Autistic & Other Neurodivergent People

Pitt ACE
Autism Center of Excellence
REACT

Regulation of Emotion in Autistic Adults, Children, and Teens



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.

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



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



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

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



Neurobiological reasons

Brain differences in activity, connectivity, & structure



Differences in physiological response to emotion

Heightened reactions and difficulty returning to baseline



Sensitivity to sensory input, change, and uncertainty

Difficulty recognizing and understanding emotions

(also called alexithymia)

Sleep, pain, and hunger



Differences in the expression and communication of emotion

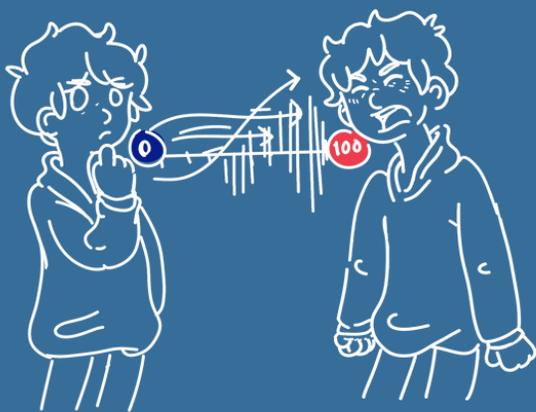
Others may not be able to tell when they are distressed or need help



Unsupportive and unpredictable environments

Unhelpful emotion regulation strategies, such as avoidance or rumination

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

