

# Understanding ADHD Meltdowns: What Are They and How to Manage Them

ADHD meltdowns in adults are explosive outbursts of emotion like rage, shouting, and crying, along with some other signs. Caused mainly by a lack of emotional regulation, ADHD meltdowns can be difficult to handle. So, let's look at what they are and how to manage them.



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# What Are ADHD Meltdowns?

An ADHD meltdown is a sudden outburst of emotion such as anger and frustration that seemingly come out of nowhere. ADHD meltdowns in adults happen because adults struggle to regulate and process emotions. This can result in tantrum-like behaviour that some compare to a metaphorical volcanic eruption. Symptoms of an ADHD meltdown include:

- Physical reactions like feet stomping, clenching fists, or throwing objects
- Making loud noises including yelling and screaming
- Emotional reactions such as irritability, cursing, and bursting into tears
- Crumbling into a ball on the floor
- Full body tension

People with co-occurring neurodivergence like Autistic Spectrum Disorder or AuDHD may also experience ADHD meltdowns, along with other associated symptoms from co-occurring neurodivergence.



# The ADHD Volcano Model

The US organisation CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) created their own 'ADHD Volcano Model' to illustrate the potential process behind ADHD meltdowns. Their model plots core symptoms, behaviours, influences, and executive function skills in people with ADHD and how these can create something similar to a 'volcanic eruption' when someone has an ADHD meltdown.

The model also highlights the importance of reviewing or observing executive functions in someone with ADHD. It reveals the core areas that drive executive functions as: [Cognitive Flexibility](#), [Working Memory](#), [Emotional Control](#), and [Inhibitory Control](#).

As illustrated in the ADHD volcano model and report, supporting executive functioning in people with ADHD may help to reduce the frequency or impact of ADHD meltdowns.



# ADHD Meltdowns in Adults vs. Children

ADHD affects around 3-5% of the adult population and between 5-7% of children. According to DSM-5 mental health criteria, ADHD symptoms must appear before the age of 12 to get a diagnosis. But it's also worth noting how ADHD has different manifestations throughout someone's lifespan. And this makes it harder to receive an accurate diagnosis, especially if there are any comorbid conditions.

Symptoms of an ADHD meltdown will vary between adults and children. Initial signs that a child with ADHD may be about to have a meltdown include:

- Being fidgety and restless
- Impulsivity and carelessness
- Agitation or tension
- Struggling to complete tasks or take directions
- Difficulty concentrating or keeping attention

Symptoms of a meltdown may include yelling, crying, rage, and anger. And they're different from tantrums since meltdowns are involuntary neurological reactions.



An adult ADHD meltdown may look like the following:

- Emotional outbursts including yelling, crying, and throwing objects
- Irritability and restlessness
- Binge eating or binge drinking
- Withdrawing and staying isolated or crumbling into a ball
- Muscle tension
- Self-harm



# What Does an ADHD Meltdown Feel Like?

When an adult has an ADHD meltdown it can feel like a sudden burst of extreme emotion. Even minor triggers such as inappropriate words or small irritations can cause emotions to boil up within someone before they explode in inappropriate ways. Types of emotional responses can include anger, frustration, sadness, and fear.

Some people describe it as if they're "physically exploding from the inside". Others say they feel as though they're overstimulated or overwhelmed. One example some people use is a metaphor of "having their emotional radio turned up to full blast".

ADHD meltdowns happen when adults feel like they can't handle difficult emotions. This can lead to a sense of feeling overwhelmed or out of control.



# What Triggers ADHD Meltdowns

There are some signs to look out for that can help to prevent an adult ADHD meltdown. Breaking these triggers down into specific categories can help to avoid triggers and, if not, manage their impact as and when they occur:

- **Social Interactions:** Emotional dysregulation in adults with ADHD can create a feeling of hypersensitivity in social situations. In these situations, common triggers can include feelings of being misunderstood, rejected, overlooked, or excluded.
- **Sensory overload:** In a similar way that people with ASD experience autistic meltdowns, adults with ADHD can have intense reactions to sensory inputs such as loud noise, harsh lighting, or chaotic environments.
- **Unexpected changes:** Inconveniences, alterations, or disruptions to the structure of someone's routine can lead to significant distress. Keeping a predictable routine may help to reduce triggers over time.





- Stress, anxiety, and frustration: Busy working environments, pressured interactions, not meeting expectations, and having difficulties in relationships can all increase someone's level of frustration and stress. This may lead to mental health challenges that trigger meltdowns.
- Physical changes: Experiencing physical pain, injury, or any changes in hormonal activity can all trigger emotions that people with ADHD may struggle to manage.



# Why Are People With ADHD Prone to Meltdowns?

We can attribute ADHD meltdowns in adults to several factors but specifically the following:

- **Emotional dysregulation:** People with ADHD tend to experience limitations in their executive functioning that can prevent them from handling emotions within a healthy range. Such limitations can lead to a lack of control over more intense or stimulating emotions and lead to emotional outbursts.
- **ADHD symptoms:** Living with any type of neurodivergence is very frustrating and can cause chronic feelings of stress and depression. People with ADHD in particular can experience low self-esteem, low confidence, and other mental health challenges that can overwhelm their ability to manage emotions.
- **Impulsivity:** Adults with ADHD experience impulsivity of emotion and behaviour as a core symptom of their neurodivergence. And this can reduce their ability to control emotions like frustration and anger as their neurotypical peers would.



# How to Deal With ADHD Meltdowns

Prevention and management are both key when dealing with ADHD meltdowns. And there are many strategies to support both outcomes:

- **Recognise an ADHD meltdown:** Knowing when an ADHD meltdown is happening can help sufferers and the people around them. Doing so also lessens the impact on someone's self-concept and prevents them from feeling despondent or bad about themselves.
- **Communicate to others:** Explaining feelings or experiences to others, as someone with ADHD, can help to gain more support from people nearby.
- **Take time out:** An ADHD meltdown may be a sign that someone is dealing with more stress, overwhelm, or situations than they can handle. Taking time away from these stressors may help. And tactics like booking a mental health day off work may be beneficial.
- **Self-regulate:** Deep breaths are scientifically proven to reduce the body's stress response and may help to calm the mind and body during an ADHD meltdown. Counting to ten or taking long walks can also be helpful.



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