

Autism and Emotional Regulation



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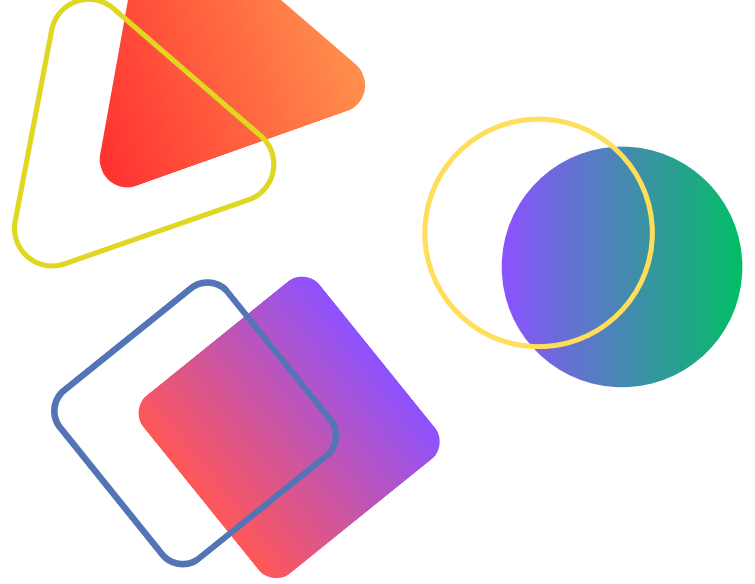


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Introduction

1 What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice, understand, and manage feelings in a way that helps a person cope with situations. It helps a person calm down, feel safe, or stay balanced after strong emotions for example, calming down when upset, or finding healthy ways to express anger or stress. Emotional dysregulation happens when it is very hard to manage feelings and emotions feel overwhelming or out of control. This might look like becoming extremely upset over something that seems small, struggling to calm down, freezing up, or reacting in ways that feel bigger than the situation. Even generally positive, intense emotions, such as excitement, can feel overwhelming for autistic people. In short: regulation means emotions feel more manageable, while dysregulation means emotions feel too strong and hard to control. Many autistic people experience difficulties with emotional regulation.

For some people, autism is synonymous with the word behaviour. As soon as people hear the word autism, often the immediate thought is behaviour, and how do we modify the behaviour to ensure the autistic individual fits into society. Over time, we have learnt from the autistic community that the goal is not necessarily to change or fix autistic behaviour, but rather to support regulation, understand the meaning behind the behaviour, and listen to the person's needs. Often, the autistic community will say: we have done a lot to be a part of your world; now you need to help build the bridge so that we can all be a part of society together.

In this booklet, we will move away from a behaviourist perspective of autism, and more towards a trauma-informed approach.

We will look at what dysregulation can look like, provide practical tips for autistic individuals to help regulate their emotions and explore how we can support an autistic individual struggling with dysregulation.

2 Why emotions and not behaviour



3.

Emotional regulation and the brain

To really understand emotional regulation, we need to look at how the brain works.

We are going to look at two main areas of the brain:

- The subcortical area, which is responsible for our basic survival responses, like reacting to danger or perceived danger.
- The cortical area, which helps us think, plan, and make decisions.

The subcortical area is where our strong emotions, like fear or anger, come from. This part of the brain works very fast and doesn't involve thinking or planning. It is automatic and focused on keeping us safe. It is also connected to our autonomic nervous system, which controls things like heart rate, breathing, and muscle tension when we're stressed or calm. Think about when you had a very strong emotional reaction to something; were you able to control your emotions? And what about your actions?

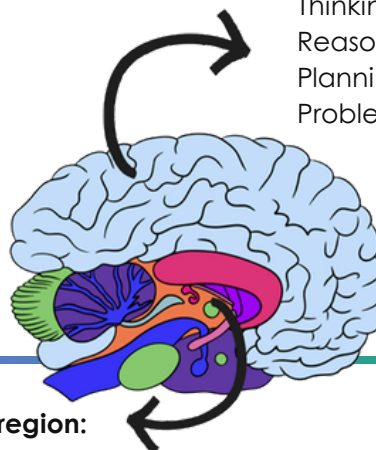
The cortical area is where we do our thinking. This is where we can control our reactions, plan what to do, and calm ourselves down. When this part of the brain is working well, we can regulate our emotions and behaviour. But when we're overwhelmed, stressed, or feel unsafe—like in a sensory overload or a meltdown—the survival part of our brain takes over. When this happens, it's very hard to think clearly or stay calm.

Cortical region:

Thinking
Reasoning
Planning
Problem solving

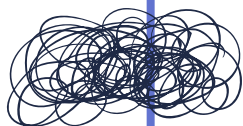
Subcortical region:

Safety
Reactivity



4

Stress/survival responses



Many of us have heard of fight, flight, and freeze, but there is also a fourth state, known as fawn, which is common in autistic people. These responses are automatic (a person doesn't choose them), and they are part of our body's trauma/stress/survival responses. When we respond with any of these, it is our subcortical brain that is responding. These responses get our body ready to protect itself when it feels unsafe. We explain these responses in the table on the next page in a bit more detail.

For autistic people, this can happen more often and more quickly than for others, even if others around them don't see anything dangerous. That's why a big part of helping autistic people with regulation is understanding how their nervous system works and responding with care. We need to help the person feel safe and supported in their body and environment first.

We are stepping away from behaviourist methodologies towards a more trauma-informed response, as many autistic people feel that behaviourist interventions have caused them trauma and left them feeling judged and misunderstood.



The different stress/survival responses

Meltdown = Fight Response

When our brains think we are in danger or too overwhelmed, our bodies may react in big, loud, or strong ways.

It may feel like anger, irritability, aggression, and/or frustration.

It might look like:

- yelling, crying, or screaming
- hitting things or hitting ourselves
- throwing or breaking things

This is not bad behaviour — it is our nervous systems trying to protect us when things feel like too much to handle.

Anxiety = Flight Response

This is when our brains want to get away from danger or stress.

It may feel like anxiety, fear, panic, feeling scared, and/or nervous.

It might look like:

- eloping or bolting
- wanting to hide or leave a place
- having a racing heart or stomach ache

It is our brains trying to run away from something it thinks is unsafe — even if the situation is not actually dangerous.

Shutdown = Freeze Response

This is when everything becomes too much and our bodies shut down. This may happen when our nervous system feels unable to fight against or escape from a perceived threat.

It may feel like being overwhelmed, depressed, emotionally collapsed, ashamed, hopeless, or dissociated.

It may look like:

- going very quiet
- not being able to move or talk
- feeling as if our mind has gone blank

It can feel as if our brains are pressing a “pause” button in an attempt to keep us safe.

Masking = Fawn Response

This is when a person hides how they are feeling in order to keep others happy because they feel unsafe.

It might look like:

- ignoring their own needs, feelings, and body signals
- trying to appear “normal” and hiding autistic traits
- copying how other people act
- forcing themselves to smile or make eye contact
- saying “yes” when they want to say “no”
- putting other people’s needs before their own

It is the brain trying to keep the person safe by avoiding conflict or by making sure others are pleased with them.

It is important to remember that a meltdown is not a tantrum, they are different. A meltdown is a complete loss of control. The brain is operating from the subcortical area, and therefore rational thought is not in the foreground. Think about when you have been in a scary situation, are you able to think rationally?

A meltdown is therefore not a choice. It is an intense response to overwhelming stress, sensory input, or emotions. An autistic person's behaviour during a meltdown is not meant to manipulate, but occurs because their nervous system is in overload.

A tantrum is purposeful behaviour, often aimed at getting something (like attention, a toy, or to avoid something unpleasant). It usually stops once the goal is met—or if the person realises it is not going to work. It is important to remember that wanting attention is not always a bad thing.



Tantrum

- Scream, cry, lash out, hit or hide
- Usually not long lasting, but can last a while
- Deliberate - individual wants something
- Some control of actions
- Aware of their surroundings and safety
- You can use reason and communicate with the individual
- Individual may try to bargain
- Usually stops if the audience is removed
- Will also stop when the individual gets what they want
- Individual can calm down quickly

Meltdown

- Screaming, crying, lashing out, hitting, hiding, injuring
- Might last a long time, might be for a short while
- Involuntary - no control
- Reaction to overwhelming environment or to dysregulation
- Unaware of own and others safety
- Not able to reason
- Individual unable to communicate
- Will continue if there is no audience
- Stops when the sensory environment changes or individual tires themselves out
- May take a long time for individual to calm

6.

How autistic people might experience emotions

Autistic people do feel emotions, often deeply. But the way they notice, understand, and express emotions can be different because of how their brains process information. These differences deserve understanding and support.

Affect and emotional expression

Affect refers to how emotions show up on a person's face, in their voice, or body language. Autistic people may show emotion in ways that are:

- Different from what others expect
- More subtle or more intense, or
- They seem flat or “neutral” even if they feel strong emotions inside.

Example: An autistic person might feel happy but not smile — or might laugh when anxious. This can lead to misunderstandings. Others might wrongly think the autistic person doesn't care or doesn't feel anything.



Sensory regulation and emotional regulation

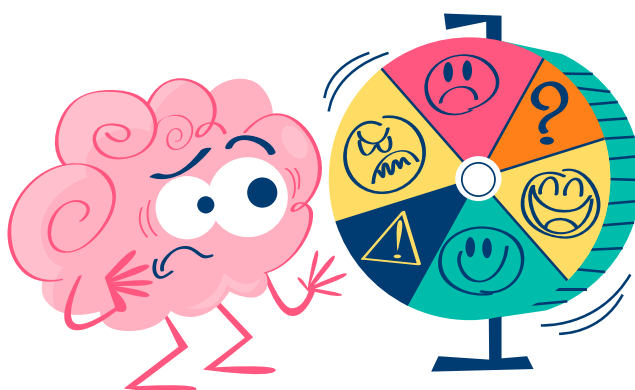
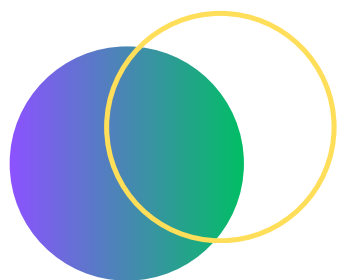
Autistic people may be over-sensitive (hypersensitive), under-sensitive (hyposensitive), or both to different types of sensory input. If an autistic person is oversensitive, everyday experiences can feel too intense. For example, bright lights may feel painful, background noise can be overwhelming, and clothing tags may feel unbearable. When the brain is constantly dealing with too much sensory input, it uses a lot of energy, which can make someone irritable, anxious, and/or overwhelmed and more likely to have a meltdown or a shutdown.

If an autistic person is under-sensitive (hyposensitive) to sensory input they may not notice pain or hunger until it's extreme and/or they might seek strong input (e.g., crashing into things, enjoying loud sounds). Interoception is the sense that helps us notice and understand internal body signals, such as hunger, thirst, heartbeat, breathing, or the need to use the toilet. It plays a key role in self-awareness and regulation. Because emotions are often connected to body signals (e.g., a racing heart when anxious), being under-sensitive can make it harder to:

- Notice that you're feeling something
- Recognise emotions building up
- Take action before things get too intense.

When someone struggles to notice or name their own feelings this is called Alexithymia. An autistic person might feel overwhelmed or upset, but not be sure what the emotion is or why it's happening. Many (but not all) autistic people experience alexithymia to some degree.

For more information on understanding and supporting sensory differences in autistic people, please refer to our booklet *The Sensory World of Autistic People*.

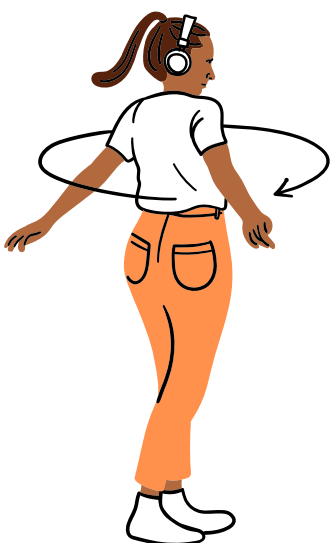


Movement, speech and emotions

Differences in sensory processing such as the senses interoception (internal body signals) and proprioception (awareness of body in space), can also affect movement. A lot of autistic people have described something called the mind-body disconnect. This refers to the experience of feeling a lack of cooperation or connection between thoughts, feelings, intentions (the "mind") and physical actions, sensations, or responses (the "body"). This can affect speech, motor control, self-awareness, and emotional expression. This disconnect is often misunderstood or overlooked, but it's a very real and valid experience for many autistic individuals.

Many autistic people have challenges with motor planning (also called dyspraxia), which means they may struggle to turn thoughts or intentions into coordinated movements. This includes gross motor (e.g., walking, jumping), fine motor skills (e.g., writing, brushing teeth) and speech. Many autistic people describe knowing what to say but being unable to speak (especially in stressful or sensory-heavy environments). It is therefore vital to give access to non-speaking communication methods (e.g., AAC, typing, gestures, and/or picture communication).

How to support sensory needs



A sensory-friendly environment can help autistic people feel calmer, support emotional regulation and reduce anxiety and outbursts. Sensory supports like headphones, sunglasses, weighted blankets, soft textures, or movement breaks can make a huge emotional difference.

Autistic people often use stimming (like rocking, hand-flapping, or humming) to regulate their sensory and emotional state.

These repetitive movements help:

- Calm the nervous system
- Focus attention
- Manage overwhelming feelings

Instead of seeing stimming as a "problem," it is important to understand it as a healthy and necessary coping strategy.

7

The cup analogy and effect of the environment



Everybody has a cup. This cup represents a person's bodily and mental capacity for stress. This cup is under a tap representing daily stressors as well as stressful life events that are dripping or even pouring water into the cup. These can cause the cup to overflow. The point when the cup overflows is when the person's body and mind are no longer able to cope with the amount of stress, and their emotions become too big to control. For example, an anger outburst, anxiety attack, meltdown, or shutdown. Autistic people may have a lot of daily and long-term stressors related to navigating a world that is not made with them in mind.

We should ask ourselves if there are creative ways in which we can make adaptations to the environment to limit unnecessary stress factors that “fill the cup”, such as providing sensory accommodations, alternative communication, or fighting stigma.

Autistic people can have unique and important ways of coping with stress that also bring comfort and joy—in other words, ways to “empty the cup”. Examples include special interests (activities or topics they feel deeply interested in and enjoy focusing on) and stimming (repetitive movements or sounds that help with regulation). Are there ways in which we can increase these factors, especially when we see signs of emotional dysregulation, for example, allowing the person to stim?

On the next page we give some examples of factors that can “fill and empty the cup”. It is, however, always important to ask the autistic person first, before assuming that something will work for them.

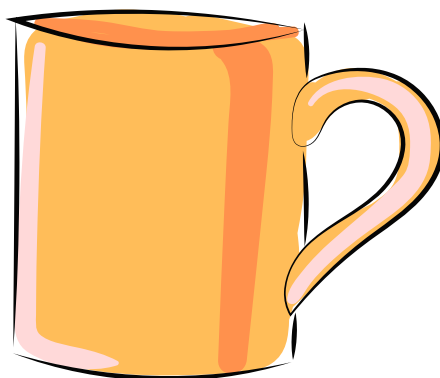


Filling the cup

- Being hungry, thirsty, tired, or sick
- Not being understood
- Not being presumed competent
- Unrealistic or unclear expectations
- Masking
- Lack of autonomy
- New or unpredictable environments
- The brain-body disconnect
- Social rejection
- Bullying
- Being taken advantage of
- Having to shift attention, especially if they were busy with interests
- Ableism
- Autistic trauma
- A sensory-under or overstimulating environment (such as loud noise, bright lights, or having to sit still for extended periods)

Emptying the cup

- Stimming and regulating sensory inputs for example, headphones, weighted blankets, music, etc.
- Being allowed access to communication
- Participating in special interests or passions
- Finding community
- Routine, familiarity, and consistency
- Clear expectations
- Self-acceptance
- Being understood
- Autonomy
- Being presumed competent
- Mindfulness exercises such as breathing exercises might work for some autistic people



What we see:

Crying
Shouting
Aggression
Meltdowns
Stimming
Strong emotions

Unpredictable situations
Confusion
Anxiety
Stress
Overwhelm
Hunger
Pain
Executive functioning difficulties
Illness
Masking
Sensory overload
Fear
Frustration

As discussed, emotional regulation can be more difficult for autistic people due to factors such as sensory overload, communication differences, unexpected changes, and social pressure. Let us now look at practical strategies that autistic people themselves can use to help regulate their emotions.

8

Practical regulation tips for autistic people

8.1. Knowing and respecting support needs

Many autistic people are told to “just cope” or “act normal,” but it is important to know that autistic people’s needs are real and valid, and that they deserve support. A person can start by noticing what makes them feel overwhelmed or stressed. Do loud noises, bright lights, or too much talking affect them? If yes, that is important. Writing it down or making a list can help. Knowing one’s needs is the first step in taking care of oneself.

Sometimes it can be difficult for an autistic person to recognise their own needs, and that is okay. They could ask a trusted person what they have observed or noticed about when the person seems overwhelmed or uncomfortable. They can then talk about it together and check whether the autistic person agrees. This can help the person understand themselves better and figure out what support they need.

You can try this:

- Make a list of things that help you feel calm
- Also make a list of what makes you feel overwhelmed
- Share this with someone you trust

You can use the table below:

Calming	Overwhelming



8.2. How to know you're feeling dysregulated

Dysregulation looks and feels different for different people. Examples of dysregulation:

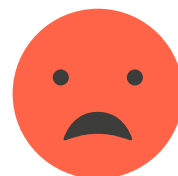
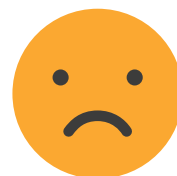
- Physical: nausea, headaches, muscle tension, clenching jaw
- Cognitive: blanking out, looping thoughts, memory issues
- Behavioural: pacing, stimming more intensely, becoming non-speaking

It can be helpful for a person to learn what their early signs of dysregulation are. Noticing early signs can help them take action before things become too difficult. It may also help to use emojis, feeling charts, or other visual supports to explore and communicate what they are feeling. They may also notice that they are experiencing more than one feeling at the same time.

You can try this:

Draw 3 zones: green (okay), yellow (getting stressed), red (overwhelmed). Write or draw what each of these states feels/looks like for you. You can use the table below:

Green Zone	Yellow Zone	Red Zone



8.3. It's okay to ask for support

Some people can find it difficult to ask for support.

You can try this:

- Pre-plan support scripts: Write or record simple ways to ask for help when dysregulated.
- Use AAC: Communication boards, apps, written notes, cards or pointing to pictures can help when speaking is difficult/not accessible.

Examples for phrases you can use to ask for support:

"I'm not okay. I need a break."

"Can we go somewhere quieter?"

"I can't talk right now. Please stay nearby."

You can ask someone you trust to practice asking for help with you during calm moments so it feels easier during a tough time.

Remember support does not always need to come from a person—it might mean using a sensory tool, taking a break, or engaging in a favourite activity to self-soothe.



8.4. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment with openness and curiosity. It means noticing our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings without judging them as good or bad. For some people, practising mindfulness might help reduce stress, improve focus, and support emotional regulation. Other people might find it stressful. That's okay—it's not for everyone. For some autistic people, turning inward—especially during distress—can increase anxiety or dissociation. Traditional silent or still mindfulness can be overwhelming or inaccessible. Movement-based or sensory-rich mindfulness may work better than still, silent meditations. Mindfulness does not mean ignoring discomfort—it's about tuning in, not suppressing.

You can try this:

Sensory-Based Mindfulness Exercises:

- 1.Touch: stroking a textured fabric or holding a smooth stone
- 2.Smell: using a calming essential oil or familiar comforting scent
- 3.Sight: watching a lava lamp, fish tank, or candle flame
- 4.Sound: listening to calming music, nature sounds or rhythmic sounds like white noise
- 5.Movement: rocking, stretching, or walking while focusing on sensations

The goal is not to force calm, but to help a person tune into the present moment in a way that feels safe and grounding for their nervous system. If these exercises do not feel helpful or comfortable, they do not have to be done.



8.5. TIPP Skills (Body-Based Tools)

TIPP skills are quick, body-based tools that help a person manage strong emotions and calm their nervous system when they feel overwhelmed. They work by changing a person's physical state, which sends signals to their brain that it is safe to calm down.

You can try this:

1. **Temperature:** Splashing cold water on your face, holding a cold water bottle or ice pack or dipping your hands or face in cool water. If you have blood pressure or heart problems, please speak to your medical professional before trying this skill.
2. **Intense Exercise:** Jump, run in place, wall push-ups, dance to one song or squeeze a pillow
3. **Paced Breathing:** Breathe in for 4, hold for 5 and out for 6
4. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Tighten then relax each muscle group



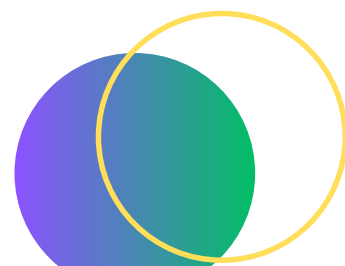
8.6. STOP Skill

STOP skills are a way for a person to slow down in stressful moments. They can help a person pause, think more clearly, and make choices that keep them safe and calm, rather than reacting on impulse.

You can try this:

- S – **Stop** what you're doing, don't react yet
- T – **Take a step back**, breathe, leave the room, pause
- O – **Observe** how you feel and what's happening around you
- P – **Proceed with care**, choose your next step calmly

Try writing this on a card or wall poster where you'll see it during intense moments. Practising this can help you stay safe and calm.



8.7. Other Helpful Strategies

The above-mentioned strategies are based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). However Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), doesn't work for everyone — it can be inaccessible or ineffective for many autistic people. That's okay. Not all effective emotional regulation methods come from CBT or cognitive reframing. Below are some other strategies that do not come from CBT which might be helpful.

8.7.1. Sensory regulation

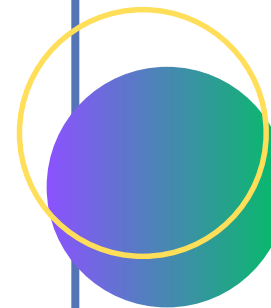
Sensory regulation is often an effective strategy. This might include using weighted blankets, stimming (repetitive movements, sounds, or actions—such as hand-flapping, rocking, tapping, or humming—that help a person regulate emotions, process sensory input, or express themselves), movements, spending time in calming sensory spaces, or using noise-reducing headphones. We would recommend having a look at our other free booklet: The Sensory World of Autistic People for more information on sensory regulation.

8.7.2. Environmental adaptation

Autistic people consistently have to navigate a world that isn't designed for them. As discussed earlier in the booklet under the cup analogy and the effect of the environment, changing surroundings to reduce stressors can be a powerful way to support emotional regulation. This can include sensory adaptations as mentioned above, such as using soft lighting, reducing clutter, or creating quiet zones. It can also involve practical support, like maintaining a consistent routine and having access to alternative communication methods. An occupational therapist can recommend reasonable accommodations tailored to the person's individual needs.

8.7.3 Spending time in nature

This may help lower stress and promote sensory regulation. Activities like walking in a park, tending to plants, or just sitting under a tree can offer regulation without requiring verbal or cognitive effort. They can also stroke or play with a pet.



8.7.4. Participation in special interests

Special interests are topics, activities, or hobbies that a person feels deeply passionate about and enjoys focusing on. They can provide joy, comfort, and a way to relax. Deep focus on a special interest can reduce stress, increase motivation, and restore energy.

8.7.5 Co-regulation

Co-regulation is emotional regulation that happens in the presence of a calm, supportive person (or even a pet) when emotions feel too strong to manage alone. It can help when someone offers calm and steady presence rather than advice or solutions. This might be a trusted person sitting nearby, speaking gently, giving reassurance, helping with slow breathing, or a pet sitting close to help the person feel safe. Over time, these experiences can help the autistic person learn to manage their feelings more easily on their own.

Emotional regulation is not about being calm all the time or appearing “normal” in the eyes of society. It is about a person understanding themselves, having tools that work for them, feeling safe in their body, living in alignment with their values, and being kind to themselves when things feel hard.

Everyone's brain is different. What matters is what works for the individual. Whether through cold water, special interests, movement, nature, co-regulation, or adapted mindfulness, there are many valid and empowering ways an autistic person can support themselves. There is no single right method — what matters is what feels regulating and affirming for that person. Autistic people are allowed to need support and they are allowed to ask for help.



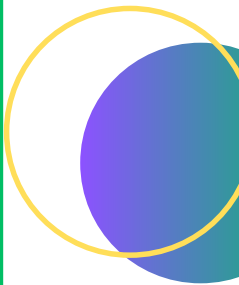
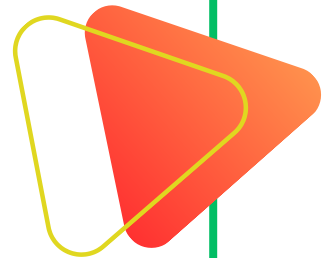
Why no reward charts for autistic children

First, let us start with what NOT to do. The common behaviour charts and reward charts are not helpful, and neither is punishment such as time out or taking away privileges. Punishment has long been shown in research to only be effective in the short term. It has no long-term efficacy.

Why don't we then use reward charts? There is a great book on this which is written by Alfie Kohn and titled "Punished by Rewards"; the take-home messages of this book include the following:

- Who are we trying to please with reward charts?
- Is the behaviour we want helpful to us or helpful to the child?
- It is a very controlling authoritarian method.
- Are we creating submissive children who just accept authority?
- Where does this leave our children when it comes to abusive adults?
- It teaches children to ignore their body signals.
- A child who needs to move to regulate, is now ignoring their signals to keep themselves seated at a table – later on, that same child may not be able to identify when they need to move.
- It is an extrinsic form of motivation.
- Extrinsic motivation is a lot less powerful than intrinsic motivation. We need to work with our children, and not try to control them because it makes our lives easier.

How to support an autistic person's regulation





Instead of reward charts, rather offer the following:

- Access to self-regulatory activities or tools such as fidgets
- Build in time for regulation and movement breaks
- Allow for choices as much as possible

So, how do we help? If we know that dysregulation is occurring because the environment is too noisy, we can offer headphones. We don't punish the person because they are dysregulated in a noisy environment. We also do not tell a person who is having a hard time regulating what they are doing wrong and what they should be doing. They are not in control of their behaviour.

When a person is dysregulated, we need to focus on regulation and not behaviour.



What we often label as “bad behaviour”—like hitting, throwing things, or refusing to move—is often a sign of stress or unmet needs, not simply disobedience. Instead of reacting with punishment or control (e.g., “no screen time”), we should try to understand what's behind the behaviour. The person may be overwhelmed, have difficulties with communication, or feel out of control. By focusing on regulation—helping the person feel safe and supported—we can reduce challenging behaviour in a more compassionate and lasting way.

9.1. Check the environment

Is the environment sensory-friendly? Is there a lot of visual clutter? What are the noise levels like? Think about smells. Is there strong perfume or strong cleaning products in the room? Consider ways to make the environment more sensory-friendly. For more information on how to support autistic people's sensory needs, see Autism South Africa's booklet: The Sensory World of Autistic People.

9.2. Check ourselves

It is also helpful to reflect on ourselves. What clothing is being worn? How loud is our voice? Is communication consistent and predictable? Are we wearing strong perfumes or very bright colours that could be overwhelming? This does not mean that a person cannot wear what they like, but it is important to be aware that these things may cause distress for an autistic person. It is also important to notice one's own level of regulation, as autistic people can react to the emotional state of those around them. Acknowledging and validating the person's experience can help them feel safer.

9.3. Co-regulation

Co-regulation can be very powerful. Co-regulation is when one person helps another person manage their emotions by being calm, supportive, and steady during stressful moments. It often happens between a trusted person — such as a parent, teacher, friend, or therapist — and someone who is feeling overwhelmed or upset. For example, when a person feels anxious, the trusted person may speak gently, offer reassurance, or guide slow breathing, which can make it easier for the person to calm down.



Supporting someone through co-regulation means that even if the other person becomes very upset, the person offering support tries to remain as calm as possible, or at least present a calm and steady presence. Many autistic people are highly sensitive to the emotions of the people around them and may react to the stress of others. If the people around the autistic person become loud, angry, or panicked, the situation may escalate. When those around the person stay calm and composed, it can help the autistic person feel safer and begin to settle.

Co-regulation is especially important for children and for autistic people who may need extra support to recognise and manage strong emotions. Over time, repeated experiences of co-regulation can help the person develop their own ways of regulating their emotions more independently.

9.4. Strategies to help with regulation

9.4.1. Identify any possible triggers

Triggers can be situations, events, environments, sounds, activities, or interactions that make the person feel stressed, overwhelmed, or unsafe.

Identifying triggers can help the person understand why dysregulation happens and make it easier to plan ways to reduce stress.

Some of these triggers could be:

- Changes to routines
- Medical issues
- Communication frustrations
- Stressful situations
- Sensory overload
- Unpredictable changes
- Not being included in family discussions



The following strategies can help reduce triggers and support regulation:

- Consider whether the environment can be changed or adapted to make it less overwhelming.
- Check whether the person has access to AAC and knows how to use it. AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) refers to any method, tool, or system that helps a person communicate when they have difficulty using speech. This can include gestures, pictures, communication boards, speech-generating devices, or apps on a tablet.
- If a person uses AAC, it is important that it is always available to them.
- The person can be gently redirected to more calming or neutral activities.
- If possible, the trigger can be removed.
- If the trigger cannot be removed, it may help to remove the person from the environment and move them to a quieter, safer space.



9.4.2. Recognise the signs

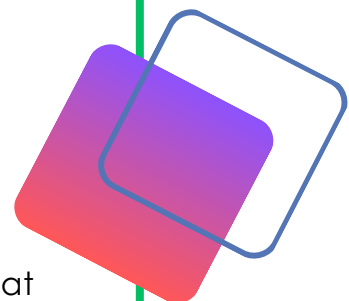
Early signs of dysregulation often appear before a meltdown or shutdown happens. Learning to notice these signs can make it possible to respond earlier and reduce how overwhelmed the person becomes. These signs may look different for each person.

These can include the following:

- Facial expressions becoming more tense
- Movements or gestures becoming more frantic, restless, or very still
- Repetitive behaviours becoming faster, stronger, or more frequent
- Screaming or shouting
- Becoming quieter or isolating themselves

The following strategies may help when early signs are noticed:

- Respond in a calm and clear manner
- Try not to make any demands
- Use visual reminders or supports to help the person understand what is happening
- Redirect to more calming or neutral activities
- Remove the person or others from the environment, or reduce stimulation in the environment if possible



9.4.3. During the period of dysregulation

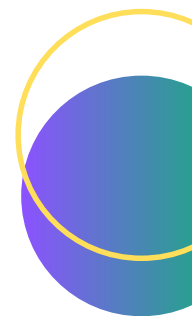
When dysregulation becomes very intense, the person may no longer be able to think clearly, communicate, or stay in control of their actions. At this stage, the nervous system is in survival mode, and the focus should be on safety rather than on teaching, correcting, or reasoning.

During this period, the following may be noticed:

- Injurious behaviour towards others or self-injurious behaviour
- Destruction of property
- Being unable to talk, respond, or move

To support the person during the incident, the following may help:

- Respond in a calm and clear way
- Make the environment as safe as possible. This may mean moving the person to a safer space or moving others away
- If extra help is needed, involve additional support, but avoid overcrowding the person
- Allow the meltdown or shutdown to run its course. It cannot simply be stopped. Intervene only when necessary for safety



9.4.4. After the incident

After a meltdown or shutdown, the nervous system may still feel tired, sensitive, or overwhelmed. Even though the visible behaviour has stopped, the person may need time to recover. This is sometimes called the recovery phase, and support during this time is very important.

After the incident, the following may be noticed:

- Behaviour becoming less intense or stopping completely
- The person seeming agitated, stressed, tired, or upset with themselves

The following may help during this stage:

- Give the person time and space to recover
- Avoid giving demands, corrections, or reprimands
- Offer reassurance and let the person know they are safe
- Acknowledge and validate that the experience was hard, even if it did not seem hard to others. For example: "I can see that this has been really hard for you, and that is okay. I'm here if you need support"



10.

Conclusion

Understanding and supporting emotional regulation is key to well-being for autistic people. Everyone experiences emotions differently, and what helps one person stay calm and balanced may be different for another. By learning about how autistic people experience the world as well as their own emotions, autistic people can gain a better understanding on how to manage strong emotions, and loved ones can offer meaningful support. Remember, small changes in the environment and respecting individual needs can make a big difference. With patience, understanding, and the right tools, both autistic people and those around them can create a calmer, safer, and more joyful daily life.

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