Why ADHD Meltdowns Happen and How to Cope

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How to Manage ADHD Meltdowns and Tantrums

The world can be a frustrating place. It's noisy, stressful, and demanding. Those things can be amplified if you have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and managing emotions is difficult for you.

The building up of, and the eventual boiling over, of our extreme emotions, is what is known as ADHD meltdown.

According to a 2011 study by Craig B.H. Surman M.D., people with ADHD have trouble regulating emotions. This group of symptoms includes spontaneous bursts of anger, frustration, impatience, or excitability in response to ordinary everyday experiences.

Everyone can have difficulty regulating emotions, but for most people, this is more common during times of excess stress or strain. Those who have deficient emotional self-regulation cannot censor emotional reactions even during times of low stress.

The study looked at how ADHD affected emotional regulations and the connection between ADHD and poor emotional regulation in siblings and family members. Over half of those with ADHD also have poor emotional management.

What Does an ADHD Meltdown Look Like? And What Does It Feel Like?

And ADHD meltdown can be extreme anger, fits of crying, frustration, and/or complete shut- down. I don't believe every person with ADHD will experience this in the same way, but we all do share some similarities.

When I get extremely overwhelmed, every noise seems amplified in my head. It becomes harder to sort the important from the unimportant. I zone out but also have difficulty tuning things out. Every person is irritating, and I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my own skin. My anxiety is heightened, and I need to be by myself to calm down my feelings. I am not prone to angry outbursts, but crying is a common response for me.

When my daughter was in middle school, angry outbursts were a part of every afternoon. After spending all day trying so hard to focus and fit in at school, homework could send her over the edge. There would be crying, pencils flying around the room, and often screaming.

As she got older, the outbursts dissipated. She experiences overwhelm entirely differently now. Noise and crowds can trigger her, and she is then agitated by everyone and everything. She will tend to lash out in annoyance during these times.

Some days when she has a hard time focusing at school or her classmates are noisy, and she can't tune them out, her agitation levels will soar. She tries to restrain from responding in anger, but it isn't always easy.

I had a friend a few years ago who was prone to angry outbursts. It seemed as if he was always angry. There was a permanent scowl on his face, and he would often scream at his spouse, hurling insults and cussing at her. He finally started working with a therapist and a doctor to manage his ADHD and anxiety when his angry meltdowns threatened his marriage.

A friend with a young ADHD child does her best to manage the tantrums that are common in her household. Her child will often have a meltdown when he gets too tired, or if there is a lot of stimulation, such as a party. He refuses to participate in class when he gets overwhelmed or when it takes him longer to arrive at an answer than his classmates. He often yells in anger and frustration.

Why Do People With ADHD Have Meltdowns?

Children with ADHD have a hard time waiting. When they want or need something, they have a hard time controlling that need, as their desires are front and center. They also have not yet learned ways to calm themselves, or how to express emotions properly.

When children are frustrated or bored, overstimulated or angry, it is common for meltdowns and tantrums to ensue. This can be yelling, kicking, screaming, or complete shutdown and refusal to comply with any request.

When a person has ADHD, feelings often direct their behavior and thoughts without regard as to what the outcome will be. Children and adults can both experience anger as a first response, and after an intense, angry outburst the only thing a person can do is to try to clean up the aftermath.

Other than impulse control, another reason people with ADHD experience meltdowns is because ADHD is frustrating. It may sound simple, but ADHD is hard to live with, and it takes a considerable effort to concentrate on a daily basis, setting us up for exasperation.

It takes so much energy to live, work, and attend school that those energy levels are often depleted, resulting in frustrated and irrational responses.

Next page: ADHD and anger problems, how to manage ADHD meltdowns in adults and children and more.

Other Common Reasons Why Having ADHD Results in Anger Problems

- Children and adults alike with ADHD tend to feel emotions very deeply. They have a hard time regulating these feelings which can cause them to cry easily or feel intense anger.
- Moods shift very quickly throughout the day when you have ADHD. During one day there are many episodes of happiness, sadness, and frustration.
- Low tolerance to frustration leads to angry outbursts
- Feeling anxious about a situation or low self-esteem can lead to anger.
- There is an increased chance of meltdowns occurring as medications wear off.
- The restlessness and energy that comes from having ADHD can be too much to handle sometimes, and it bubbles over into anger or physical reactions.

What Can Adults Do to Ease ADHD Meltdowns?

There are several steps a person can take to manage and even prevent outbursts.

- Notice when you are approaching overwhelm and sensory overload.
- Take breaks when you need to.
- Identify your triggers and come up with ways to cope with them as they occur.
- Don’t demand perfection from yourself or others.
- Study your routines and find the areas and times that produce the most stress and devise a plan for dealing with those instances.

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat nutritious meals.
- Mindfulness training.
- Daily exercise. Exercise will help to rid the body of excess energy as well as release endorphins.

What Can Adults Do to Help a Child Ease Meltdowns?

It takes a great deal of patience to deal with a child in meltdown mode, but it can be accomplished!

- Learn your child's triggers and come up with a plan to address them. Being prepared ahead of time for potential outbursts can help diffuse them before they happen.
- Let your child know ahead of time what the consequences will be for certain actions.
- Talk to your child and encourage them to talk to you. Always acknowledge their feelings and let them know that feelings in themselves are not bad. Teach a child to articulate their feelings, giving them a sense of power over their emotions.
- Distract them.
- Use time-outs. Give them space and time to calm down.
- Ignore the tantrum. This may be easier said than done, but it doesn't help to respond with anger or annoyance.
- Give reminders to a child leading up to the thing or event they are supposed to do.
- Praise a child when they show self-control.
- Avoid corporal punishment.
- Daily activity. Strenuous play can provide an outlet for strong emotions and the excess energy.

Learning to Live a Life Where Emotions Don't Control You

It is possible to learn to curb our strong emotional responses. Cognitive behavioral therapy can be extremely beneficial in learning to cope with the symptoms of ADHD.

No one is perfect. There will be times when any one of us will succumb to angry outbursts, fits of crying, or strong emotional responses. It's normal.

The key, if you have ADHD, is not to let these strong emotions run you, or destroy your relationships. It's one more thing that will require our energy, but it is worth learning to control. Acknowledge that you have a problem regulating emotions and ask for help from loved ones and experts.

Be patient with yourself. Some days are going to be easier than others. Some days are going to test your limits. Practice mindfulness, know your triggers and follow your plan.