A Family Services Guide

What Is an Autistic Shutdown?

Understanding withdrawal responses to overwhelm

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

What is an autistic shutdown?

The internalised version of a meltdown

Instead of overwhelm being expressed outwardly, the person withdraws – shutting down speech, movement, or engagement in order to cope.

Shutdowns are just as involuntary and just as exhausting as meltdowns, but they are often missed because they look quiet rather than dramatic.

What a shutdown can look like

Going silent or losing the ability to speak

Sometimes called situational mutism.

Appearing to "zone out", freeze, or stare blankly

The person may seem unreachable in the moment.

Withdrawing physically

Curling up, turning away, or leaving the room.

Slowed movement or responses

Or appearing "shut off" altogether.

Struggling to process or respond to language

Even simple questions can feel impossible to take in.

Common triggers

The same overload triggers as a meltdown

Sensory, emotional, or cognitive overwhelm.

Prolonged masking or camouflaging

Sustained effort to appear “fine” can build up unnoticed.

Social exhaustion

After a demanding event or environment.

Feeling unable to escape or communicate distress

Being stuck in a situation with no clear way out.

Shutdown or meltdown – what is the difference?

	Meltdown	Shutdown
Direction of response	Outward – expressed	Inward – withdrawn
Typical signs	Shouting, crying, movement, agitation	Silence, stillness, withdrawal
Cause	Overwhelm reaching a peak	Overwhelm reaching a peak
What is needed	Space, safety, reduced demands	Space, time, reduced demands

How to support someone during a shutdown

Give time and space

Do not rush or pressure a response.

Reduce demands and questions

Avoid requiring speech.

Offer alternative ways to communicate

For example writing, pointing, or a communication card.

Stay calm and reassuring

Without expecting interaction.

Let the person come back to engagement

In their own time.

Remember

Because a shutdown looks calm from the outside, it can be mistaken for someone being rude, sulking, or not listening. In reality the person is often trying very hard to cope with more than their system can currently process. Patience and reduced demands are the most supportive response.