Meltdowns & *shutdowns.*

Two ways a nervous system responds when it has taken in more than it can hold. One spills out. One folds in.

OUTWARD

Meltdown: *the overflow*

WHAT IT IS

An involuntary release when stress, sensory input or emotion pours in faster than it can be processed. The energy has to go somewhere, so it comes out.

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Crying, shouting or yelling
- Pacing, rocking, intense stimming
- Bolting from the room
- Words that come out sharp or not at all

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE INSIDE

Like a kettle past boiling: it can't be turned down, only ridden out.

Many people describe panic, heat and losing the steering wheel, often followed by exhaustion or embarrassment.

INWARD

Shutdown: *the power-down*

WHAT IT IS

An involuntary withdrawal when the system is too full to take in more. Instead of spilling out, it switches off non-essential functions to protect itself.

WHAT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Going quiet or losing speech
- A blank or far-away expression
- Moving slowly, or not at all
- Hiding, curling up, needing the dark

WHAT IT CAN FEEL LIKE INSIDE

Like being behind thick glass: still in there, just unable to reach the controls.

Many people describe fog, numbness and heaviness. It's easy for others to miss, or to mistake for ignoring them.

Neither is a choice or a tantrum — *both are a nervous system at capacity.*

They aren't bids for attention and can't be reasoned or punished away. What helps is less input, more safety, and time.

Continued on back →

MOVING THROUGH IT

Before, during and after

What helps changes as overload builds, peaks and settles — for you, and for anyone supporting you.

BUILDING UP
Before

FOR ME

Notice early signs: clenched jaw, sharper sounds, shorter replies.

Step out early — leaving isn't failing.

Reach for headphones, sunglasses or a fidget.

IF YOU'RE HELPING

Lower the volume, lights and number of questions.

Offer an easy exit: "Want to take a break outside?"

Hold off on new demands or decisions.

AT CAPACITY
During

FOR ME

Get to my safe place if I can.

Let it pass; I don't have to explain right now.

Use a card or gesture if words are gone.

IF YOU'RE HELPING

Stay calm and nearby; say little.

Clear space and keep others back.

No touch unless it's been welcomed before.

SETTLING
After

FOR ME

Rest. Recovery can take hours or days.

Water, a snack, something soft or familiar.

Skip the shame — my body was protecting me.

IF YOU'RE HELPING

Don't rehash it right away.

Offer quiet company, not a lecture.

Later, ask together: what could help next time?

YOUR TURN

My overload plan

Fill it in on a calm day. Share it with people you trust.

My early signs

My safe place

What I need you to do

Please don't...