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Neuro-Crash: How to Identify Triggers and Avoid Stressful Meltdowns

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What is a neuro-crash?

“Neuro-crash” is a term coined by authors, speakers, and advocates Raun Kaufman and Kate C. Wilde. Neuro-crashes happen when a person’s neurological system (brain) becomes overwhelmed with stress to the point that his or her normal coping mechanisms fail. This means that the person becomes unable to calm down or self-regulate his or her emotions and behaviors. There is often a “tipping point” or a series of triggers and micro-traumas throughout the day that add up and eventually cause the neuro-crash.



What does a neuro-crash look like?



- Though neuro-crashes are internal events (something that happens on the “inside” of the individual), they often result in visible or external behaviors.



- The way a neuro-crash looks can vary greatly depending on the person’s age, physical ability, usual temperament, environment, and typical communication style.



- Some people may experience alarming physical behaviors such as hitting, kicking, screaming, crying, falling to the floor, hyperventilating, or engaging in self-injury. Neuro-crashes with these visible external reactions are often called “meltdowns.”



- Other individuals may exhibit panic or avoidance behaviors such as running away, hiding, seeming to completely “shut down,” or becoming suddenly unable to speak or communicate as they normally would.

Who experiences neuro-crashes?

Anyone can experience a neuro-crash, but they are most common in “4S” individuals, or people with “super sensitive sensory systems.” This includes people on the autism spectrum, those with sensory processing disorder, highly sensitive people, or young children who cannot yet self-regulate their emotions and reactions.

What causes a neuro-crash?

Neuro-crashes can be caused by a singular stressful event or by the combination of a series of neurological stresses over a period of time. Some common neuro-crash triggers include:



- Autistic “masking,” or experiencing difficulty during interactions with neurotypical individuals

- Being directly exposed to others who are overwhelmed, upset, or in pain



- Sensory overload: bright or flashing lights, loud sounds, overstimulating smells, large crowds, etc.

- Inability to communicate needs or have needs adequately met

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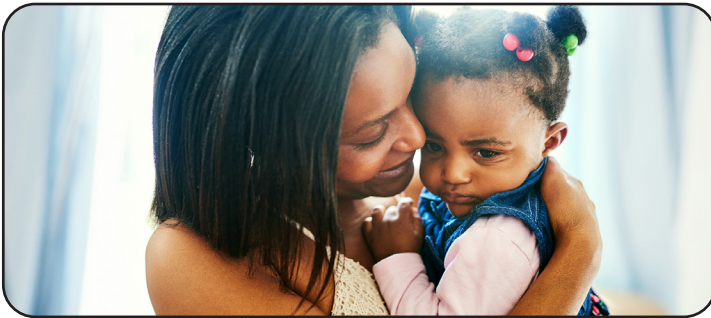
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- Violations of control and autonomy: invading the person's personal space or not respecting his/her "no"
- Decreased environmental predictability or changes to comforting routines



- "Bio-storms": having to deal with a variety of personal or health issues all at once (gastrointestinal or dietary issues, sleep problems, difficulty with autonomic systems and regulating arousal, medication reactions, hormones, headaches, etc.)



- A tantrum is often exhibited when the person is having a hard time communicating his/her needs; it typically ends when the needs are met. Though tantrums can be controlled, and for that reason are sometimes viewed as manipulative, they usually occur due to extreme frustration and communication issues rather than for manipulative purposes.

How can I help prevent a neuro-crash?



- Learn to recognize your 4S loved one's "SOS" (signals of stress) signs that indicate an impending neuro-crash, and learn how to decrease or eliminate the triggers that cause overwhelm. Keep in mind that some SOS signs may be very subtle.

o Examples of SOS signs:



- Engaging in a "stim" or repetitive behavior more urgently/frantically/intensely (see [Handy Handout #659](#) for more information)



- Saying "no" to everything (even things he or she normally likes)
- Becoming very controlling



- Repeatedly asking the same question over and over again



- Physiological symptoms such as the clenching of jaw/fists, tightening of muscles, posturing, breathing pattern changes



- Hitting/self-injury/picking or biting skin



- o When you begin to notice these behaviors, back off and give the person space and/or control of the situation if possible. Try to stay personally relaxed to promote coregulation (see [Handy Handout #661](#) for more information).

Neuro-crash versus tantrum: What is the difference?



- Neuro-crashes/meltdowns and tantrums have different causes and solutions. A tantrum can usually be voluntarily controlled (or stopped) by the individual, whereas a neuro-crash/meltdown cannot—in fact, people who often experience neuro-crashes are usually attempting to avoid them at all costs. This is why it can be very harmful to attempt to control or stop self-regulatory behavior, such as "stimming."



- Individuals experiencing a neuro-crash may need to be physically removed from the stressful situation or environment, may benefit from receiving structured support to help reactivate their coping strategies, and often need a longer period of time to calm down or get back to a state of self-regulation.



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- Work together to develop and practice calming strategies when the person is not in crisis. Strategies that may help include deep breathing, learning how to identify triggers and advocate for his/her own needs, and asking for a break in overstimulating situations.



- Help to educate other caregivers or significant figures in your loved one's life regarding his/her needs, triggers, and SOS signs.



Related Handy Handouts®:

[661 – Recognizing and Meeting the Needs of Highly Sensitive Children](#)

[658-659 – The Conversation Around Autism is Changing: How Best to Support Your Autistic Child or Clients \(Parts 1 and 2\)](#)

[643-645 – Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? \(Parts 1 through 3\)](#)

[630 – Autism—the Basics](#)

Resources:

Kaufman, Raun. "Neuro-Crash: The Surprising Causes of Meltdowns, Anxiety, and Extreme Behaviors." Webinar from the World Autism Conference. Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://worldautismconference.org/videos/635437030/33cea080d0>.

Kaufman, Raun. "How To Tell the Difference Between Neuro-Crashes, Meltdowns, Tantrums, and Button-Pushing." Webinar by Raun Kaufman. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/Raun.K.Kaufman/videos/how-to-tell-the-difference-between-neuro-crashes-meltdowns-tantrums-button-pushing-your/1077190572827044/>.

Wilde, Kate C. "Neuro-Cashes: What Are They, and How Can We Help Prevent Them?" Jessica Kingsley Publishers, JKP Blog. Accessed March 16, 2023. <https://blog.jkp.com/2021/09/neuro-crashes/>.

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