

Understanding Autistic Burnout, Inertia, Meltdown, and Shutdown (BIMS)

Christie Welch, PhD, OT Reg. (Ont.)

May 2023



AutismMONTARIO



Bloorview
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Disclaimers & Statements

General Disclaimer

- Opinions are of the presenters
- Make informed decisions

Language

- Identity-first (e.g., autistic person)
- Person-first (e.g., person with autism)

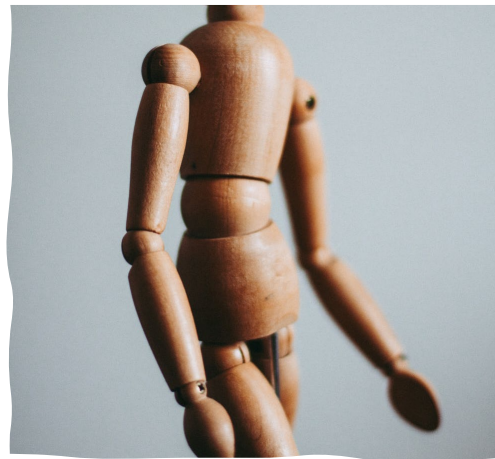
Professional Disclaimer

- Specific questions
- Additional Resources

A Shift in Thinking

- From dominant theories
- To intelligent, embodied, and empathic
- Burnout, Inertia, Meltdown & Shutdown (BIMS)

(Welch, 2019; Welch et al., 2020)



Burnout, Inertia, Meltdown & Shutdown

- Terms grounded in language used by autistic people (community & academic)
- Important parts of daily life for autistic people
- Definitions are evolving in the literature (based on first person perspectives)

BIMS



BURNOUT



INERTIA



MELTDOWN

**“You’re a passenger
on a ride of
destruction ... and it’s
like hitting a bunch of
stuff.”**

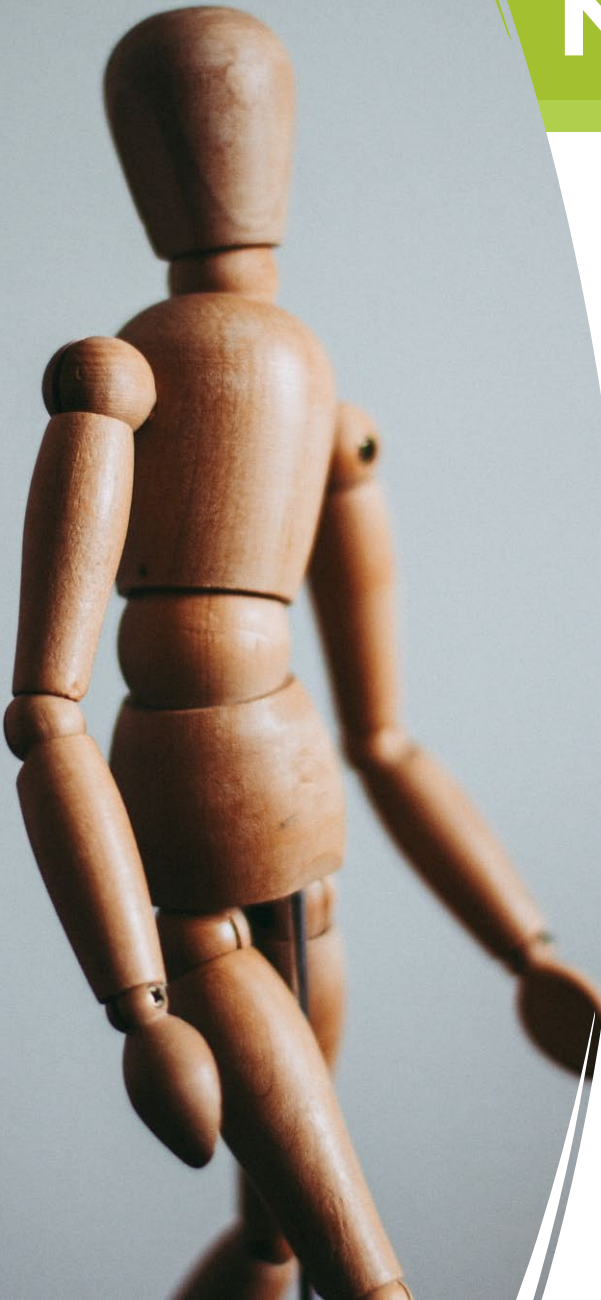


Meltdowns – In my mind



- “When I’m in a meltdown it’s not easy to get out of and I’m not in full control, like I’m not thinking clearly.”
- “It’s like my subconscious is still out of my control.”
- “It’s like tunnel vision.”
- “I don’t really remember what happens very well, it’s usually a little fuzzy.”

Meltdowns – In my body



- “My vision getting blurry.”
- “Getting tense muscles and I start to get hot.”
- “My cheeks get warm.”
- “My hair sticks up.”
- “Shoulders bunch up.”
- “My face gets a little bit red.”
- “I breathe fast.”
- “My sight is a little bit more restricted.”

A young boy with light brown, shaggy hair is shown from the chest up, standing in a forest. He is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and has his hands pressed against his face, covering his eyes and nose. The background is a soft-focus forest scene with green foliage and a path covered in fallen pink cherry blossom petals. The word "SHUTDOWN" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

SHUTDOWN

BIMS in Adults

- BIMS as clear, distinct phenomena
- BIMS is a major barrier to employment
- BIMS is a barrier to social relationships



BIMS in Children & Youth

- Less distinct
- Emphasis on Meltdown
- Misunderstood by NT
- Tremendous insight

(Phung et al., 2021)



BIMS in Children & Youth

- Whole-person experiences – physical, cognitive and emotional
- Whole-person strategies

(Phung et al., 2021)



Burnout

- Reduce need to mask
- Ongoing self-care
- Ongoing spoons management
- Good awareness of what drains and what energizes
- Dedicated time for special interests
- Protected alone time
- Demand elimination for recovery



Inertia

- Day-timers
- Watches, Alarms
- Agreed upon prompts (parents, friends, teachers)
- Playing music
- Internal countdown
- Visual schedules
- Positive self talk



Meltdown

- General wellness
- Know the triggers
- Know the signs
- Pre-planned responses
- Pre-developed communication strategies – scripts for adults,
- Highly individualized
- Supportive and non-judgmental before during and after
- Operant conditioning not effective



Shutdown

- General wellness
- Know the triggers
- Know the signs
- Pre-planned responses
- Adult script
- Planned access to communication
- Plan for physical guidance if needed



Managing BIMS at School

- Burnout – masking, breaks, start planning
- Inertia – experiment with kinds of prompts
- Meltdown – time space, do not introduce demands, do not add drama
- Shutdown – time space, do not introduce demands, do not add drama



Coming Soon...



CREATORS

Christie Welch,
Melanie Penner,
Clementine Pirlot,
Abigail Bernardo,

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING BURNOUT, INERTIA, MELTDOWN, AND SHUTDOWN

A guide made by and for autistic people

Coming Soon...

Meltdowns and Other Stuff: A Guide Made by and for Autistic Youth



How we made them:

- Interviews – asked kids about content and design
- Focus groups
- Usability study



Features

- Parent & Teacher guide
- Definitions of BIMS
- Words of support from autistic co-designers
- Strategies bank
- Worksheets
- Child-friendly illustrations



Next Steps



- Knowledge translation phase
- Launch

Key Takeaways

- Proactively work to understand triggers and strategies
- Create a plan together
- Communicate acceptance and understanding before, during & after
- Implement strategies—cognitive, physical and emotional
- **HIGHLY** individualized e.g., talk / touch / eye contact



I'd love to hear from you!

christie.welch@utoronto.ca
@ChristiWelchPhD 



Feedback Survey

- Please answer each question in the survey
- The questions include items with:
 - A Likert scale (i.e., a 5-point scale with a range of responses)



- Selecting only one answer (single answer)
- Selecting all answers that might apply (multiple selections)
- Text boxes where you type your answer

Contact Us

Phone: 416-246-9592

Toll Free: 1-800-472-7789

www.autismontario.com



@autismontarioprovincial



@autismONT



@autismeontarioprovincial



linkedin.com/company/autism-ontario



@autismontario



youtube.com/user/autismontario

References

- Buckle, K. L., Leadbitter, K., Poliakoff, E., & Gowen, E. (2021). “No way out except from external intervention”: First-hand accounts of autistic inertia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1592.
- Phung J, Penner M, Pirlot C, & Welch C. (2021) What I wish you knew: Insights on burnout, inertia, meltdown and shutdown from autistic children and youth. Under review at *Frontiers in Psychology*
- Welch, C. (2019). *Embodied, Intelligent and Empathic: Reframing Autism Using Insider Perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto (Canada)).
- Welch, C., Cameron, D., Fitch, M., & Polatajko, H. (2020). Living in autistic bodies: bloggers discuss movement control and arousal regulation. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 1-9.

Photo Credits

Slide # and artist

2: Body – Kira auf der Heide (2017),
Teens - Alexis Brown (2016), Brain -
Robina Weermeijer (2019)
4&14: Vladislav Muslakov (2017)
5&15: Alexander Grey 2019
6&16: Xia yang (2021)
7: Kinga Cichewicz (2018)
8: Robina Weermeijer (2019)

Slide # and artist

9: Kira auf der Heide (2017)
10 & 17 : Annie Sprat (2021)
11: Marten Bjork (2018)
12 & 13: Toa Heftiba (2018)
18: Sigmund (2020)
19: Monika Grabkowska (2021)
21: Compare Fibre (2021)
23: Jake Hills (2014)
24: Ben Mullins (2018)