Autistic Shutdowns

Similarly to meltdowns, shutdowns occur as a response to things such as high levels of anxiety or overload and can occur at any point after a stressful situation. However, meltdowns are a more externalised response whereas shutdowns are a more internalised and muted response. A shutdown is the brains equivalent to the 'freeze' response. This means a shutdown can be more difficult to spot however the impact can be just as distressing as a meltdown. Just like a meltdown it may be very difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of the shutdown. Some common triggers include:

- Needs being unmet
- Too many demands
- Sensory overload
- Masking
- Social overload
- Changes to routine – particularly if they are unexpected.
- Pain or illness

Shutdowns can present differently for every person however some of the more common signs include:

- Experiencing verbal shutdown (being unable to verbally communicate at all)
- Being completely still or not being able to move
- Person withdrawing themselves or retreating to their safe space
- Having a blank expression or appearing to stare into space
- Loss of energy or becoming sleepy
- Increased stimming
- Experiencing concurrent days of meltdowns

Shutdown's will still need a recovery period, in the same way a meltdown would. Recovery time is different for each individual and may depend on the severity of the shutdown.

Tips for supporting someone experiencing a shutdown:

- Let the person know you are there for them
- Reduce or remove demands
- Give the person space and time
- Try not to talk and ask lots of questions as this is additional things for the person to try and process
- Try and limit sensory input, considering the persons individual sensory needs, as they may not be able to communicate these needs during shutdown.
- Provide / direct to a quiet and safe space
- Implement a recovery / decompression period afterwards
- Provide a non-verbal communication option
- Explore self-management techniques when emotionally regulated

It is important to remember similarly to meltdowns this is a person's involuntary response to a situation where they feel unsafe or highly anxious. It is often too late to support someone when they are already experiencing a shutdown, therefore it is important to have coping mechanisms and strategies in place for the person before with an aim to prevent the shutdown from happening.