



## Understanding Trauma in ASD

Trauma occurs when an experience feels overwhelming, frightening, or impossible to control and the body cannot return to a sense of safety afterward. It can result from a single event or from repeated experiences that feel threatening or distressing over time.

It's important to understand that trauma is not defined by what happens, but by how the nervous system experiences and remembers what happens.

For children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), trauma may come from experiences that others do not recognize as traumatic, such as repeated sensory overwhelm, communication barriers, restraint, bullying, medical procedures, or feeling misunderstood or unsafe.

### How Trauma Affects the Body and Brain

When a person feels unsafe, the nervous system automatically shifts into survival mode. This is the fight, flight, freeze, or shut-down response. These responses are not choices, rather they are automatic biological reactions designed to keep us alive.

If the nervous system is activated too often or for too long, it can become harder to return to a calm and regulated state.

#### Individuals who have experienced trauma may:

- React strongly to changes or stress
- Avoid certain places or situations
- Have difficulty trusting others
- Experience meltdowns, shutdowns, or panic
- Appear constantly "on alert" or easily overwhelmed

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### Trauma Can Be Visible or Invisible

Trauma is not always obvious. A child or adult may look calm on the outside while their nervous system is working very hard to manage stress and stay safe. Understanding trauma helps us shift from asking *“What’s wrong with this person?”* to asking, *“What has this person experienced and what do they need to feel safe?”*