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The Art of the Pandemic Meltdown

Under stress from every front, we're having more meltdowns. Here's how to lose it the right way.

PHOTO: JOHN KUCZALA

By Elizabeth Bernstein
Oct. 6, 2020 4:10 pm ET

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Preston Woodruff held it together for months during the pandemic—working in his garden and making musical instruments in his workshop, sharing meals with his daughter, and walking in the woods behind his home.

Then a sneeze sent him over the edge.

Mr. Woodruff was sleeping soundly when he woke to an uncomfortable feeling in his nose. He rolled over and reached for the box of tissues he keeps on his nightstand. None peeked up from the top. He tried—and tried—to dig one out. The entire wad remained tightly wound.

So Mr. Preston did something uncharacteristic: He grabbed the box in a rage, crushed it in his hands, and flung it at the far wall of his bedroom. Alone in the dark, he slammed his head back on the pillow and swore.

"I momentarily lost it," says Mr. Woodruff, a 74-year-old retired philosophy professor in Brevard, N.C.

Welcome to the Pandemic Meltdown. Have you had yours yet?

It's what happens after you've held it together for all these turbulent months—through a pandemic and quarantine, working from home and home schooling, civil unrest and the most divisive public discourse in several lifetimes. And then something seemingly small happens and suddenly you're screaming alone in your car or sobbing to your dog about, well, everything.

People lost control of their emotions before 2020, of course. But we're doing it a whole lot more now because of our sustained levels of stress, anger and fear. We're overwhelmed by constant bad news. We're exhausted by the need to be ever-vigilant. It's no wonder our fuses are short.

Think you've never had a meltdown? Think again. Although we typically expect meltdowns to look like the adult version of a toddler's tantrum—wailing, whining, whimpering—psychologists say they can manifest in different ways: Crying. Rage. Silence or an emotional shut down. "Often, people don't identify with the word 'meltdown' because of the stigma of having a mental-health crisis," says Amanda Luterman, a licensed psychotherapist in Montreal. "They will just say they are having a really horrible day."

What most meltdowns have in common is a loss of emotional control—often manifested physically—and a sense of helplessness. They occur when we no longer have the emotional resources to deal with our stress. And they're typically triggered by something small and unanticipated—a stubbed toe, a spill on our shirt, or (for me recently) a broken backspace key on the laptop.

Yet meltdowns have an upside. They allow us to release tension. And once we do that, we can think more clearly, because we're no longer spending all our energy trying to hold it together. "A meltdown is the body's natural mechanism to let go, to cleanse itself of painful emotions," says Tal Ben-Shahar, a psychologist who specializes in the science of happiness. "It lets us reset."

Not all meltdowns are created equal. Bad ones happen too often, interfere with our life, hurt people around us or leave us feeling worse than before. Good ones are rare, ideally happen when we're alone, and leave us feeling better than we did before, with a sense of relief.

To have a productive meltdown, experts say we should accept it.

We need to identify what will make us feel better—and explain this to others. We should be careful to minimize the negative effects, and explore the meaning afterward.

Mr. Woodruff, of the tissue tantrum, has minor meltdowns several times a week nowadays. He says he's careful to take his frustration out on inanimate objects—throwing a piece of wood across his workshop or slamming silverware into the dishwasher when it won't load properly. He sometimes plans his emotional purges in advance: When he replaced his wonky computer a while back, he carried the machine out to his fire pit, destroyed it with a sledgehammer, and set it on fire.

But Mr. Woodruff makes sure to keep his outbursts brief. "It's wasted energy and wasted time to focus too long on the hostility of the moment," he says. "I let it out and then I have an immediate feeling of relief."

Preston Woodruff enjoying his fire pit in Brevard, N.C. He once threw a troublesome computer in the pit, as an emotional purge.

PHOTO: PRESTON WOODRUFF

Mike Veny was walking to his truck one recent afternoon, looking forward to going to the gym, when he received an email from a colleague stating that some information he needed for a project wasn't available. Immediately, his stomach "dropped like an elevator." His fists clenched. He began stomping down the street, ranting about a growing list of complaints: a co-worker who annoyed him, the state of the country, whether people on the street were looking at him funny, how his dad hadn't called him all week.

"It was like going down a rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland," says Mr. Veny, 41, who lives in Queens, N.Y., and owns a company that provides mental-wellness and diversity training for corporations. "It spiraled faster and faster until things felt 10,000 times worse than they really were."

Luckily, Mr. Veny has a plan for dealing with meltdowns, which he says have come more frequently recently. This time, he paused in the middle of the street to collect himself, then got in his truck and drove to the gym. He sat in the parking lot for 20 minutes and thought about the answers to three questions: "What do I feel?" (Anger, but also sadness at losing work and fear of whether he would get the coronavirus by going to the gym.) "Where do I feel it?" (In his chest and stomach.) "What do I need now?" (Time to feel his emotions, rather than suppress them.)

Next, he went into the gym. It was "leg day," so each time he pushed the weights forward with his feet he visualized himself pushing his negative energy out. The music was loud and he cursed while he worked out. When he got home, he also did yoga, which he says helps him let go of his emotions.

When he went to bed that night, Mr. Veny realized he had a smile on his face. "I felt free of whatever it was that had been cooking up inside me," he says. "I felt like I was in control again, like I had taken my power back."

How to Have an Effective Meltdown

Accept it. Don't judge yourself. Meltdowns are as natural as gravity, says Tal Ben-Shahar, a psychologist who specializes in the science of happiness. A meltdown lets you release

tension and frees up energy that was spent suppressing emotions.

Plan ahead (if possible). Better to cry in private than to start sobbing in the middle of a Zoom board meeting. When you start to feel overwhelmed, talk to your partner, a friend or a therapist. Find a private place, such as the shower or a parked car, where you can be alone—you may feel freer to let your emotions out. Or try writing about your feelings.

Know what you need—and tell others. Some people prefer to be left alone when they lose control. Others want a hug or a pep talk. You should figure out what helps you before a meltdown and be clear with your loved ones about your needs, says Amanda Luterman, a licensed psychotherapist in Montreal. And be careful never to take your meltdown out on other people.

Mike Veny often uses exercise to release painful emotions.
PHOTO: MIKE VENY

Model a good meltdown. No kicking the dog or punching the wall or screaming at your family while visiting your dad in the ICU. (Yes, it's happened.) And be very careful never to have a full-blown meltdown in front of children—it can frighten them. But showing others, especially kids, that you can express painful emotions in a productive way that doesn't negatively affect others can be an important lesson. "Having an occasional meltdown and recovering from it helps people see that we can be OK through these expressions," says Carrie Krawiec, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Troy, Mich.

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Try an "alternate rebellion." When we lose control of ourselves, we often want to rebel: quit our job, fire off a snotty email to our boss, tell off our father-in-law. Instead, plan a healthy rebellion that satisfies the need to assert control in your life, recommends Jenny Taitz, a psychologist and assistant clinical professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. One idea: Explain to others that you are turning off your phone for a while and can't be reached. Then do something you enjoy—and crank some loud music on the way.

Calm yourself. Dr. Taitz suggests a technique from a form of therapy called Dialectical Behavior Therapy, referred to by the acronym TIPP. The first "T" refers to temperature—put your face in extremely cold water. This immediately lowers your body temperature, which activates your body's diving response, reducing your body's emotional and physiological reflexes. The "I" is for intense exercise—go get some energy out. The first "P" is for paced breathing—six counts in and eight counts out—which calms your nervous system. And the final "P" is for progressive muscle relaxation.

Explore the meaning of your meltdown. First, give yourself time to recover. Then reflect on what happened. This helps you turn your meltdown into a growth experience, says Maru Torres-Gregory, a faculty member and staff therapist at the Family Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

Move on. Apologize if you've upset others—and don't expect someone else to clean up your mess. Forgive yourself: Having a meltdown makes you human. And make a fresh start. Research shows that picking a date on the calendar to begin anew can help people achieve a goal. So pick midnight tonight and decide that tomorrow will be better.

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Have you had an emotional meltdown during the pandemic? What happened? Join the discussion below.

Appeared in the October 7, 2020, print edition as 'The Art of the Meltdown Tips for Better Meltdowns.'