

My Body Is Screaming Too

A neurodivergent guide to noticing what your body is communicating.

Overwhelm is not only a thought or an emotion. It can arrive through the whole body. You might feel tense, sick, hot, shaky, restless, heavy, numb, unable to speak, desperate to move or desperate to get away. These reactions can be information: your nervous system may be telling you that the load has become too much.

You do not have to explain it first

Start with sensation rather than interpretation. You can notice 'my jaw is tight' or 'my skin feels unbearable' without yet knowing why.

The strongest sensation

My body wants to...

What happened just before I noticed it?

Where Is It Showing Up?

Use words, marks, descriptions or your own shorthand.

Possible body signals: tight jaw • clenched teeth • pressure in the chest • racing heart • shallow breathing • nausea • stomach pain • headache • migraine • hot or flushed skin • cold hands • sweating • shaking • buzzing • tingling • restless legs • heavy limbs • dizziness • pain • itching • feeling trapped in your skin • needing to pace • needing to curl up • going still • losing speech • crying • numbness.

Head, face, jaw and throat

Chest, breathing, heart and stomach

Skin, arms, hands, legs and movement

What Is My Nervous System Doing?

There is no single 'correct' neurodivergent response to overload.

I need to MOVE

Pace, rock, shake, stim, stretch, run, push, jump, flap, leave, change position or release physical energy.

I need to STOP

Freeze, go quiet, hide, lie down, shut my eyes, stop talking, stop deciding, withdraw or become very still.

I need to GET AWAY

What is your body trying to move away from - sound, light, touch, a person, questions, a demand, uncertainty, conflict, being watched, a crowded space or something else?

I cannot tell yet

Not knowing is information too. You can simply record what your body is doing and come back to meaning later.

What Is My Body Reacting To?

Look outside yourself as well as inside.

Sensory environment

Noise, lighting, smell, heat, cold, touch, clothing, movement, screens, crowds or competing input.

A person or interaction

Tone, proximity, criticism, questions, misunderstanding, conflict, pressure, unpredictability or feeling unsafe.

Demands and change

Too many tasks, switching, interruption, decisions, waiting, time pressure, changed plans or loss of predictability.

Or is it several things stacking up?

What Would Reduce the Load?

Support the body you have, rather than forcing it to behave differently.

Try thinking in terms of reducing input and increasing safety. Your answer may be very small: one light off, one person to stop talking, five minutes without questions, loosening clothing, moving seats, going outside, using headphones, changing temperature, eating or drinking, stimming, pressure, movement, rest or knowing exactly what will happen next.

Less of...

More of...

What I need another person to understand...

Listening Without Judging

The aim is not to make your body quieter. It is to understand the message.

A message from Maggie

When your body reacts strongly, it can be tempting to tell yourself that you are overreacting. But the body often carries the information we have been trying to push past. A tight jaw, nausea, shaking, pain, silence, restlessness or an urgent need to escape can be signs that something in the situation has become too much. You do not have to wait until you can explain it perfectly before you make an adjustment. Notice first. Reduce what you can. Give your nervous system information, space and time. Understanding the pattern can come afterwards.

The pattern I am beginning to notice

A sentence I can use

Example: 'My body is telling me I am overloaded. I need less input before I can continue.'

Further reading

- National Autistic Society — sensory differences and sensory processing.
- Kapp, S. K. (ed.) (2020). Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement.
- Price, D. (2022). Unmasking Autism.
- Dunn, W. (2007). Supporting Children to Participate Successfully in Everyday Life by Using Sensory Processing Knowledge.

For reflection and support; persistent, severe or new physical symptoms should be medically assessed.