

I Give Myself Permission to Say: This Is Too Much

Recognising overload before I have to push through it

You do not have to wait for breaking point.

For many neurodivergent people, overwhelm is cumulative. A bright room may be manageable until conversation, decision-making, uncomfortable clothing, hunger, uncertainty and several demands are added. Each individual thing can look small from the outside while the total load becomes enormous.

Saying 'this is too much' is not giving up. It can be accurate communication about capacity. Recognising the limit earlier can create an opportunity to reduce input, leave, pause, ask for an adjustment or recover before the nervous system reaches crisis.

My limit does not have to look like somebody else's limit to be real.

Overload can be sensory, emotional, cognitive, social or physical

Too much sound. Too much light. Too many people. Too many decisions. Too many questions. Too much uncertainty. Too much emotion. Too much pain. Too little sleep. Too many transitions. Too much masking. Often, several of these happen together.

How overload builds

Capacity changes from day to day. A person may manage a supermarket one day and find the same environment unbearable another day because sleep, pain, stress, hormonal changes, hunger, previous demands or social exhaustion have already used part of their available capacity.

Sensory load

Background conversations, alarms, traffic, fluorescent lighting, visual clutter, smells, temperature, touch and clothing can all require active processing. Sensory distress is not simply dislike; for some people it can feel physically painful or impossible to filter.

Cognitive and demand load

Planning, switching tasks, remembering instructions, making choices and responding quickly all use executive resources. Even pleasant activities can become too much when they require repeated transitions and decisions.

Social and masking load

Monitoring facial expression, eye contact, tone, turn-taking and what other people expect can create substantial fatigue. A person may appear composed while their internal capacity is disappearing.

Emotional load

Conflict, rejection, uncertainty, grief, injustice or feeling misunderstood can sit alongside sensory and cognitive demands. The nervous system does not keep each type of stress in a separate box.

The question is not 'Should this be too much?' The useful question is 'Is it too much for me right now?'

My early warning signs

Catching overload earlier is often easier when you learn your own body signals rather than waiting for a clear verbal thought.

Area	What I might notice
Body	jaw tightness, headache, nausea, heat, shaking, restless legs, holding breath
Senses	sounds sharper, lights painful, touch irritating, smells stronger, visual clutter unbearable
Thinking	losing words, forgetting instructions, indecision, rigid thinking, difficulty switching
Emotion	irritability, tears, anger, panic, feeling trapped, sudden hopelessness
Behaviour	pacing, increased stimming, withdrawing, covering ears, needing to leave, going silent
Communication	short answers, repeating myself, unable to explain, needing questions to stop

My personal signs

The first sign I am reaching capacity is: _____

People close to me might notice: _____

The point where I need to stop rather than push through looks like: _____

One sign I have previously ignored is: _____

THIS IS TOO MUCH — MY PAGE

You can use words, scribbles, circles, huge letters, repeated marks or simply tick what is happening.

WHAT IS TOO MUCH RIGHT NOW?

SOUND	LIGHT	TOUCH	SMELL
PEOPLE	QUESTIONS	DECISIONS	DEMANDS
CHANGE	WAITING	EMOTIONS	MASKING
PAIN / BODY	TIREDNESS	HUNGER	EVERYTHING

GET IT OUT OF YOUR HEAD

Write the demands, noises, thoughts or feelings here. Cross them out. Circle the worst one. Draw how crowded your head feels.



Right now I need LESS of: _____

Right now I need MORE of: _____

The sentence I can use is: "This is too much. I need _____."

What can I change when it is too much?

Regulation is not only something you do inside your body. Often the most effective response is to change the environment or demand.

Reduce sensory input

Move away from competing sound, lower lighting, reduce visual clutter, change uncomfortable clothing, use familiar sensory supports, or leave the environment if possible.

Reduce language

When processing drops, long explanations can increase overload. Ask for one question at a time, written information, fewer choices, extra processing time or a pause in conversation.

Reduce demands

Delay non-urgent tasks. Break one task into smaller steps. Remove optional decisions. Cancel or shorten an activity if capacity has changed. A plan can be adjusted without being a failure.

Communicate simply

Useful phrases might include: 'I cannot process this yet.' 'Please stop asking questions.' 'I need ten minutes without talking.' 'I need to leave.' 'Please write that down.' 'I am overloaded, not angry with you.'

My three fastest ways to reduce load

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

One adjustment I want other people to understand: _____

After overload: recovery counts

Even when you step away before a full meltdown or shutdown, the nervous system may still need recovery. Preventing escalation does not mean the load disappeared instantly.

Low-demand recovery

Reduce conversation and decisions. Rest somewhere predictable. Use comfortable sensory input. Drink and eat something manageable if you can. Allow stimming or movement. Avoid immediately filling the newly created space with another task.

Meltdown and shutdown

If overload continues, some people may experience meltdown, shutdown or a significant loss of usual communication and functioning. These are not moral failures. They are signals that demands exceeded available capacity.

Look back without interrogating yourself

Later, ask what accumulated, which early signals appeared, and what could realistically be changed. The purpose is prevention and understanding, not finding something to blame.

My recovery plan

After overload I usually need: _____

Please do not expect me to: _____

A person who can help by reducing demands is: _____

I know I am recovering when: _____

Rest after overload is part of regulation, not a reward for coping well.

A message from me

If you have spent years pushing through, you may not recognise 'too much' until your body makes the decision for you. You may have learned that leaving is rude, cancelling is unreliable, asking for quiet is difficult, or needing fewer demands means you are not trying hard enough.

I want you to practise noticing the moment before that. The moment when the light becomes painful, conversation becomes harder, your jaw tightens, you lose your words, or one more small request suddenly feels impossible.

That moment matters. You do not have to prove your distress by reaching meltdown, shutdown or complete exhaustion before you are allowed an adjustment.

You can say: this is too loud. This is too bright. I cannot answer another question. I need to leave. I need space. This is too much.

Books and useful reading

Luke Beardon — *Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Adults*. Explores anxiety and the importance of understanding environmental contributors.

Devon Price — *Unmasking Autism*. Discusses masking, identity and the cost of suppressing needs.

Barry M. Prizant with Tom Fields-Meyer — *Uniquely Human*. Encourages understanding behaviour in context and as communication.

Evidence-informed references

NICE CG142: Autism spectrum disorder in adults: diagnosis and management. NICE CG170: Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: support and management. National Autistic Society information on sensory differences, meltdowns and shutdowns.

This guide is educational and supportive and does not replace individual medical or mental-health assessment. Sudden or severe changes in sensory tolerance, cognition or functioning may also have medical causes and deserve appropriate assessment.