

ADHD Shutdown

When demand exceeds available capacity

Some people with ADHD use the word **shutdown** to describe a state in which thinking, speaking, deciding, starting tasks or responding becomes markedly harder after demands have accumulated. 'ADHD shutdown' is not a separate formal diagnosis, so this guide uses the term descriptively rather than diagnostically.

ADHD itself can involve difficulties with attention regulation, organisation, starting tasks, following instructions and forgetfulness. When stress, sensory input, conflict, fatigue or repeated decisions are added, a person may temporarily have much less usable capacity. ■cite■turn0search5■

The response is not to force productivity back online. First reduce unnecessary demand, create clarity and allow enough time for capacity to return.

1. Demand exceeds capacity

A person may have been coping with work, appointments, household tasks, social expectations and internal pressure for hours before their capacity drops. The visible 'stop' can therefore seem sudden. **Helpful response:** identify what is genuinely essential now, postpone what can wait and reduce the number of instructions being held at once.

2. Conflict feels inescapable

Conflict can require rapid language, emotional regulation, memory and decision-making at the same time. If there is no safe way to leave or pause, capacity may fall further. **Helpful response:** stop trying to resolve the whole disagreement in the moment. Agree to return later, reduce verbal pressure and make physical or conversational space where possible.

3. Too much sensory input

Noise, lighting, movement, notifications, touch and competing conversations can add to cognitive load. NICE specifically recognises environmental modifications such as reducing noise and distractions, changing lighting, using headphones and allowing movement breaks as potentially useful ADHD supports. ■cite■turn0search0■

4. Decisions keep arriving

Every choice requires processing. When someone is already depleted, even small questions can feel impossible. **Helpful response:** pause non-essential decisions, offer one or two concrete options rather than an open-ended question, and write down decisions that can wait.

5. Emotions have been held in

Trying to stay composed, hide frustration or keep functioning while distressed can use substantial effort. When that effort can no longer be maintained, the person may become quiet, tearful, irritable or unable to engage. **Helpful response:** remove judgement and allow emotion without demanding an immediate explanation.

6. No safe way to pause

If every environment contains another expectation, recovery never properly begins. **Helpful response:** deliberately create a low-demand interval. At work or education, reasonable adjustments and environmental modifications may include quieter space, written instructions and help structuring tasks. ■cite■turn0search0■turn0search1■

NOTICE THE LOAD • PAUSE • REDUCE DEMANDS • RECOVER

Recognising a possible shutdown state

A shutdown-like state can look different from person to person. It may involve staring, going unusually quiet, losing words, being unable to choose, feeling physically heavy, becoming stuck at the start of a task, withdrawing from interaction or needing to lie down or escape stimulation. These experiences can have many causes; they should not automatically be attributed to ADHD.

What you might notice	A gentler response
Speech becomes limited or slow	Use fewer words. Allow text, gestures, yes/no responses or silence.
The person cannot choose	Remove non-essential choices. Offer two concrete options only if a decision is necessary.
They cannot start the next task	Make the first step visible and very small, or pause the task entirely.
They withdraw from people	Do not automatically interpret withdrawal as rejection or rudeness. Ask later what contact was helpful.
Noise/light feels unbearable	Reduce stimulation and interruptions. Move to a quieter, lower-demand space if wanted.
They seem 'fine' but cannot function	Look at capacity, not appearance. Someone can be internally overloaded without a dramatic outward reaction.

What to do in the moment

Start by taking something away: noise, questions, urgency, people, decisions or tasks. Give information simply. If the person wants company, quiet presence may be more useful than repeated reassurance. If they want space, agree how and when you will check in rather than repeatedly interrupting.

Afterwards: recovery before analysis

It can be tempting to immediately ask what happened or how to prevent it next time. Those conversations are often more useful once thinking and language have returned. Restore basic needs first: hydration, familiar food if wanted, warmth or cooling, rest, reduced sensory input and predictable next steps.

Work, college and university

NICE describes environmental modifications for ADHD as individual changes to reduce day-to-day impact, including adjustments to noise and lighting, fewer distractions, shorter periods of focus with movement breaks, and reinforcing verbal requests with written instructions. NHS guidance also notes quiet workspaces, written instructions and help planning and structuring tasks as examples of reasonable adjustments. [■cite■turn0search0■turn0search1■](#)

A message from Maggie

When your brain seems to go offline, forcing more words, more decisions and more effort into the moment can make everything feel heavier. You are allowed to make the world smaller for a while. One room. One need. One next step — or no next step until you have recovered enough to find it.

My shutdown map

This page is for reflection when you have capacity. It is not something you need to complete while shut down.

What tends to build before I shut down?

Demands, conflict, sensory input, interruptions, uncertainty, social effort, tiredness, hunger, pain, masking, unfinished tasks...

What are my earliest signs?

Changes in speech, movement, attention, emotion, body sensations, eye contact, decision-making or ability to begin tasks.

What should people NOT do?

List the responses that add pressure: repeated questions, touching, rushing, arguing, demanding eye contact, adding choices, asking for explanations...

What helps me feel safe enough to pause?

A particular room, person, phrase, signal, headphones, blanket, movement, silence, written communication, leaving the situation...

What can be postponed?

Name the responsibilities that can usually wait until capacity returns.

My simple support message

Write one short message others can follow when you have very few words.

Further support, books and sources

If shutdown-like episodes are frequent, severe or substantially affecting daily life, it can be useful to discuss the pattern with an appropriately qualified professional. Other physical, neurological, sleep-related, neurodevelopmental or mental-health factors may also affect concentration, speech, energy and responsiveness.

Book recommendations

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD — Russell A. Barkley. Evidence-informed practical strategies for adult ADHD and external supports.

How to ADHD — Jessica McCabe. Accessible approaches to understanding ADHD, working with executive-function differences and reducing shame.

ADHD 2.0 — Edward M. Hallowell and John J. Ratey. A broad overview of ADHD experiences and practical approaches.

Professional sources

NICE NG87 — Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management. NICE recommends individualised information and support and recognises the importance of environmental modifications. Examples include reducing distractions, changing noise or lighting, using written instructions and allowing breaks.

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NHS — ADHD in adults. NHS information describes common adult ADHD difficulties and gives examples of workplace or study adjustments, including a quiet workspace, written instructions and help structuring tasks.

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This guide is psychoeducational. 'ADHD shutdown' is used here as a descriptive lived-experience term, not a formal diagnostic label. If a person is newly unresponsive, severely confused, fainting, having difficulty breathing, experiencing chest pain, has been injured, or there is another acute safety concern, seek urgent medical help rather than assuming the cause is ADHD.

Space to Breathe Therapy