

Circles of Neurodivergent Overload

Understand your limits, protect your energy — and place effort where it can genuinely support you.

Neurodivergent overload can build when sensory input, demands, uncertainty, communication, transitions and the effort of coping all compete for limited capacity. The circles model is not about pretending difficult things do not matter. It helps separate what is yours to act on, what you may be able to influence, and what may need to be acknowledged without spending all of your energy trying to control it.

CIRCLE OF CONTROL	CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE	CIRCLE OF CONCERNS
Reducing sensory input Taking recovery time Using clear self-advocacy Choosing the next manageable step	Changing the environment Using external reminders Agreeing communication needs Requesting adjustments	Unexpected sensory input Other people's assumptions Last-minute change Systems, delays and wider pressures

A useful question is not only “Can I control this?” but also “Is spending energy here helping my nervous system right now?”

When overload is building

Early signs may include becoming less able to process speech, irritability, physical tension, a need to escape, losing words, going blank, becoming unusually quiet, repetitive movement, tears, agitation, shutdown, or finding ordinary decisions suddenly impossible. Signs vary from person to person.

Circle of control: reduce the immediate load

Lower light or noise where possible; step away from conversation; reduce the number of decisions; use familiar clothing or sensory tools; eat, drink and rest if needed; slow communication; cancel or postpone non-essential demands; and choose one small next action rather than trying to restore full productivity.

Circle of influence: make the environment work better

You may be able to ask for written information, more notice of changes, a quieter space, fewer interruptions, clearer priorities, a predictable meeting structure, extra processing time or another person to help communicate your needs.

Circle of concerns: release the impossible job

You cannot guarantee that other people understand neurodivergence, prevent every unexpected noise or change, control somebody else's reaction, or make every system flexible. These things can still matter deeply. Releasing means recognising the limit of your responsibility — not approving of what happened.

Working With Overload Before It Becomes a Crisis

Situation	Lower-demand response
Noise, people or visual input is building	Reduce one source of input first. Headphones, a quieter room, dimmer lighting, fewer conversations or simply moving position may create enough space to think.
Plans change suddenly	Ask for the new information in one clear message. Identify what has actually changed and what remains the same. Give yourself transition time.
Too many demands arrive together	Externalise them. Write them down, identify what is urgent, what can wait and what can be delegated or dropped.
Communication becomes difficult	Use a prepared phrase such as: "I am overloaded and need time to process. Please put the key information in writing."
You are already depleted	Work from today's capacity rather than yesterday's expectations. A minimum viable day can be a legitimate regulation strategy.

For partners, family and supporters

During overload, fewer words are often more useful than more questions. Avoid demanding an immediate explanation, repeatedly checking what is wrong, or treating reduced speech as rudeness. Offer practical choices: quiet or company, now or later, spoken or written, help or space. Once the person has recovered, discuss what made the situation harder and what could be changed next time.

At work or in education

Helpful adjustments can include written instructions, clear priorities, predictable routines, advance notice of changes where possible, quieter work areas, reduced interruptions, sensory adjustments, breaks, flexible communication and agreed ways to signal overload. Adjustments should be individual rather than based on assumptions about a diagnosis.

A message from Maggie

Overload can make your world feel very small very quickly. Things you normally manage may suddenly become impossible, and that can be frightening or frustrating. You do not have to prove how much you can tolerate. Look at what is actually in your circle today: reduce one demand, communicate one need, take one recovery step. The things outside your control can be acknowledged without asking your nervous system to solve them all.

My Neurodivergent Overload Map

Use this when you are settled enough to reflect. It is designed to help you recognise patterns before the load becomes unmanageable.

1. What usually adds to my overload?

Sensory input, people, uncertainty, transitions, decisions, hunger, fatigue, masking, work demands, conflict, travel or something else?

2. What are my earliest signs?

What changes in my body, speech, thoughts, movement, tolerance, concentration or emotions?

3. What is in my control?

List three actions that reduce load quickly.

4. What can I influence?

Which people, routines, environments or adjustments could be changed with communication or planning?

5. What belongs in my concerns circle?

What matters to me but is not mine to fix or control?

6. My recovery plan

Where can I go? What sensory input helps? Who should know? What should be postponed? What food/drink/rest is realistic?

Understanding, Support & Further Reading

This resource uses “neurodivergent overload” as a broad, descriptive term rather than a diagnosis. Overload can look different across autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent experiences, and similar symptoms can also have other causes. Individual assessment matters when difficulties are new, severe or changing.

Useful reading

Unmasking Autism — Devon Price. Explores autistic identity, masking, needs and creating a more sustainable life.

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD — Russell A. Barkley. Practical information on adult ADHD and executive-function challenges.

How to ADHD — Jessica McCabe. Accessible strategies for understanding and working with an ADHD brain.

Looking After Your Autistic Self — Niamh Garvey. Practical approaches to recognising needs, sensory differences and wellbeing.

Professional context and resources

NICE guideline NG87 — Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management. Includes discussion of environmental modifications and individualised support.

NICE guideline CG142 — Autism spectrum disorder in adults: diagnosis and management. Includes consideration of sensory sensitivities, environment and individual needs.

NHS — Autism and ADHD information. Useful starting points for understanding traits, assessment and support in the UK.

Important note

This is an educational and coaching resource, not a diagnostic checklist or a substitute for personalised medical or mental-health care. If overload is accompanied by new neurological symptoms, severe physical illness, immediate danger, or thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, seek appropriate urgent professional help.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY