

The Neurodivergent Recipe Translator

Turn recipes into clear, manageable actions

A recipe can look simple and still demand a great deal from the brain. “Meanwhile, sauté the onion until translucent” asks you to track time, interpret an uncertain word, switch attention, judge heat, remember another pan and notice a sensory change. That is several tasks hidden inside one sentence.

For ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ARFID, fatigue or anxiety, the barrier may not be cooking ability. It may be the way the information is written, the number of decisions it contains, or the sensory environment in which it has to be completed.

Translating a recipe is an accessibility tool. It moves information out of working memory and puts it somewhere visible.

What a standard recipe may quietly expect

Hidden demand	What it can feel like	Translation support
Starting	The recipe begins at “cook”, but shopping, choosing, unpacking and clearing space happened first.	Add a preparation stage and decide what can be bought ready-prepared.
Working memory	Holding the next step in mind while measuring, stirring or finding equipment.	One visible action per line; cover later steps; tick off each completed action.
Time awareness	“Cook for a while” gives no reliable stopping point; multiple timers can blur together.	Give each timer a name and include a physical sign as well as minutes.
Task switching	“Meanwhile” means leaving one task unfinished and starting another.	Choose a sequential method, pause safely, or prepare the second task before heat goes on.
Decision load	“Season to taste” or “add as needed” creates repeated choices.	Choose a starting quantity and a rule for whether to add more.
Sensory processing	Smell, steam, noise, sticky textures, raw-food contact and heat can use up capacity.	Name the likely sensory moments and select alternatives in advance.
Interoception	Hunger, fullness, thirst, heat or fatigue signals may arrive late or feel unclear.	Use external prompts, planned pauses and a safe-food back-up without judgement.

Before translating: is this recipe usable today?

Question	If the answer is no
Do I have the ingredients, equipment and safe workspace?	Swap, simplify, buy prepared, or choose a different meal.
Can I tolerate the likely smell, sound, texture and heat today?	Use ventilation, ear protection, gloves/tongs, a quieter method, or a familiar food.
Can I stay close to heat and remember the steps?	Choose no-cook/microwave food, use support, or postpone the high-attention method.
Does the food fit my allergies, intolerances, ARFID needs or medical guidance?	Do not improvise around an allergen. Check labels and use personally safe alternatives.

My thoughts

Sometimes we tell ourselves we “should” be able to follow an ordinary recipe. But ordinary for whom? Many recipes are written by people who already know the missing actions. Making those actions explicit is not failure. It is good design. On a difficult day, success may mean translating only the next two steps, using a packet instruction, or eating something familiar without cooking at all.

Key takeaway

The meal is the goal. Following the original method exactly is not the goal.

The eight-part translation method

A repeatable way to rewrite almost any recipe

Part	Translate it into	Prompt
1. Finish line	What you are making and how many portions.	What does "finished" mean today: full recipe, half quantity, or one component?
2. Gather	Ingredients, tools and containers in the order used.	What can be opened, measured, drained or positioned before heat?
3. One action	One verb per numbered line.	Can this line be physically completed before the next one starts?
4. Exact place	Where the action happens.	Which bowl, pan, shelf, burner or safe surface?
5. Time	A named timer or a check-in point.	What time should I check, stir, turn or stop?
6. Sensory cue	What ready looks, sounds, smells or feels like.	Small bubbles? Soft enough for a fork? Quiet sizzle? Golden edge?
7. Safety stop	The point where attention cannot move elsewhere.	When must I stay in the kitchen or turn heat off before continuing?
8. Easier route	A lower-demand substitution that still feeds you.	Pre-cut, frozen, jarred, microwave, ready-made, fewer pans or another person?

Translation rules that reduce ambiguity

Instead of	Write
"Prepare the vegetables."	1. Put the chopping board on a dry surface. 2. Put the vegetables beside it. 3. Use pre-cut vegetables, or cut each into roughly 2 cm pieces. 4. Put them in the bowl.
"Cook until ready."	Set the stated timer. At the check, look for the named sign. Follow the packet or trusted recipe for safety; add time in short checks if needed.
"Meanwhile..."	Choose: complete the first task and turn it off safely; or prepare the "meanwhile" task before starting.
"A little / a splash."	Choose a starting amount, such as 1 teaspoon or 1 tablespoon, when suitable. Add more only after mixing and checking.
"Use a large pan."	Name the pan you own: for example, the deeper pan with two handles. Photograph it for next time.

Make the page easier to read

Reduce visual load: copy only the method you need; use a plain font; increase line spacing; highlight temperatures and timers; keep one action on one line; cover completed or future steps. **Protect attention:** silence unrelated alerts, label timers with the food name, and keep the recipe visible rather than allowing the phone to lock. **Support dyslexia:** use text-to-speech, a reading ruler or colour overlay if helpful. **Support dyscalculia:** circle the unit, use one measuring system, place the correct spoon beside the ingredient and ask a calculator or trusted person to scale quantities.

A traffic-light plan

Green - continue	Amber - simplify	Red - stop safely
I can follow the next action, monitor the heat and tolerate the sensory environment.	I am losing the sequence, missing timers or becoming overloaded. Turn down/off heat if needed, sit, use prepared food or ask for support.	Smoke, unsafe oil, forgotten heat, shutdown/meltdown, dizziness or inability to monitor. Turn appliances off if safe, leave danger, and get help.

Gentle practice

Choose a familiar recipe and translate only one sentence. Notice whether naming the action, timer and stopping sign makes it easier. The aim is not to create a perfect system; it is to remove one point of friction.

Worked translation

From compressed recipe language to visible actions

Original instruction: “Heat the oil in a large pan. Sauté the onion until translucent. Add the garlic and spices and cook briefly. Stir in the tomatoes, bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer until thickened.”

Why it may overload: the pan is not identified; “heat” and “briefly” are vague; several ingredients need preparing before the first step; the smell may intensify suddenly; boiling and simmering need different heat; and “thickened” is an uncertain stopping sign.

Translated version

Step	One visible action	Check / stopping point
1	Put the deep pan on the unlit hob. Put a wooden spoon beside it.	The handle is turned away from the edge.
2	Use ready-diced onion, or prepare it now. Measure the oil. Open the tomatoes. Put garlic and spices in one small bowl.	Everything needed before the tomatoes is within reach.
3	Add the measured oil to the pan. Set the hob to a middle setting.	Stay beside the pan. If the oil smokes, turn the heat off.
4	Add onion carefully. Stir. Set a timer for 5 minutes. Stir when the timer reaches 3 minutes.	Aim for a gentle sizzle, not violent spitting.
5	At 5 minutes, check the onion. Continue in 2-minute checks if it is still firm and opaque.	Stop when softer and slightly glassy. It does not need to be perfect.
6	Tip in the garlic and spice bowl. Stir continuously for the exact time given; if none is given, use a trusted version of the recipe rather than guessing for safety-sensitive ingredients.	Lower the heat if it catches or smells burnt.
7	Pour in the tomatoes. Stir from the base of the pan. Increase heat gradually.	Large bubbles across the surface mean boiling.
8	Turn the hob down until only small steady bubbles remain. Start the recipe timer.	Small bubbles = simmer. Stir at labelled check-ins.
9	At the end, drag the spoon across the base.	If the gap stays visible briefly, the sauce has thickened. Follow food-safety guidance for all ingredients.
10	Turn off the hob. Move the pan only if safe. Put the spoon on a plate.	Say or tick: “heat off”. Allow steam and pan handles to cool.

Sensory and ARFID-aware routes

Possible barrier	Translation option
Onion smell or frying sound	Use ventilation before starting; wear ear protection; use frozen/pre-cooked onion; choose a recipe without it; ask someone else to complete that step.
Touching wet or raw ingredients	Use tongs, gloves, a spoon, pour-from-pack ingredients or ready-prepared versions.
Mixed or unpredictable textures	Keep components separate; blend only if that texture is safer; serve sauce beside rather than over food; preserve a familiar component.
Smell changes appetite	Cook earlier and reheat only when appropriate; use a covered or lower-odour method; have a safe food available.
Recipe changes a safe food	Do not force the variation. Keep the known version and experiment only when there is capacity, consent and an acceptable back-up.

Myth and reality

Myth	Reality
“If I simplify it, I am not really cooking.”	Prepared ingredients and adapted methods are legitimate access tools.
“I should cook from scratch to eat properly.”	Convenient, fortified, frozen, tinned, ready-made and familiar foods can all contribute to being fed.
“I failed if I abandon the recipe.”	Stopping when capacity or safety changes is skilled self-monitoring.

In my therapy room

The most useful question is often not “Why can’t I make myself cook?” but “Where does the process become inaccessible?” The answer may be choosing, beginning, tolerating the smell, switching between pans, noticing hunger, or recovering after the task. When we locate the actual barrier, we can design support around it rather than using shame as a strategy.

My recipe translation sheet

Use this before heat goes on; complete only the boxes that help

Recipe / meal: _____ Date: _____

What counts as finished today? _____

Safe or familiar component I will keep: _____

My easier back-up if capacity changes: _____

Gather first

Ingredients, opened or measured in order	Equipment and exact pan / container	Sensory support
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

One-action translation

#	One physical action	Timer / check	What tells me to stop or move on
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

Safety pause

Before cooking, check packaging for allergens, storage, cooking and reheating instructions. Prevent raw meat, fish or egg from contacting ready-to-eat food. Wash hands at the necessary points. Use suitable microwave/oven containers. Open lids and film away from your face. Never put water on a fat or oil fire. If concentration drops while heat is on, turn it off if safe before trying to recover the plan.

This resource does not give universal cooking times or temperatures. Size, quantity, appliance, starting temperature and ingredient can change what is safe. Use the current packet, appliance guide, a trusted recipe and a food thermometer when recommended.

Maggie's reflection

I know how easily food can become tangled with pressure, fear, sensory discomfort and the belief that we ought to manage in the same way as everybody else. A translated recipe does something important: it stops asking the brain to carry invisible information. It makes the task kinder and more honest.

Some days you may use every part of this sheet. Some days a ready meal, smooth soup, familiar snack or somebody else taking over is the right answer. Being fed matters more than proving that you can push through.

Before you go

Keep the translation that worked. Add the exact pan, appliance setting, brand, time and sensory support. Photograph the equipment or finished texture if that is easier than words. Next time, you are not starting from zero; you are using a personal instruction manual built around your own brain and body.

Sources and further support

Food Standards Agency. Current UK guidance on food hygiene, allergens, storage, cooking and reheating. [food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene](https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene)

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Autism guidance and quality standards, including person-centred support and individual needs. [nice.org.uk/guidance/conditions-and-diseases/neurological-conditions/autism](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/conditions-and-diseases/neurological-conditions/autism)

Stern et al. Research on food-preparation skills and self-efficacy among adults with ADHD. *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health*.

Tiimo. Neurodivergent cooking and executive-function supports, including visible steps and timers. tiimoapp.com

Books: *How to Keep House While Drowning* by KC Davis - care tasks without moral judgement; *Cook As You Are* by Ruby Tandoh - flexible routes for different capacity and equipment; *The Autism-Friendly Cookbook* by Lydia Wilkins - accessible cooking guidance and recipes.

Clinical note

This educational guide is not individual medical, dietetic, occupational-therapy or feeding support. Seek appropriately qualified help if eating is very restricted, weight or hydration is changing, there are choking or swallowing concerns, fainting, severe gastrointestinal symptoms, allergy risk, or distress around food is increasing. ARFID and other eating difficulties deserve informed, non-coercive support.

Space to Breathe Therapy | Bodmin, Cornwall | spacetobreathetheapy.co.uk