

Sitting in the Car Before Work

WHEN YOU NEED TEN MORE MINUTES BEFORE YOU CAN WALK THROUGH THE DOOR

You have arrived — but you are not ready to go in

You have completed the journey, parked the car and switched off the engine. Work is only a few metres away, but opening the door feels like another task entirely. So you sit. Perhaps you look at your phone without really taking anything in. Perhaps you stare through the windscreen, drink the last of your coffee, rehearse the day ahead or simply enjoy the fact that, for a few more minutes, nobody is asking anything from you.

This can be difficult to explain to somebody who has never experienced it. From the outside it may look like procrastination, lateness or avoidance. From the inside it can feel like the final pause between one environment and another — the last private space before noise, conversation, decisions, performance, masking, demands or uncertainty begin.

Sometimes those ten minutes are regulation. Sometimes they are exhaustion. Sometimes they are anxiety. And sometimes they are your body telling you something important about what is waiting on the other side of the door.

The car can become a transition space

Transitions require mental energy. We move from home to travel, travel to work, private self to professional self. For autistic and ADHD people, transitions can be particularly demanding because they involve switching attention, expectations, sensory environments and roles. Sitting quietly before going inside may help the nervous system catch up with the physical journey.

This is not automatically a problem. If a short pause allows you to regulate and then enter work feeling more settled, it may be a useful strategy. The question is not simply, 'Why am I sitting here?' but 'What am I needing from these minutes?'

What are you waiting to feel?

Are you waiting until your heart slows down? Until you have enough energy to speak? Until a particular colleague has gone inside? Until you feel able to put on the expression you use at work? Are you trying to recover from traffic, public interaction or the morning at home? Or are you hoping that if you sit long enough you somehow will not have to face the day?

The answer can help separate a healthy transition from a sign that work is becoming emotionally difficult.

When the car is the only place nobody needs anything

For people carrying responsibilities at home as well as work, the car may be one of the few spaces in the day where nobody is speaking, touching, asking, emailing or needing a decision. Those minutes can become precious. That does not necessarily mean the person dislikes work or home; it may mean there is almost no unscheduled space between the two.

Using the Pause Rather Than Fighting It

If you need a few minutes, try making them intentional rather than spending them criticising yourself. Decide, where possible, how long you need. Put the phone down if scrolling increases agitation. Notice the physical transition: unclench your jaw, lower your shoulders, take a drink, allow your breathing to settle naturally and recognise that you have arrived.

Ask one useful question

Instead of mentally running through the entire working day, ask: 'What is the first thing I need to do when I walk in?' Not the whole day. Not every deadline. Just the first step. Put your belongings away. Make a drink. Open the computer. Go to the first meeting. Breaking entry into one action can reduce the feeling that opening the car door means accepting every demand of the next eight hours at once.

If you are masking before you go in

Some people use the car to prepare the version of themselves they believe work requires: arranging their face, practising conversation, reminding themselves to make eye contact, preparing to appear energetic or pushing down sensory discomfort. If this happens every day, it is worth asking how much energy masking is taking and whether there are safer ways to be yourself at work.

Reasonable adjustments, clearer communication, quieter spaces, written information, sensory changes or greater understanding from colleagues may reduce the amount of performance required simply to be present.

If anxiety rises as soon as you see the building

Notice that pattern. Your nervous system may have connected the workplace with previous difficult experiences. This can happen after bullying, repeated criticism, conflict, overload, burnout or a period where work felt unsafe or unpredictable. The physical building, car park or entrance can become a cue for anxiety even before anything happens that day.

Grounding can help you enter the present moment, but do not use grounding to convince yourself that genuinely harmful conditions are acceptable. If the anxiety is linked to something happening at work, the situation itself may need attention.

Your pause does not have to look productive to be useful. Sometimes five quiet minutes are the bridge between arriving and being able to begin.

Create a kinder arrival

If possible, avoid scheduling your most demanding task for the exact moment you arrive. Give yourself a predictable first action. Keep essential items organised so that entry does not begin with searching and decision-making. If sensory demand is part of the difficulty, consider headphones before entering, a quieter route into the building or a few minutes in a lower-stimulation area. A small amount of predictability can make the threshold feel less abrupt.

When Ten Minutes Becomes Thirty — or You Cannot Go In

There is a difference between choosing a short transition and repeatedly feeling unable to enter. If you are arriving earlier and earlier because you need longer to prepare yourself, crying in the car, experiencing panic, calling in sick from the car park or driving away because going inside feels impossible, this deserves support.

Look at what happens on different days

Do you need less time when a particular manager is away? Is it worse before team meetings, presentations or certain shifts? Is the pause longer after poor sleep, periods of heavy workload or conflict? Is working from home noticeably different? These patterns can reveal whether the main pressure is social, sensory, organisational, performance-related or connected to your mental health more broadly.

What could the workplace change?

A later or flexible start, quieter entry time, predictable first task, reduced early meetings, hybrid working, a low-stimulation space, clearer expectations or another reasonable adjustment may help. If you are returning after sickness absence, burnout or a difficult experience, a phased or supported return may also reduce the sense that you must immediately perform at full capacity.

If bullying, harassment, discrimination or another serious workplace issue is contributing, use appropriate support and reporting routes. Coping strategies should never become the only response to harmful behaviour.

Reach for support before the car becomes the only safe place

If the car increasingly feels like the only place you can breathe, consider talking to somebody. That may be a trusted manager, occupational health, a GP, therapist, workplace peer supporter, union representative or another appropriate service. You do not need to wait until you are completely unable to work before your experience deserves attention.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

I think there is something important about those minutes in the car because they are easy for everybody else to miss. Your colleagues see you when you walk through the door. They do not necessarily see the negotiation that happened before you opened it.

If you sit there each morning gathering yourself, I would want you to replace the question 'What is wrong with me?' with something more useful: 'What am I preparing myself for?' Maybe your nervous system needs a transition. Maybe you are exhausted. Maybe you are masking. Maybe something at work has made entering feel unsafe. Understanding the reason matters.

Take the ten minutes if they help. But if those ten minutes keep becoming harder, longer or more desperate, listen to that too. The goal is not simply to force yourself through the door. It is to make the life waiting beyond it more manageable.

A small car-park check-in: Before you get out, ask yourself three things: What am I feeling in my body? What am I expecting when I go inside? What is the first thing I need — not for the whole day, just for the next ten minutes? Over time, your answers may show you what kind of support or change would genuinely help.

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health or employment advice.