

When Emails Feel Overwhelming

UNREAD MESSAGES, AVOIDANCE, EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING AND SHAME

When opening the inbox becomes a task in itself

Email looks simple from the outside: open the message, read it and reply. But an inbox can contain dozens of different decisions. Which message is urgent? Which needs information before you can answer? Which requires careful wording? Which can wait? What have you forgotten? What if somebody is annoyed because you have taken too long?

For someone already overloaded, the inbox can stop feeling like a communication tool and begin to feel like a wall of unfinished responsibilities. The unread number rises, anxiety rises with it, and opening email becomes increasingly difficult.

This can be especially challenging for people with ADHD, autism, executive-function difficulties, anxiety, perfectionism or previous experiences of being criticised for communication. Avoidance is often interpreted as not caring. In reality, the person may care so much that every unanswered message feels heavier.

The longer an email waits, the more emotional weight it can acquire — even when the reply itself might only take two minutes.

Executive functioning is hiding inside email

Responding often requires prioritising, remembering context, switching tasks, deciding what action is needed, finding information, estimating time and producing appropriate language. One message can create several new tasks. When there are many messages, the brain is not simply reading; it is repeatedly organising and deciding.

Why avoidance grows

If opening the inbox reliably produces stress, the brain may begin avoiding it. Avoidance gives short-term relief, which can make it more likely next time. Meanwhile more messages arrive. Eventually the person may feel frightened to look because they expect to discover something urgent, critical or embarrassingly overdue.

Shame makes the backlog harder

Once somebody believes they 'should have replied by now,' they may feel they need to write a perfect apology before they can answer. A simple delayed response becomes a complicated emotional task. Shame rarely clears an inbox. It often makes the inbox harder to approach.

Making Email Smaller and More Manageable

When the inbox feels impossible, the first goal does not need to be 'get to zero.' That can turn recovery into another overwhelming target. The aim is to regain enough visibility to know what genuinely needs attention.

Separate reading from solving

Not every message needs to be fully dealt with the moment it is opened. One approach is to identify what the message requires: no action, a quick response, a task, information from somebody else, or focused time later. This reduces the pressure to solve everything while scanning.

Create a small starting point

Instead of 'deal with my emails,' choose a bounded action: review messages from today, answer three straightforward emails, identify anything genuinely urgent, or spend fifteen minutes sorting. A clear endpoint can make initiation easier, particularly when executive functioning is stretched.

The overdue reply

A delayed response usually does not need a long explanation. Where appropriate, a brief acknowledgement can be enough: 'Thank you for your patience. I'm picking this up now.' Then move into the actual response. Repeatedly apologising can keep attention on the delay rather than the information the other person needs.

Protect email from becoming constant interruption

Some roles require continuous monitoring, but many do not. Where the job allows, checking email at planned points can protect concentration better than reacting to every notification. Turning off non-essential alerts, using folders or filters sensibly and agreeing team expectations around response times can reduce the feeling that every new message is immediately urgent.

Managers can help by being explicit. If a response is needed today, say so. If it is information only, make that clear. Avoid creating a culture where every message silently carries the expectation of an instant reply.

An inbox is a system for receiving communication. It is not a measurement of somebody's worth, organisation or commitment.

When the Inbox Is Telling Us Something Bigger

Sometimes email overload is mainly about the inbox. Sometimes it is a sign that the entire workload has exceeded capacity. If messages are arriving faster than they can reasonably be processed, no productivity technique can create unlimited time.

Look beyond personal organisation

How many channels is the employee expected to monitor? Are requests duplicated across email, chat, phone and meetings? Is everything marked urgent? Are priorities clear? Does the person have protected time to complete the work generated by messages, or are they expected to respond while simultaneously doing everything else?

For neurodivergent employees, practical adjustments may include clearer communication expectations, reduced duplication, written priorities, protected administrative time or support with systems. The useful adjustment depends on the individual and the role.

If you are returning to a large backlog

Start with what matters now rather than punishing yourself by working chronologically through every old message. Identify current priorities, recent requests and anything with a genuine consequence. Some old threads may no longer require action. Where possible, ask for help clarifying what remains relevant.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There can be so much shame attached to an overflowing inbox. People tell themselves they are lazy, disorganised or unprofessional when, very often, they have become caught in a cycle of overload, avoidance and fear.

I would encourage you to remove the moral judgement. An unread number is information. It tells you there is communication waiting. It does not tell you what kind of person you are.

Open one message. Make one decision. Reply to one person. Then another when you have capacity. And if the volume of communication is greater than anybody could reasonably manage, let the conversation move from 'How can I try harder?' to 'What needs to change in the way this work is organised?'

You do not need to clear everything today to have made progress.

An inbox check-in: What makes email hardest for me — volume, wording, prioritising, fear of criticism, remembering to return, or the tasks hidden inside messages? Which emails genuinely need attention now? What system or workplace change would reduce the load rather than simply asking me to tolerate more?

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