

Receiving Difficult Feedback When You Are Neurodivergent

PROCESSING TIME, EMOTIONAL RESPONSE AND UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS ACTUALLY BEING ASKED OF YOU

Feedback can contain far more information than the words being spoken

Being told that something needs to change can be difficult for anybody. For a neurodivergent employee, the conversation may also involve rapid language processing, reading tone and facial expression, managing an emotional response, remembering examples, working out what the manager actually wants and trying to respond appropriately — all at the same time.

The person may understand the words but not yet have processed their meaning. They may go quiet, become tearful, ask many questions, appear defensive or agree immediately and only realise later that they did not understand what was expected. None of these responses automatically means they are unwilling to receive feedback.

Autistic and ADHD employees can have very different experiences, so there is no single neurodivergent response. But processing differences, rejection sensitivity, literal interpretation, working-memory demands, previous criticism and the effort of masking can all affect how feedback lands.

Needing time to process feedback is not the same as refusing to hear it.

When the emotional response arrives first

Some people experience a powerful physical or emotional reaction before they have had time to think. The chest tightens, tears arrive, words disappear or the brain begins urgently searching for evidence that they are about to lose their job. Once the nervous system is in threat mode, it becomes harder to absorb detailed instructions.

Allowing a short pause can therefore improve understanding rather than avoiding accountability.

Past criticism can enter the room too

Many neurodivergent adults have histories of being corrected for being too loud, too quiet, too direct, too distracted, too emotional, too slow or somehow 'wrong.' Difficult workplace feedback may connect with years of shame long before the current manager intended it to.

Vague feedback is especially hard to act on

'Be more professional,' 'improve your attitude' or 'communicate better' can leave somebody trying to decode an invisible standard. Specific examples and observable expectations make feedback much more usable: what happened, what impact did it have and what would you like to happen differently next time?

Turning Feedback Into Information You Can Actually Use

The purpose of feedback should be to help somebody understand what needs to continue, stop or change. If the employee leaves knowing only that the manager was unhappy, the conversation has produced anxiety without enough information for improvement.

Ask for the concrete message

If the conversation feels overwhelming, bring it back to the practical point. You might ask: 'What is the main thing you need me to do differently?' 'Can you give me an example?' 'What would a good outcome look like?' or 'Which part should I prioritise first?' These questions are not arguments. They turn general criticism into actionable information.

Written follow-up can reduce memory pressure

When emotions are high, working memory can become less reliable. A short written summary of the agreed actions can prevent the employee leaving with a different understanding from the manager. Some employees may also benefit from seeing key information before a formal feedback meeting so they have time to process.

It is okay not to respond perfectly in the room

You may need to say, 'I want to take this seriously, but I need a little time to process what you have said. Can I come back to you after I have thought about it?' Processing time does not remove responsibility. It can make the eventual response more thoughtful and accurate.

Separate the work from your whole identity

Feedback about one task, conversation or behaviour is not automatically a judgement of your entire competence or character. Try to identify the boundaries of the issue. Is this one email? One repeated pattern? One skill that needs development? Anxiety can turn a specific correction into 'I am bad at my job.' Keep returning to what was actually said.

Managers: clarity is part of accessibility

Give specific examples, avoid unnecessary ambiguity, explain the expected change and allow questions. Where possible, do not deliver a long list of unrelated concerns in one conversation. Prioritise. Check understanding without asking a vague 'Do you understand?' Instead try: 'Can we agree what the next step will be?'

Good feedback should leave somebody clearer about what to do next, not simply more frightened of getting it wrong.

Feedback Can Be Accountable and Compassionate at the Same Time

Neurodivergent inclusion does not mean employees should never receive difficult feedback. Clear expectations and accountability matter. Inclusion means considering whether the way feedback is communicated gives the person a fair opportunity to understand it, process it and act on it.

When communication style is part of the issue

Sometimes a neurodivergent communication style is interpreted negatively when the actual intention is different. Directness may be read as rudeness; reduced eye contact as disengagement; a neutral expression as hostility; questions as challenging authority. This does not mean impact should be ignored, but managers should distinguish between an actual work problem and a difference in communication style before deciding what needs changing.

When the feedback itself is unfair

Not every piece of feedback is accurate simply because it comes from a manager. If expectations are inconsistent, discriminatory, unrelated to the role or focused on suppressing harmless neurodivergent traits, further discussion or appropriate workplace advice may be needed. Inclusion should not become a demand to mask more successfully.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

If difficult feedback stays in your head for days, I would not want you to conclude that you are incapable of taking criticism. I would want to understand what happened inside you when the words arrived.

Did you understand the actual request? Did your brain immediately hear rejection? Were there too many points at once? Did you lose access to words? Did the conversation remind you of every previous time you were told you were doing something wrong?

Then, when the emotion has settled enough, come back to the practical question: what is actually being asked of me?

For managers, I would ask you to make feedback usable. Do not hide the important message inside vague language and expect an anxious or overloaded employee to decode it. Say what happened, explain the impact, describe what needs to change and give enough space for processing.

Different brains may need different routes to the same understanding. That does not lower standards. It makes the route to meeting them clearer.

A feedback check-in: What was the main message? What exactly am I being asked to do differently? Which part is fact and which part is my fear about what it means? Do I need an example, written clarification or processing time? What will my next practical step be?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, HR, legal or employment advice. Neurodivergent people are individuals and support needs vary.