THE TOILET-CUBICLE RESET

When five minutes alone is the only way you can regulate at work

A workplace wellbeing article, practical guide and personal reflection workbook from Space to Breathe Therapy. This article is designed for employees, managers, colleagues, therapists, coaches and workplace supporters.

Sometimes the workplace toilet is not really about needing the toilet. It may be the one place an employee can close a door, stop speaking, let their face relax, escape unpredictable social demands or lower the amount of sensory information reaching them. A brief private pause can be valuable. But if a toilet cubicle is the only place where someone can recover, that says something important about the working environment.

The goal of this guide is not to make hidden breaks more efficient. It is to understand why they are needed, recognise signs of overload, find helpful responses and consider more dignified, accessible alternatives.

Central question: If this is the only place I can regulate, what is happening around me that needs to change?

1. What might be happening beneath the surface?

A person may look composed, efficient and sociable while privately managing high levels of stress or sensory demand. Regulation is the process of finding or maintaining a state in which thinking, communicating and functioning feel more manageable. People regulate in different ways: through stillness, movement, reduced stimulation, predictable routines, time alone or another person’s support.

An employee who disappears for a few minutes may be responding to noise, bright lights, interruptions, difficult conversations, constant self-monitoring, grief, anger, pain, uncertainty or cumulative fatigue. The trigger immediately before the break may be minor compared with everything preceding it.

2. Why privacy can become essential

In busy or open-plan environments, being visible can itself become a demand. Someone may feel pressure to make eye contact, answer promptly, keep their expression neutral, explain what they are doing, or appear approachable. Behind a closed door these demands may briefly stop.

Privacy is not the same as isolation. Some people want someone nearby who will not ask questions. Others need uninterrupted time alone. Choice and consent matter. A supportive workplace should offer options rather than assume everyone will regulate through the same technique.

3. Autism, ADHD, masking and sensory overload

Autistic employees may experience intense cumulative sensory input, pressure to manage eye contact or conversation, difficulty with unexpected changes, or shutdown when demands exceed capacity. An employee with ADHD may find interruptions, task-switching, emotional intensity and

competing priorities especially taxing. These experiences vary considerably; neither diagnosis predicts a single set of needs.

Masking means suppressing or concealing behaviours and difficulties to meet perceived expectations. It can include forcing eye contact, rehearsing responses, hiding distress and appearing calm when overwhelmed. Sustained masking can take effort and may leave people exhausted after apparently ordinary interactions. The fact that colleagues cannot see the effort does not make it insignificant.

4. Tears, shutdown and the final straw

Some employees cry in a toilet cubicle because they have held their emotions in throughout the day. Others go quiet, struggle to speak, feel detached, shake or experience a strong urge to escape. Crying does not prove incompetence; silence does not necessarily mean refusal; a break is not automatically avoidance. The question is what support is required and whether the conditions are sustainable.

Consider the sequence: What was happening earlier that day? How much recovery was available? Was there conflict or bullying? Had the person been navigating repeated interruptions or masking? Was there a safe way to ask for help? These questions are generally more useful than demanding an immediate explanation.

5. A five-minute reset that is not another demand

A five-minute reset can be helpful, but it is not a test, deadline or cure. There is no obligation to complete all the steps, use breathing exercises or return to work while still overwhelmed. Choose what fits your needs and location.

Minute 1 — Reduce the incoming demands

Where possible, find a safe and appropriate place to pause. Sit or stand comfortably. Put your phone away if notifications are overwhelming. You do not have to speak.

Minute 2 — Orient gently

Notice something stable: a wall, the floor under your feet, the feel of your clothing or a familiar object. If body-focused grounding is uncomfortable, skip it.

Minute 3 — Name the demand, not a personal failure

Ask: Is it noise? A social expectation? Uncertainty? Exhaustion? Conflict? Physical discomfort? More than one may be true.

Minute 4 — Choose one need

This could be water, a longer break, written instructions, less noise, support from a colleague or a private space. Small practical changes count.

Minute 5 — Decide the next safe step

Return when ready, request more recovery time or ask for appropriate support. You may need a different arrangement tomorrow, not just another hidden break.

A quiet reminder: “I am allowed to notice my limits. I can ask for a more suitable environment.”

6. When an occasional break signals something bigger

A brief private break may be an ordinary way to manage a demanding day. But if it is becoming longer, more frequent, increasingly desperate or followed by difficulties returning to work, it may be an early warning sign of more significant distress or burnout. A person might also notice sleep disruption, dread before shifts, repeated crying, panic, persistent exhaustion, withdrawal or communication becoming harder.

Repeated hidden breaks should prompt curiosity about workload, relationships, bullying, discrimination, insufficient support, sensory conditions or unrealistic performance expectations. Address any bullying or harassment through the appropriate workplace channels. If distress is affecting health or safety, consider support from a GP, occupational health or an appropriately qualified professional.

7. What managers and colleagues can do

• Respond privately and without accusation. Avoid questioning someone about tears or breaks in front of colleagues.

• Ask what would help, without assuming the employee wants to disclose a diagnosis or personal history.

• Offer written follow-up if speaking is difficult and allow time to process questions.

• Review the work itself: deadlines, interruptions, priorities, equipment, workload and working relationships.

• Agree a realistic break arrangement and a suitable location rather than making the toilet the default refuge.

• Follow agreed workplace processes while protecting confidentiality and dignity.

• Check whether further support, adjustments or occupational health advice would be useful.

Comments to avoid: “Everyone else manages”; “Just calm down”; “You cannot keep disappearing”; “It is only a noisy office”; “Why are you making such a fuss?” These statements can increase shame and fail to address the underlying conditions.

A more helpful response: “I’ve noticed the day seems difficult at times. You don’t have to explain in front of anyone. Would it help to look at the environment or how the work is organised?”

8. Better alternatives to a toilet cubicle

A supportive workplace can identify one or more spaces that provide privacy and reduced demands. The space should be safe, accessible and available when needed; it should not block toilets, emergency access or other essential facilities. Possible options include a quiet room, a small unused office with agreed access, low-sensory break area, private wellness space, or permission to take a short break in a suitable outdoor area.

Not every workplace has a dedicated room. In a small business, adjustments might include a predictable quiet period, flexible timing, lower-noise workstation, headphones where safe, a

temporarily unused room, written communication, or fewer non-urgent interruptions.

The most useful arrangement is designed with the employee, not imposed on them. Ask about lighting, sound, smells, seating, privacy, temperature, access, how to enter without needing permission each time, and whether the space can reliably be used.

9. Reasonable adjustments and fair processes

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 may require employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees where applicable. Adjustments are considered in context; examples may include altered work arrangements, equipment, communication methods or access to a quieter workspace. A support discussion should not depend entirely on the employee repeatedly becoming overwhelmed to prove a need.

Agree what will happen when the employee needs a break, what information they want shared and how to review whether arrangements work. Avoid demanding detailed personal disclosures that are not needed for an adjustment conversation. Workplace policies and safety requirements still matter, but dignity should remain central.

10. Practical wording for a workplace conversation

Employee: “I’ve noticed that I sometimes need to find a private place during the day because the working environment becomes overwhelming. I’d like to discuss a more appropriate quiet space and ways to reduce the build-up before I reach that point.”

Manager: “Thank you for telling me. I’d like to understand which parts of the environment are difficult and what options might help. We can agree a practical arrangement and check whether it works.”

Colleague: “Would you prefer some space, a written message or for me to check in later?”

11. A short personal reflection

You do not need to answer every question. These prompts are intended to support understanding, not judgement.

What happens before I feel the need to disappear?

Which sensory, social, emotional or workload pressures have been building?

What changes first in my body, thinking, emotions or communication?

What does a closed door allow me to stop doing?

What would a more suitable and dignified alternative look like?

12. My workplace regulation plan

My three main workplace pressures

My earliest warning signs

A private or low-sensory space that would work for me

Practical adjustments I would like to discuss

How I would prefer colleagues or managers to respond

My first step, and someone I could approach for support

13. A note for workplaces

An employee should not have to conceal the fact that they are overwhelmed in order to remain respected. If a toilet cubicle is the only place they can stop performing, interacting or processing sensory information, the working environment may be asking too much without providing a way to recover.

Supporting regulation at work is not about eliminating all stress or promising that five minutes will fix everything. It is about recognising patterns, reducing avoidable demands, providing appropriate choice and creating conditions in which people can participate with dignity.

Five minutes alone can help. But regulation should not have to be hidden.

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