Meeting Overload

When too many meetings leave too little time to actually work

Space to Breathe Therapy | Workplace Wellbeing | Practical three-page guide

What is meeting overload?

Meeting overload happens when the number, length, timing or intensity of meetings leaves insufficient space for focused work, preparation, recovery and ordinary responsibilities. A full diary can look productive while making it harder to complete the work discussed. The issue is not that all meetings are unnecessary: collaborative decisions, supervision, safeguarding and urgent coordination may require live discussion.

How it can affect people

• **Concentration:** switching repeatedly between discussions and individual tasks can interrupt attention and increase the time needed to regain focus.

• **Productivity:** actions accumulate while uninterrupted time to complete them shrinks; work may spill into evenings or breaks.

• **Energy:** prolonged listening, speaking, video calls and social demands can contribute to fatigue and reduced capacity later in the day.

• **Emotional wellbeing:** constant availability, unclear expectations and a backlog of work can increase frustration, stress or a sense of falling behind.

A realistic workplace example

A project officer has five meetings spread across the day. Each lasts 30–60 minutes, but the gaps are too short to begin a demanding report. The officer must also read papers, record actions and answer messages. By late afternoon, the report has barely progressed. The difficulty is not simply poor time management; the schedule has fragmented the time required for sustained work.

Notice the pattern, not just the meeting count

For one week, record meetings attended, their purpose, preparation time, follow-up actions, task-switching and the amount of uninterrupted work time remaining. Note whether you were needed for the whole meeting, whether a decision was made and whether another format would have worked. Avoid treating one unusually busy day as proof of an ongoing problem.

Questions worth asking

• Which meetings require discussion or a decision, and which only share information?

• Who genuinely needs to attend, and for which agenda items?

• How much time is left for the work that meetings generate?

Different needs, fairer meetings

ADHD, autism and individual working preferences

Some employees with ADHD may find frequent task-switching, competing information, unstructured discussions or keeping track of action points especially demanding. Some autistic employees may experience additional effort from rapid conversation, sensory conditions, ambiguous expectations or social processing. Others may enjoy collaborative meetings. Needs are individual, and no diagnosis automatically determines what will help.

Practical adjustments and alternatives

- **Protected focus blocks:** agree meeting-free periods for complex tasks and treat them as legitimate work commitments.
- **Clear agendas:** circulate purpose, required preparation, decision points and expected contributions in advance.
- **Shorter and more purposeful meetings:** use 20- or 45-minute sessions where appropriate; end early when the goal is met.
- **Flexible participation:** invite written contributions, optional attendance for relevant items, or a short summary afterwards.
- **Processing time:** provide papers in advance, allow pauses and avoid demanding instant answers when they are not essential.
- **Accessible communication:** use plain language, defined action owners, written decisions and captions where useful.
- **Breaks and sensory needs:** build gaps between calls and consider lighting, noise, camera expectations and quiet spaces.

Where a disabled employee faces a substantial disadvantage, the Equality Act 2010 may require reasonable adjustments. Consider the person's actual barriers, the role and what is reasonable in context. An occupational health assessment or Access to Work discussion may help identify options; Access to Work does not replace the employer's adjustment duties.

A helpful meeting invitation checklist

- Purpose: Why are we meeting?
- Outcome: What decision or work product is needed?
- People: Who must attend?
- Access: What materials or participation options are needed?
- Time: Can it be shorter or asynchronous?
- Follow-up: Who will capture decisions and actions?

Example wording to request a change

"I'm finding that several meetings across the day leave very little uninterrupted time for the analysis they generate. Could we trial two protected focus blocks each week, use agendas to identify when I'm needed and share decisions in writing? We could review the effect after a fortnight."

If the request is not agreed

Ask what operational concern prevents the proposed change, explore an alternative and agree when to review it. If disability-related needs are involved, request an individual reasonable-adjustment discussion and keep a written record of agreed next steps.

From overload to healthier practice

What managers and teams can do

• **Audit recurring meetings:** check their purpose, outcomes, duration, attendance and whether they still need to exist.

• **Set meeting norms:** agendas, punctual starts, meaningful breaks, decisions and named action owners.

• **Protect delivery time:** plan realistic capacity for preparation, follow-up and individual work, not just calendar attendance.

• **Make inclusion practical:** ask employees about communication and accessibility rather than assuming everyone works best in the same format.

• **Evaluate the trial:** compare meeting time, completed work, reported strain and decision quality after two to four weeks.

Meeting overload reflection tracker

Use one row per day. Focus on observable facts and practical consequences rather than assuming anyone intended to create pressure.

Day	Meetings / hours	Focus time left	Effect / change needed
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Personal action workbook

Which meeting patterns are most disruptive to my work or energy?

_____

Which meetings could be shortened, combined or replaced with an update?

_____

What protected focus time or communication adjustment would help?

_____

Who will I speak to, what will I request, and when will we review it?

_____

UK support and further reading

ACAS: acas.org.uk — workplace adjustments, communication and resolving concerns. **HSE:** hse.gov.uk/stress — work-related stress and organisational duties. **Equality and Human Rights Commission:** equalityhumanrights.com — disability discrimination and reasonable adjustments. **Access to Work:** gov.uk/access-to-work — potential employment support. **CIPD:** cipd.org — workplace management and wellbeing resources.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

A busy calendar does not always mean meaningful progress. People need time to think, prepare, recover and complete the work they are responsible for. Healthy meeting practice respects different ways of working while keeping communication clear, decisions timely and expectations realistic.

Educational information only; not a substitute for individual medical, HR or legal advice.