Sitting in the Car Before Work

Why it happens and how to make arrivals feel easier
Space to Breathe Therapy | Workplace Wellbeing

For some people, the minutes spent sitting in a parked car before work are not wasted time. They can be a pause between the demands of travelling and the demands of entering a workplace. Sometimes that pause helps; sometimes it signals that work has become difficult to face.

What might be happening?

• Anticipatory anxiety: thinking ahead to meetings, conversations, performance expectations or conflict.

• Sensory load: preparing for bright lights, overlapping conversations, smells, crowds or movement.

• A difficult transition: shifting from the relative predictability of the journey into competing workplace demands.

• Masking and social effort: anticipating the need to monitor expression, communication or behaviour.

• Exhaustion or burnout: feeling that even the first step into the building requires considerable effort.

Sitting in the car is not proof of any diagnosis or of a workplace problem. The meaning depends on the person, the frequency, what happens next and how much distress is involved.

Notice the difference: a pause or a barrier?

A short pause may help someone settle and enter feeling more prepared. It becomes more concerning if the wait grows longer, distress increases, lateness becomes frequent, or the person feels unable to enter despite wanting to. Curiosity is more useful than self-criticism.

A real-world example

An employee with ADHD arrives early but stays in the car for 20 minutes. They are not avoiding work deliberately; they are trying to organise the day mentally after a busy commute. Another employee feels dread because previous team interactions have been unpredictable. Both sit in their cars, but they may need very different support.

Understanding your arrival pattern

Anxiety, autism, ADHD and masking

Some autistic people find the change between environments demanding, particularly if arrival involves uncertain social expectations or strong sensory input. Some people with ADHD may find task initiation, prioritising or switching attention difficult. Masking can add pressure when someone expects to suppress natural responses throughout the day. Experiences vary; a diagnosis alone does not tell us what a person needs.

What can help before leaving the car?

• Choose a realistic arrival window. Build in a few minutes of transition time without turning it into another performance target.

• Use a simple three-step routine: notice your body, identify the first task, and choose one manageable next action.

• Try grounding: feel your feet on the floor, look around and name a few neutral things you can see.

• Reduce decisions: prepare your first task, access card and essential items the evening before.

• Consider an agreed quieter entrance, flexible start, low-stimulation workspace or written first-task checklist.

• If the car feels unsafe because of panic or overwhelming distress, prioritise safety and seek appropriate support rather than forcing yourself through.

When the workplace needs to change

Self-soothing alone cannot resolve an unsafe or inaccessible workplace. If the difficulty is linked to excessive workload, bullying, sensory barriers, unclear expectations or unsupported disability-related needs, those conditions also deserve attention.

Possible adjustments include predictable start-of-day duties, reduced early meetings, a quieter arrival route, structured check-ins, flexible start times, sensory equipment or a phased return. Employers in Great Britain may have a duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 where its requirements apply.

A conversation starter

“I have noticed that arriving and moving straight into a busy environment can be overwhelming. A quieter first ten minutes and a written list of priorities would help me begin the day more consistently. Could we trial that and review how it works?”

For managers

Ask what makes arrival difficult rather than assuming lateness or reluctance means poor motivation. Agree practical changes, protect confidentiality, check that workload is realistic and schedule a review. Avoid requesting unnecessary personal medical detail.

Your calmer arrival workbook

Use this page to identify patterns and design one manageable experiment. You can complete it privately or use it to prepare a conversation.

1. What happens before I go in?

What thoughts or worries tend to appear?

_____

What do I notice in my body?

_____

What is different on easier mornings?

_____

2. My arrival pattern tracker

Day / time	What was difficult?	What helped?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

3. My first small step

One change I would like to try: _____

Support I may need from work: _____

How I will know whether it helps: _____

Review date: _____ Person to speak to: _____

When to seek more support

If dread, panic, distress or avoidance is persistent, worsening or affecting everyday functioning, consider speaking with your GP, an appropriate mental health professional, occupational health, or a trusted workplace contact. If the environment feels unsafe or discriminatory, seek advice about workplace options as well.

UK information and support

ACAS: acas.org.uk | HSE work-related stress: hse.gov.uk/stress | NHS: nhs.uk | Access to Work: gov.uk/access-to-work | Samaritans: 116 123 (UK and Ireland).

Space to Breathe Therapy
A difficult arrival is information worth listening to, not a personal failure. Notice the pattern, reduce unnecessary

demands and ask what support would make the next step possible.

Educational resource only; not a diagnosis or substitute for medical, legal or occupational-health advice.