Understanding Overload

Recognise how demands can build up and why your capacity may change.

What is overload?

Overload can happen when the demands placed on us exceed what we can comfortably process or manage at that moment. It may involve sensory, emotional, cognitive, physical or social demands.

Different demands can add up

Sensory	Noise, light, movement, touch or busy environments.
Cognitive	Decisions, interruptions, uncertainty or complex instructions.
Emotional	Conflict, worry, difficult news or sustained pressure.
Physical	Pain, fatigue, hunger, illness or inadequate rest.
Social	Extended interaction, masking or navigating expectations.

Capacity is not fixed

The same task may feel manageable one day and difficult another. Needing to pause, reduce demands or ask for support is not a failure.

A gentle starting reflection

What situations tend to leave me feeling overloaded?

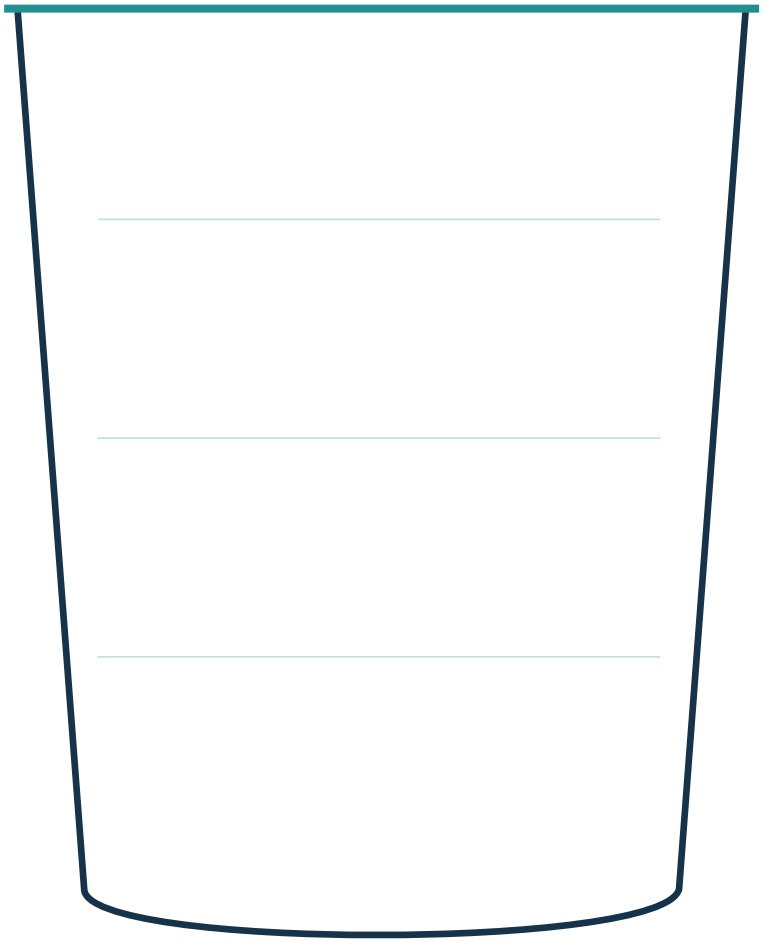
My Overload Bucket

Use this visual to notice what adds to your load and what may ease it.

Imagine a bucket that fills as demands accumulate. Write or draw examples inside it. You can use the prompts alongside it or add your own.

Sensory

Sounds, light, touch



Emotional

Feelings and uncertainty

Cognitive

Thinking and decisions

Physical

Energy and discomfort

Social

Interactions and expectations

What changes the level in my bucket?

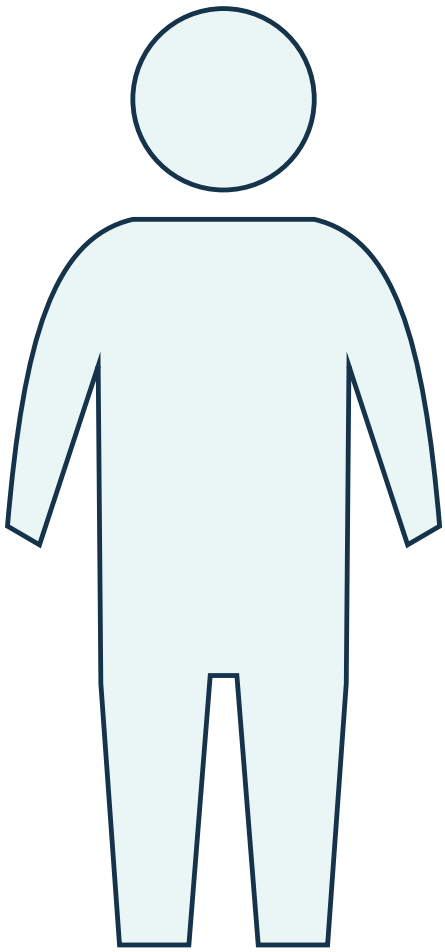
Demands that fill it quickly

Things that help reduce the load

Recognising My Body's Signals

Notice signs of overload without expecting them to look the same for everyone.

Mark, circle or annotate the outline where you notice changes. You can also write about signals that are not physical, such as difficulty finding words or feeling detached.



Possible signals

- [ ] Tension or jaw clenching
- [ ] Headaches or pressure
- [ ] Changes in breathing
- [ ] Restlessness or shutdown
- [ ] Difficulty processing speech
- [ ] Increased sensitivity
- [ ] Fatigue or reduced capacity

My earliest noticeable signs

Signs I sometimes notice later

My Overload Warning Scale

Personalise the stages to recognise changing capacity and possible support.

These five stages are examples, not a fixed sequence. You may skip stages or notice overload only after it happens.

1

Comfortable

Demands feel manageable.

Possible response: Maintain what supports me.

My signs / what helps:

2

Early signs

Small changes in tension or focus.

Possible response: Check needs; reduce one demand.

My signs / what helps:

3

Building overload

Processing or tolerance feels harder.

Possible response: Lower stimulation; pause tasks.

My signs / what helps:

4

Significant overload

Communication or decisions feel difficult.

Possible response: Stop non-essential demands; seek help.

My signs / what helps:

5

Recovery needed

Continuing may not feel possible.

Possible response: Prioritise safety, space and recovery.

My signs / what helps:

My most useful early warning sign:

Reducing Demands and Finding Support

Consider what can be reduced, adjusted or supported during overload.

Reduce

Remove, delay or simplify something that is adding pressure.

Example: postpone a non-urgent decision.

One option that might help me

Adjust

Change the environment, task or communication approach.

Example: use written instructions or a quieter space.

One option that might help me

Support

Ask for practical help, accommodation or recovery time.

Example: request help prioritising tasks.

One option that might help me

Recovery can take time

After overload

You may need quiet, rest, food, reduced interaction or fewer decisions. Recovery needs vary, and not every episode can be predicted or prevented.

A change I could make to my environment or demands

Someone or something that could support me

My Personal Overload Support Plan

Bring your observations together into a practical plan you can revisit.

My common overload triggers or demands

My early warning signs (if I notice them)

What helps when overload begins to build

What I need during significant overload

What helps me recover afterwards

People, adjustments or resources I can turn to

A reminder to myself

I can change this plan as my needs change. Rest, support and adjustments are valid responses to overload.