

OVERWHELM RESCUE TOOLKIT

A Neurodivergent-Friendly Guide for Moments When Everything Feels Like Too Much

Simple, gentle tools for:

- ADHD overwhelm
- Shutdown or freeze
- Executive dysfunction
- Emotional dysregulation
- “I can’t do anything right now” moments

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is designed for **the moments when your brain stops cooperating** — when you feel frozen, overloaded, or unable to function.

You don’t need to read this whole thing.

You only need to do **one page** at a time.

When you’re overwhelmed:

1. **Open to any page that feels doable.**
2. **Follow one tool — even halfway is enough.**
3. **Stop as soon as you feel even 5% calmer.**

This toolkit is your safety net, not a to-do list.

OVERWHELM TRIAGE (The First 60 Seconds)

Step 1 — Pause + Exhale

Take one breath:

Inhale for **3**, exhale for **6**.

You're not trying to calm down — just give your brain oxygen.

Step 2 — Name What's Happening

Circle one or more:

- Shutdown
- Freeze
- Foggy
- Avoidant
- Emotional surge
- Sensory overwhelm
- Scattered
- Tired or depleted

Naming it = lowering the internal alarm.

Step 3 — Pick an Anchor

Choose ONE:

- **Touch:** hand on chest, hold something warm/cool
- **Sight:** focus on one object
- **Hearing:** listen for one sound
- **Breath:** slow exhale

Step 4 — Choose One 10-Second Step

Pick one:

- Stand up
- Sit down
- Drink water
- Stretch
- Walk to another room
- Put your feet flat on the floor

You've already started.

TWO-MINUTE RESET MENU

For when you can't function but need *something* to interrupt overwhelm.

Pick ONE reset:

- Run your hands under warm or cool water
- Do neck rolls or shrug your shoulders 3 times
- Drink a sip of water slowly
- Look at something blue or calming
- Put on headphones or noise protection
- Put a blanket or jacket over your shoulders
- Step outside for 5 breaths
- Touch something with texture
- Massage your temples
- Set a 30-second timer and breathe deeply

These are not productivity hacks — they're nervous system resets.

WHY YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED (The ND Overwhelm Map)

Your brain is not broken. It's overloaded. Overwhelm is a **capacity issue**, not a character flaw.

Common causes of neurodivergent overwhelm:

- **Working memory overload:** too many thoughts, tabs, or tasks
- **Task initiation friction:** your brain can't "switch on"
- **Emotional dysregulation:** feelings are too big too fast
- **Sensory overload:** sound/light/touch becomes too much
- **Clutter overload:** too many visual inputs
- **Fear of failure or shame spiral**
- **Decision fatigue:** too many choices, not enough clarity

What Your Brain Needs in Each Type of Overwhelm

Working Memory Overload — Your Brain Needs:

- **Externalizing tools (lists, timers, sticky notes)**
- **One-step-at-a-time scaffolding**
- **A pause to let mental tabs close**

Task Initiation Friction — Your Brain Needs:

- **One micro-step**
- **A friction-reducer (gloves, headphones, timer)**
- **Internal permission to start messily**

Emotional Dysregulation — Your Brain Needs:

- **Pressure or grounding**
- **Slow exhales**
- **A pause before problem-solving**

Sensory Overload — Your Brain Needs:

- **Dimmed lights**
- **Reduced sound**
- **Temperature shift**

Clutter Overload — Your Brain Needs:

- **One-square-inch method**
- **Visual simplicity**
- **A single anchor space**

Shame Spiral — Your Brain Needs:

- **Self-compassion script**
- **A pattern interrupt**
- **A reminder: "Overwhelm ≠ failure"**

Decision Fatigue — Your Brain Needs:

- **A binary choice (this or that)**
- **A default option**
- **A "not today" category**

TASK TRIAGE (What Do I Do First?)

Use this 6-box quick sorter:

Time-Sensitive

Things with deadlines or consequences.
→ Do these first (or break into 1 step).

Under 2 Minutes

Can be done immediately with momentum.
→ Do now.

High Avoidance

You've been avoiding it because it feels big.
→ Break into 1 tiny step.

High Stress

It's bothering you just thinking about it.
→ Reduce friction first (see later page).

Not Today

Doesn't matter right now.
→ Move it off your mental plate.

Too Big

Overwhelm = poor scoping
→ Break it into 3–5 micro-steps.

You don't need to finish the task — only sort it.

MICRO-TASK GENERATOR (Momentum Builders)

Choose ONE 30–90 second micro-task to break the paralysis.

Kitchen

- Throw away one item
- Wipe one small surface
- Open the dishwasher
- Put one dish in sink/dishwasher

Email / Work

- Open one unread email
- Flag the most important message
- Rename one file
- Write one sentence

Laundry

- Move clothes to washer
- Put one item away
- Start the dryer
- Match 3 socks

Paperwork / Bills

- Open an envelope
- Take a photo of a document
- Put papers into 2 piles: “Keep” + “Trash”
- Pay one small bill

Cleaning

- Pick up 3 things
- Put trash in bin
- Wipe part of a counter
- Straighten one corner

One micro-task = jumpstart to your executive function system.

REDUCE THE FRICTION (Make Tasks Easier)

When a task feels impossible, your brain is telling you **something about the environment or emotional load is wrong**.

Try reducing friction by:

Sensory:

- Dim lights
- Wear noise-canceling headphones
- Put on comfy clothes
- Use gloves for gross tasks

Emotional:

- Lower expectations (“done is enough”)
- Use a timer (2 minutes)
- Remind yourself: “I don’t need to finish this.”

Executive Function:

- Break into ONE tiny action
- Leave everything else for later
- Start with something visible

Physical:

- Sit down
- Stand up
- Lean against a wall
- Change rooms

Friction reduction unlocks initiation.

EMERGENCY SCRIPTS (For Shutdown / Freeze Moments)

Say these out loud or silently:

- “I am overwhelmed, not failing.”
- “My brain is overloaded, not broken.”
- “I only need to take the next tiny step.”
- “This feeling will pass.”
- “I’m allowed to move slowly.”
- “I don’t need to earn rest.”
- “Half a step is still a step.”
- “I can start again.”

Scripts interrupt shame and reboot your inner narrator.

10-SECOND DECISION FLOWCHART

A simple flowchart:

1. Am I safe?

- No → Do a sensory reset first
- Yes → go to next step

2. Do I have even 5% energy?

- No → Try a 2-minute reset
- Yes → go to next step

3. What's the smallest step from the triage page?

Pick ONE micro-task → Do it for 10 seconds → Stop if needed.

If you stop early, you still succeeded.

THE ONE SQUARE INCH METHOD

When your environment feels impossible:

Choose one tiny visible area:

- One corner of a counter
- A 6-inch spot on the table
- Part of the sink
- A patch of floor

Then:

Clean only the square inch you see.

Nothing more.

Why it works:

- Reduces visual chaos
- Creates a sense of control
- Builds momentum gently
- Gives your brain a “win” quickly

Perfect for overwhelmed neurodivergent brains.

SENSORY RESET MENU

A gentle reset for sensory overload.

Sound

- Noise-canceling headphones
- White noise
- Hum quietly
- Soft instrumental music

Light

- Turn off overhead lights
- Use a lamp
- Close blinds
- Wear a hoodie

Touch / Pressure

- Weighted blanket
- Hold something soft
- Press hands together
- Hug a pillow

Movement

- Rock side to side
- Stretch arms overhead
- Shake out hands
- Walk 10 steps

Temperature

- Cold water
- Ice pack
- Warm tea
- Warm compress

Your nervous system responds fastest to sensory shifts.

POSITIVE MOMENTUM TRACKER

Check off what you managed today — it all counts.

Today I...

- Did 1 micro-task
- Took 1 reset
- Reduced friction
- Gave myself compassion
- Noticed how I felt
- Let something go
- Created 1 tiny pocket of order

Small wins = big breakthroughs.

TODAY'S BARE-MINIMUM PLAN

A compassionate day plan for low-capacity days.

If I do just one thing today, it will be:

If I can do a second thing, it will be:

One thing I can let go of today:

My emotional state right now is:

One comfort I can give myself:

If I feel overwhelmed again, I will:

- Use the triage page
- Use a 2-minute reset
- Do one micro-task
- Stop and rest
- Ask for help

This is a low-demand plan. No pressure. Just support.