



How to Care for Your Neurodivergent Brain

ADHD • AuDHD • Autism

A neurodivergent-affirming guide to supporting your energy, attention, sensory needs, emotions, and daily life.

Your brain does not need to be forced into someone else's operating system.

ADHD and autism are neurodevelopmental differences. "AuDHD" is an informal term commonly used for the co-occurrence of autism and ADHD. Support is not about making you appear more neurotypical; it is about understanding your nervous system, reducing unnecessary strain, building supports that fit you, and making room for your strengths and needs.

1. Learn Your Own Neurodivergent Pattern

Notice what drains you

Pay attention to sensory overload, too much social interaction, task switching, unclear expectations, masking, interruptions, and environments that require constant self-monitoring.

Notice what helps you regulate

Track the environments, people, routines, movement, sensory input, quiet, structure, novelty, or recovery time that help your brain and body feel more settled.

Work with your attention

Interest, urgency, novelty, challenge, and meaning can affect attention. Use external supports rather than relying on memory, motivation, or willpower alone.

Respect your sensory profile

Light, noise, clothing, temperature, crowds, smells, touch, and visual clutter can require real neurological effort. Accommodating sensory needs is a valid form of self-care.

2. Give Your Brain More External Support

■ **Externalize memory:** calendars, alarms, visual reminders, checklists, labeled homes for important items.

■ **Reduce friction:** place supplies where you use them, duplicate essentials when practical, simplify routines.

■ **Create transition cues:** timers, music, written prompts, or a short ritual can make switching tasks less abrupt.

■ **Make tasks visible:** break large tasks into the smallest next step; keep the next action where you can see it.

■ **Use body doubling:** work alongside another person, virtually or in person, when their presence helps you begin or stay with a task.

■ **Plan for recovery:** do not schedule every available space. Transition and decompression time are part of the plan.

3. Care for Sensory & Nervous-System Needs

- Lower lighting or use lamps instead of harsh overhead light.
- Use headphones, earplugs, white noise, or quiet spaces when helpful.
- Choose clothing and textures that feel comfortable rather than tolerable.
- Keep a small sensory kit: sunglasses, fidget, gum/mints, comfort item, headphones, or other personally helpful tools.
- Use movement, stretching, pacing, rocking, pressure, or other safe forms of sensory regulation that work for you.
- Build decompression time after demanding social, work, school, or family situations.

Important: Regulation is individual. A strategy that calms one person may overstimulate another. The goal is to learn what *your* nervous system responds to.

4. Protect Your Energy: Masking, Social Demand & Burnout

Masking can include suppressing natural movements, rehearsing conversations, forcing eye contact, hiding confusion, copying social behavior, or working hard to appear unaffected by sensory or executive-function challenges. Some people mask for safety or belonging. When masking is frequent or intense, it can be exhausting. You do not have to unmask everywhere; consider where it is safe to be more authentic and where accommodations can reduce the amount of effort required.

Signs you may need to reduce demands and increase support:

- Needing much more recovery time than usual
- Increased sensory sensitivity
- Reduced ability to start or complete everyday tasks
- More irritability, shutdowns, overwhelm, or emotional exhaustion
- Withdrawing because interaction feels too demanding
- Skills that are usually manageable suddenly feeling much harder
- Feeling chronically depleted from trying to keep up or appear "fine"

Instead of asking:
"Why can't I just push through?"

Try asking:
"What demand, sensory load, expectation, or missing support is making this harder?"

5. Support Emotional Regulation Without Shame

Name the state, not your character. "I am overloaded" is different from "I am failing." "I am having trouble shifting attention" is different from "I am lazy."

Pause before problem-solving. When your nervous system is highly activated, reduce input first. Hydrate, eat if needed, change the environment, move, rest, or use a regulating sensory strategy.

Use compassionate structure. Structure can be supportive without becoming rigid or punitive. Build routines that can bend when your capacity changes.

Repair after hard moments. Overwhelm can affect communication. When you are regulated, return to the conversation, clarify what happened, and communicate what may help next time.

6. Build a Life That Fits Your Brain

■ **Environment:** What changes would reduce sensory or visual overload?

■ **Communication:** Would written instructions, direct language, advance notice, or fewer interruptions help?

■ **Relationships:** Who allows you to communicate directly, ask for clarification, and be yourself?

■ **Time:** When does your brain work best? Where do you need more transition time?

■ **Tasks:** What can be simplified, automated, delegated, paired with something enjoyable, or broken down?

■ **Recovery:** What genuinely restores you - quiet, nature, special interests, movement, sleep, solitude, creativity, connection?

7. Your Personal Neurodivergent Care Plan

I know I am becoming overloaded when...

My most common sensory stressors are...

Things that help my body and brain regulate are...

When I cannot get started, the smallest next step I can try is...

The accommodations or supports I would like to use more often are...

One place where I would like to mask less - if it feels safe - is...

People I can ask for support or clarification include...

One expectation I am ready to make more realistic is...

You are allowed to make life more workable.

Support does not have to be earned by reaching a breaking point. Accommodations, boundaries, rest, sensory supports, clear communication, and self-understanding can help you use your energy for living - not only for coping.

This handout is educational and is not a diagnostic tool or a substitute for individualized medical or mental health care. If attention, sensory, emotional, sleep, medication, or daily-functioning concerns are significantly affecting your life, consider discussing them with an appropriately qualified healthcare professional.