



The grocery store can be a challenging place for some autistic & neurodivergent people.

Even if it is considered everyday to many, simply tolerating the way these trips can overload our brains, leading to exhaustion, burnout, or reactions like meltdowns and shutdowns.

As with many difficult experiences, it's important to both **reduce overwhelming input** and **regulate overload**, giving us more brain power to tackle difficult tasks

If available to you, consider some other options:



Many stores will offer **curbside service** free of charge
Examples: Walmart, Sam's Club, Target, or ALDI



Delivery directly from stores (like Walmart or ALDI)
or delivery services (like Instacart)



Meal Prep Boxes that are delivered (like Factor_ or Hello Fresh)

Ask family or friends to pick things up for you

If you need to go to the store in person, go with a plan:



If accessible and needed, **come with someone from your support system**



Before you go, **make a list**, even if you think you will remember what you want



- **Start with the basics:** like food staples or your favorite foods
- **Check your fridge & pantry:** are you getting low on anything?



- Think about non-food items, like toiletries or cleaning products



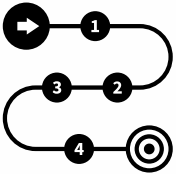
If you need to go to the store in person, go with a plan:



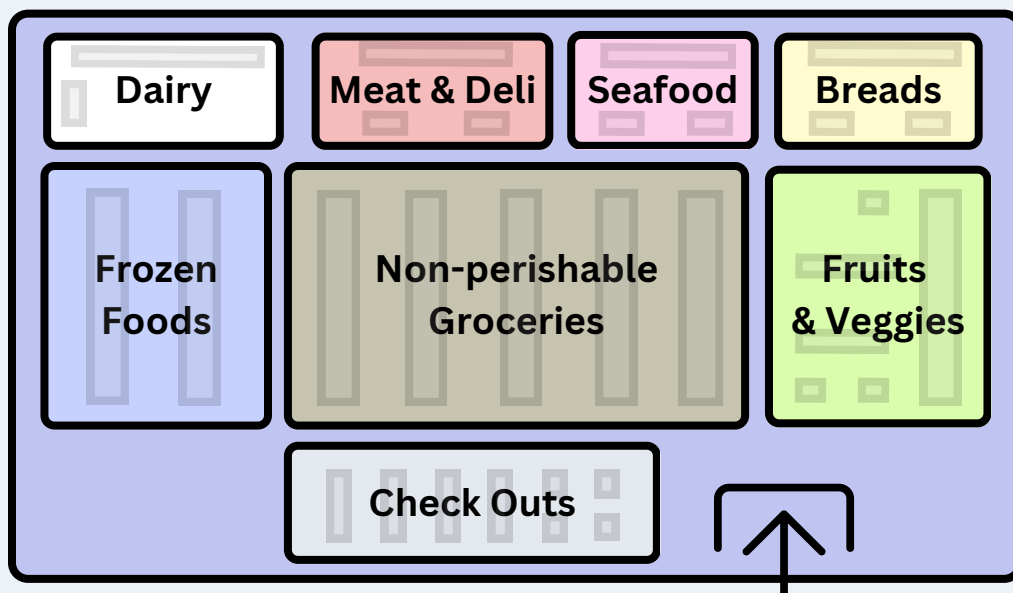
Plan what to do in a situation where you get overwhelmed **beforehand**. Take a break if you need to.

- **It is okay to leave your cart** somewhere out of the way and take time to recover. *An employee may take the cart and start to restock your items, but it's more important to take the time you need.*
- **Know where you will go**, such as the bathroom, the car, or a quiet spot in the store.
- When entering the store, **find where the bathroom is**: often at the far back of the store, or in the front by the checkouts.
- Check for in-store construction or temporary changes to the store online.

Plan your way around the store beforehand.



- If you can go to a **store you are familiar with**, think about the route you will take.
- This is an example of a common store layout. **Stores can vary**, but this map can get you started in a new store:

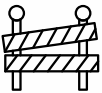




The store is unpredictable and challenging things can happen. These are some of the things that can go wrong and are some **problem-solving suggestions** during distress.

Focus on controlling what you can, like sensory input, so you have more ability to deal with unavoidable stressors.

Unexpected Interactions with Other Shoppers



People's unexpected actions can increase distress.



- People blocking aisles
- Noisy people including children
- People seeming to judge behaviors, like stims



Reminders:

- Grocery stores are awkward and confusing for everyone
- Most people just focused on their own thoughts, and will quickly forget encounters in the store



Unexpected Interactions with Employees



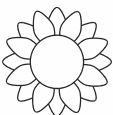
Sometimes employees may **misunderstand body language or taking time to make decisions**, this can mean:

- **Employees** may think you need help and approach you
- **Security** could become unfairly suspicious, follow, or confront



Tips:

- **Keep your receipt until you reach home**
- **Take the time you need** regardless of how others react
- **You aren't doing anything wrong**, even if you feel accused
- Some may recognize a **sunflower symbol** for hidden disabilities, so wearing this symbol can be helpful. ***This isn't something people with always recognize, even store employees.***





Sensory Accommodations

Sensory overstimulation can be a huge contributor to overload. **You may be more affected by these things than you realize**, especially if you've been tolerating overload a long time.

Just give these things a try, it just may be unexpectedly helpful.



Try wearing **headphones** or **earplugs**



It's **okay** to use **sensory & stimming tools**, or to **stim in public**.

Some people are embarrassed, but these are healthy ways to cope

You can choose more subtle stims and tools if you are worried



Avoid busy times, many people add to sensory and cognitive overload



Right before closing people are often anxious and rushing, and there are frequent noisy announcements



Things like **weather events** (like snowstorms), **holidays**, or common **social events** (like big sports events) can bring many people to the store at once



Look for times when **the store is less busy**



Find times when fewer people are around, often **very early**



Check if the store **has sensory-friendly hours** scheduled

Final Notes

Take your time, rushing can be overwhelming and make decisions hard

Don't judge yourself for needing help or accommodations, you aren't the only one that struggles with experiences like these.