

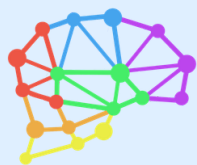
Overload



Cognitive load is the mental effort necessary for our brains to process incoming information, thoughts, and tasks.

The more information and more things to process at once, the less power the brain has to complete difficult tasks: like learning, emotion regulation, and attention.

When cognitive load reaches a point where functioning becomes difficult, we call it **overload** or **overstimulation**.



Autistic and neurodivergent people may be more prone to overload because their brains may **process incoming information differently**. For example, incoming information may activate the brain more strongly, or different brain areas may communicate in different ways.

Things that add cognitive load, and can be very difficult for neurodivergent people....

Social Information

Understanding speech, social rules, and non-verbal communication.

Social Interactions

Communicating with others, speaking and responding. **Masking traits.**

Sensory information

Information from multiple senses, including things like bright light and loud sounds.

Our Emotions

Intense emotions, recognizing what we are feeling, and regulating how we respond

Conscious tasks

Thinking, planning & deciding, remembering, attention, and taking action

These things rarely happen in isolation, and when these inputs overlap, overload can happen far more quickly.

Difficult situations often involve **extreme amounts of these inputs**, often **all at once**.

Reactions to overload can look like...

Meltdowns

Intense outbursts of emotion

Shutdowns

Becoming distant or losing the ability to respond

Recognizing Self Judgements

Others, like non-autistic or non-neurodivergent people, **do not experience the world in the same way.**

Overload reactions may look unreasonable or shocking to others. **But they are often physical brain responses, not choices.**

People often invalidate different experiences they don't understand, like calling them wrong or overly dramatic.

When things that seem so easy to others feel so overwhelming to us, we can begin to feel like there is something wrong with us.

The way others respond and the feelings we develop can lead to long-term **self-judgement and embarrassment.**

It is important to **recognize our experiences are real**, and to take **steps to help reduce overload** instead of just tolerating it.

Asking for help

It is okay to ask for help and for accommodations that you need.

We may not always get the help we need. **People can react with ignorance or be dismissive.** That does not mean asking for help is wrong, or that you are wrong for needing help.

If you do not have support with family and friends, there may be resources like advocacy organizations, coaches, and other professionals that can help.

Sometimes, we have no access to these outside supports. This may feel lonely and helpless, but **there may be ways to help yourself even when you cannot change the people and environments in your life.**

How can we reduce cognitive load?

Reducing demands on cognitive load can leave more room for what you need to do.

This can both happen before overload starts, and while overload is happening.

There are two major things to focus on:



Lower incoming information



Cope with Overload

Lowering overload before it starts

Reducing overload risk can be as simple as reducing the amount of information coming into our brains. With fewer things to process, more brain power can be used to do things we need to do and tolerate the things we cannot control.

We may not even be aware of how much certain things affect us until we find ways to reduce them. It's always worth trying these strategies if you are struggling.

Sensory	Notice your sensory sensitivities and bring tools that may help in difficult sensory environments.
Body Sensations	<p>The way our body feels can also contribute to feeling overloaded as much as sensory input that comes from the world around us.</p> <p>Some of us struggle to recognize these feelings when they happen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling overheated or cold • Feeling hungry or thirsty • Feeling physical pain or exhaustion • Tired or missing sleep
Social	<p>Social interactions are necessary and helpful, but can also add to overload.</p> <p>Examples of ways to reduce social pressure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not forcing eye contact or other body language changes that are difficult for you • Not engaging in extra social interactions outside of your goals, like chatting with strangers at the store.
Emotions	<p>Don't forget that emotions add to cognitive overload, and it's harder to manage emotions when overloaded!</p> <p>It's okay to do something another time if you cannot handle it now.</p>
Routines	<p>Large disruptions to your routine can make things more overwhelming.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden changes to your schedule or your expectations for the day • Big life changes going on • Trying a new thing, or going somewhere new <p>Making an activity part of your routine can also make it less stressful.</p>

Some tools we recommend:



Ear Plugs

- Simple **silicone or foam ear plugs** are also very affordable
- **Non-disposable ear plugs** offer different levels of sound reduction (example: **Loop ear plugs**)



Headphones

- **Ear buds or over-the-ear headphones** can dampen sound as well as play music that can help you regulate
- Some headsets come with **active noise cancellation** tech



Sunglasses

- **Outdoor sunglasses** can help with brightness and glare
- **Indoor glasses** are lightly tinted to reduce intensity of light



Clothing Choice

- Avoiding **uncomfortable fabrics**, and removing tags
- Avoiding **uncomfortable fits** (too tight or too loose)



Gloves

- Wearing **gloves** during difficult tactile experiences
- **Long sleeves** can also help



Masks

- **Masks** can help reduce scent and reduce exposure to chemicals or allergens you might be sensitive to
 - They can also ease social pressure because you don't need to focus so hard on your facial expressions.



Temperature Regulation

- Hats, umbrellas, or long sleeves can shield from the sun
- Clothing that is lighter or that wicks sweat (such as exercise-related clothing)
- Ice packs or towels cooled in the freezer

Reducing overload after it happens

We cannot always prevent overload, and self-regulation can help our brains cope.

We can use self-regulation **tools and techniques** that help to calm the body's stress response.

Sensory-seeking actions are often called "**stimming**." Stimming adds sensory input, but it can be helpful sensory input. Even though too much incoming information can cause overload, predictable or enjoyable sensory input can help the brain cope.

You might feel embarrassed about using some self-regulation techniques, but they can be a big help and are nothing to be ashamed of.

If stimming is very intense, disruptive, or harmful to you, try to **redirect to a safer type of stim**.

Body Movement	Moving the body actively, like taking a walk or doing yoga
Taking a moment	Taking a break, especially in a quiet or private spot
Weight or Vibration	Pressure or vibration that can calm the body's stress response
Stimming Movements	Certain calming motions, like rocking, flapping, and many more
Stimming Tools	Using items like fidgets, tools, and toys

Safe Spaces

A safe space can be helpful when coping with overload:

This is a place with less overwhelming sensory input (such as quiet or low light), but it can also include helpful sensory input (like stim items, music)

When in public: a family bathroom, bathroom stall, or a location like your own car. Some locations have rooms specific to this purpose, like sensory rooms, that you can ask about.

When at home: it can help to have a designated safe space to go to when overwhelmed, even if only for a short time.

This could be an entire room (like a bedroom), a small space like a closet, or even something like an indoor tent. For some, this may even be a garden or a walk in the woods.



Some tools we recommend:

Stim & Fidget Items

Explore: there is a wide variety of **stim/sensory or fidget** items available, and what helps you is unique to you.

Here are just a few ideas:

- **Tactile:**
 - **Some items are small and quiet (helpful in public!) to try:**
 - Flippy chains, fidget rings, hand rollers, stress balls
 - **Other examples to try:**
 - Hand activity fidgets (rings, cubes, and other toys)
 - Chewing Fidgets, like silicone chewelry
 - Texture-based items, like textured tape, plushies
- **Visual:**
 - Wall projectors, like nebula or star projectors
 - Light up or glow items, like glow cubes or balls
- **Auditory:**
 - Silicone poppers (also tactile)
 - Snap and click toys

Weighted Items

Try: Weighted blankets, weighted lap pads, or weighted plushies
Weighted items can feel overwhelming at first. Give it some time.

Vibrating Items

Try: Vibrating pillows, back massagers, or vibration wrist bands
These items can provide calming sensory input to our body's stress response, but are less commonly mentioned.

Music or White Noise

For many, music can be extremely effective at reducing overwhelm.
White noise can also cover background sound and reduce overwhelm.