The ND Nervous System Explained

A simple breakdown of why your body reacts the way it does… and why it's not "too much."

By Neal Glendenning

Contact: info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk

Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

A brief orientation

This is not a diagnostic guide.
It's not a self-improvement plan.
It's not here to teach you how to behave better.

This is a **plain-language explanation** of how many neurodivergent nervous systems actually work… especially in a world that moves fast, demands consistency, and often confuses capacity with character.

You don't need to read this in order.
You don't need to take notes.
You're allowed to stop when your body says "enough."

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1. "Too much" is usually "too fast, too loud, or too unpredictable"

Neurodivergent nervous systems tend to process:

- information more deeply
- signals more intensely
- changes more sharply

This doesn't mean you're fragile.

It means your system is **high-resolution**.

High-resolution systems:

- pick up more data
- notice subtle shifts
- react earlier to potential threat or overload

In environments built for low-resolution processing, this can look like:

- overreaction
- emotional intensity
- shutdown
- sudden exhaustion

But what's actually happening is **early warning**, not excess.

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2. Your body reacts before your thoughts catch up

Many people are taught that reactions start in the mind.

For neurodivergent people, they often start in the **body**.

Your nervous system is constantly scanning:

- tone
- facial expression
- pace
- ambiguity
- sensory input
- power dynamics

It does this **before** you consciously interpret what's happening.

So when you feel:

- a surge of emotion
- a need to escape
- a sudden drop in energy
- a sharp defensive response

That's not you being dramatic.

That's your nervous system doing its job… fast.

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3. Regulation is about safety, not calm

A common myth is that a "regulated" person is calm, steady, and unbothered.

In reality, regulation means:

- your system believes it can cope
- there is room to respond rather than react
- energy can move without forcing

You can be:

- emotional and regulated
- quiet and dysregulated
- productive and unsafe
- rested and still overwhelmed

Calm is a *possible* outcome of regulation… not the definition.

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4. Why inconsistency is so hard on ND systems

Many ND nervous systems rely heavily on **pattern recognition** to feel safe.

When patterns break unexpectedly:

- plans change without warning
- rules shift
- tone alters suddenly
- expectations aren't stated

…the nervous system has to work overtime.

This isn't about liking routine for its own sake.

It's about **predictability reducing load**.

Predictable systems free energy.
Unpredictable systems consume it.

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5. Shutdown, overwhelm, and "going blank" are protective states

When demands exceed capacity, the nervous system doesn't ask for feedback.

It protects.

This can look like:

- numbness
- dissociation
- brain fog
- inability to speak
- withdrawal
- exhaustion

These states are not failures.

They are **emergency brakes…** applied when pushing through would cause harm.

The goal is not to eliminate these states.
The goal is to **need them less often** by reducing overload earlier.

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6. Effort is not evenly priced

For ND nervous systems:

- some tasks cost far more energy than they appear to others
- transitions are expensive
- social processing is labour
- masking drains capacity quietly

So when someone says:

“It’s easy, just do it.”

They are often describing **their nervous system**, not yours.

Needing more recovery doesn’t mean you did something wrong.
It means you spent real energy.

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7. You don’t need fixing… you need fit

Most struggles attributed to neurodivergent people are actually **environmental mismatches**.

When environments offer:

- clarity
- predictability
- choice
- sensory consideration
- humane pacing

ND nervous systems often stabilise naturally.

Support is not about changing who you are.
It’s about changing what you’re asked to survive.

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8. Gentle supports (optional, not instructions)

If you want to experiment… only if it feels okay… you might notice:

- what drains you faster than expected
- what helps your body settle *a little*
- where predictability helps
- where permission reduces pressure

You don’t need perfect regulation.
You don’t need to be consistent.
You don’t need to earn rest.

Awareness alone can soften the load.

A closing reframe

You are not “too much.”

You are responsive.
You are perceptive.
You are operating with a nervous system that notices more… sooner.

That sensitivity is not the problem.

The problem is asking high-resolution systems to live inside low-tolerance worlds without support, adjustment, or understanding.

This guide isn’t here to push you forward.

It’s here to stand beside you…
and say: *your reactions make sense.*