Managing Overload, Shutdown & RSD in the Workplace

How to recognise early signs, respond safely, and prevent escalation.

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 clear orientation (for organisations and leaders)

This is not a behaviour-management guide.
It is not a resilience framework.
It is not about teaching people to cope better with harmful conditions.

This guide exists because **overload, shutdown, and rejection sensitivity (RSD)** are routinely misunderstood in workplaces… especially for neurodivergent (ND) staff… and are often mislabelled as:

- disengagement
- poor attitude
- lack of professionalism
- emotional fragility

When misread, organisational responses frequently **escalate harm** instead of resolving it.

This resource is designed to help organisations:

- recognise what's actually happening
- respond without triggering threat
- reduce escalation and burnout
- design safer conditions upstream

It must not be used to monitor emotional regulation, assess "resilience," or require disclosure.

---

1. A foundational reframe: these are nervous system states, not behaviours

Overload, shutdown, and RSD are not personality traits.
They are **state-based nervous system responses** to conditions.

They occur when:

- cognitive, emotional, or sensory demand exceeds capacity
- evaluation feels high or unpredictable
- safety, clarity, or choice is reduced

The same person may function well in one environment and struggle in another.

That variability is not inconsistency.
It is **context sensitivity**.

---

2. Why workplaces accidentally trigger these states

Many standard workplace practices increase nervous system load without intending to:

- unclear or shifting priorities
- constant urgency
- public feedback or correction
- ambiguous tone
- excessive meetings
- high sensory environments
- expectation of constant availability
- pressure to "stay regulated"

ND staff often absorb these pressures quietly… until the system can no longer compensate.

Escalation is usually **the end of a long chain**, not the beginning.

---

3. Understanding the three states (and why they're often confused)

Overload

A state of **too much input** and not enough capacity.

Common drivers:

- multitasking
- information overload
- interruptions
- sensory stimulation
- emotional labour

Often misread as:

- stress intolerance
- disorganisation
- poor prioritisation

In reality:

Overload is a request for **reduction**, not motivation.

Shutdown

A protective state where the nervous system **conserves energy**.

Common signs:

- reduced communication
- flat affect
- slower processing
- withdrawal
- difficulty initiating tasks

Often misread as:

- disengagement
- lack of interest
- resistance

In reality:

Shutdown is not refusal.
It is **protective withdrawal**.

RSD (Rejection Sensitivity)

A state of **heightened threat response** to perceived criticism, tone, or exclusion.

Common triggers:

- feedback without context
- ambiguous messages
- silence after communication
- power imbalance
- public evaluation

Often misread as:

- overreaction
- defensiveness
- emotional instability

In reality:

RSD is a **safety response to perceived relational risk**.

---

4. Early signs organisations often miss

Escalation can usually be prevented… **if early signals are recognised**.

Early signs of overload:

- increased errors
- irritability
- difficulty prioritising
- slower responses
- asking for clarification more often

Early signs of shutdown:

- quietness after being engaged
- reduced eye contact
- delayed responses
- missed check-ins
- minimal communication

Early signs of RSD:

- heightened concern about tone
- over-explaining
- reassurance-seeking
- sudden drop in confidence
- withdrawal after feedback

These are not performance issues.
They are **signals**.

---

5. What makes things worse (even with good intentions)

Escalation often occurs when organisations respond with:

- pressure to "push through"
- increased monitoring
- emotional interpretation ("What's going on with you?")
- urgency layered onto distress
- public questioning
- minimisation ("It's not a big deal")

These responses increase:

- self-monitoring

- fear of judgement
- loss of trust

They turn a **recoverable state** into a **crisis**.

---

6. How to respond safely in the moment

When signs of overload, shutdown, or RSD appear, the goal is **stabilisation**, not resolution.

Helpful responses include:

- reducing demand temporarily
- slowing the pace
- clarifying expectations
- offering time rather than solutions
- allowing disengagement without penalty

Simple, safe language can include:

- "Let's pause this."
- "We don't need to resolve this right now."
- "We can come back to this later."
- "Take the time you need… I'll follow up in writing."

Neutral, steady tone matters more than warmth.

---

7. What *not* to ask in these moments

Avoid questions that require emotional explanation or self-disclosure:

- "What's wrong?"
- "Why are you reacting like this?"
- "Can you calm down?"
- "Is this about something else?"

These increase pressure and defensiveness.

Instead, focus on **conditions**, not internal states.

---

8. After the moment: repair without spotlighting

Once the nervous system has settled, repair can happen quietly.

Effective organisational repair includes:

- brief written clarification of expectations
- confirmation that no penalty occurred
- neutral follow-up ("Here's what we agreed")
- adjustment of conditions where possible

Avoid:

- revisiting emotional reactions
- analysing tone or behaviour
- requiring reflection or explanation

Repair should reduce visibility… not increase it.

9. Preventing recurrence: upstream design matters most

Sustainable prevention is not about individual coping strategies.

It comes from **environmental design**.

Protective organisational practices include:

- clear priorities and definitions of "done"
- predictable workflows
- advance notice of feedback
- written communication alongside verbal
- reduced public evaluation
- flexible pacing where possible
- realistic workloads with recovery built in

If the same pattern appears across people, it is **not an individual issue**.

10. RSD-specific prevention (often overlooked)

RSD is reduced when organisations:

- separate feedback from performance review
- clarify intent before giving input
- avoid mixed or ambiguous messages
- respond consistently

- close communication loops

Silence and ambiguity are often more triggering than negative feedback.

Clarity is protective.

---

11. What good organisational response looks like over time

When organisations handle these states well, you'll often see:

- fewer crises
- earlier communication of limits
- reduced sickness absence
- improved retention
- steadier performance
- increased trust

These outcomes result from **reduced threat**, not increased pressure.

---

12. What this guide must NOT be used for

This resource must not be used to:

- require emotional disclosure
- evaluate regulation
- label staff as "sensitive"
- deny adjustments
- justify rigid policies
- push responsibility back onto individuals

If people are asked to manage their nervous systems inside unsafe systems, harm increases.

---

13. A brief organisational self-check (optional)

Leaders and teams may reflect:

- Where do we add pressure instead of clarity?
- Where do people feel evaluated rather than supported?
- Where is overload treated as failure instead of information?
- What conditions make shutdown more likely here?

- What would change if safety was treated as foundational?

This is not an audit.
It is an **orientation tool**.

A closing note for organisations

Overload, shutdown, and RSD are not problems to eliminate.

They are **signals** that tell you something important about:

- workload
- clarity
- safety
- pacing
- design

Organisations that respond to these signals with curiosity rather than correction don't become "softer."

They become **more effective, more sustainable, and more humane**.

ND-inclusive workplaces are not built by asking people to cope better.

They are built by **making work less harmful in the first place**.