



Sensory Decompression Breaks

Short, intentional breaks that reduce overload and restore nervous-system capacity

By Neal Glendenning

Contact: info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk

© 2025 Neal Glendenning / The Neuro Inclusion Project / NdCare Group.
All rights reserved.

This material may not be reproduced, distributed, adapted, or used for training, commercial, or educational purposes without prior written permission.

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.

Sensory decompression is not rest in the traditional sense.

It is the process of **reducing accumulated sensory input** so the nervous system can return to a tolerable baseline.

Neurodivergent people often do not notice overload building until capacity suddenly drops. Decompression breaks are a way of **preventing that cliff edge**.

They are:

- preventative, not reactive
- brief, not indulgent
- functional, not therapeutic

What sensory decompression actually is

Sensory decompression means **lowering sensory demand below baseline** for a short period of time.

That may include reducing:

- sound
- light
- visual complexity
- social interaction
- decision-making
- body tension

It is not about adding stimulation.

It is about **letting the system empty its buffer**.

Why decompression breaks work

Sensory input stacks.

Even neutral input (voices, screens, lighting, movement, background noise) uses processing capacity. When that capacity is exceeded, the nervous system shifts into protection.

Decompression breaks:

- prevent escalation
- reduce irritability and emotional flooding
- restore access to thinking and language
- reduce shutdown risk

- extend usable energy across the day

They are one of the **lowest-effort, highest-impact supports** available.

When decompression breaks are most needed

Take a decompression break when you notice:

- sudden irritability
- sensory “buzz” or pressure
- difficulty processing speech
- urge to withdraw or escape
- emotional intensity without clear cause
- fatigue that feels disproportionate

You do **not** need to wait until crisis.

Core principles for effective decompression

- Short is enough (2–15 minutes)
- Silence is optional... reduction is key
- No reflection or problem-solving
- No requirement to feel calm
- Stop before boredom turns into stimulation

Decompression is **subtractive**, not additive.

Decompression Break Menu

(Choose one... not all)

1. Low-Input Break (2–5 minutes)

Best for early overload.

- Dim lights or close eyes
- Remove headphones / silence notifications
- Sit still or lie down
- No talking
- No thinking required

This is about **input reduction**, not rest.

2. Sound Decompression

Best when noise has been constant.

- Earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones
- White noise or steady low sound
- Silent room if available

Avoid music with lyrics if already overloaded.

3. Visual Decompression

Best for screen fatigue and visual clutter.

- Look at a blank wall
- Close laptop and phone
- Sit facing away from activity
- Reduce visual fields (hood, blanket, eye mask)

Your brain processes everything you see.

4. Physical Stillness Decompression

Best when the body feels tense or wired.

- Sit with back supported
- Feet flat on floor
- Weighted item or pressure
- Minimal movement

This is **containment**, not relaxation.

5. Gentle Sensory Grounding

Best when you need *some* input, but less.

Choose one:

- warm drink
 - textured object
 - slow rocking
-

- consistent pressure
- neutral scent

One input only.

6. Movement-Based Decompression

Best when sensory overload is mixed with agitation.

- Slow walking
- Repetitive stretching
- Pacing
- Gentle sway

Avoid high-energy movement during overload... it can escalate.

What decompression breaks are NOT

They are not:

- procrastination
- avoidance
- laziness
- a reward for coping
- something to earn

They are **maintenance**.

Just like standing up after sitting too long.

Decompression vs breaks vs rest

Type	Purpose
Break	Pause from task
Rest	Recovery from fatigue
Decompression	Reduction of sensory load

You can take a break and still be overloaded.

You can rest and still be dysregulated.

Decompression targets the **cause**, not the symptom.

Decompression in workplaces, schools & clinics

Best practice environments:

- normalise short decompression breaks
- provide low-stimulus spaces
- do not monitor or time-police breaks
- allow people to leave briefly without explanation
- do not require disclosure

Decompression should not require permission.

For managers, educators & supporters

Helpful framing:

- “Take a few minutes to reset.”
- “You don’t need to explain.”
- “We’ll pick this up after.”

Unhelpful framing:

- “Go calm down.”
- “Take a proper break later.”
- “You were fine a minute ago.”

Decompression is preventative, not corrective.

For neurodivergent individuals

If you were taught to push through:

- this will feel uncomfortable at first
- you may feel guilty
- you may minimise your need

That does not mean it’s unnecessary.

If decompression feels “too small to matter,” that’s usually when it matters most.

How often to decompress

There is no universal rule.

Many ND people benefit from:

- micro-decompression every 60–90 minutes
- short decompression after meetings or social interaction
- decompression *before* starting emotionally loaded tasks

Earlier is always better than later.

A final reminder

Sensory overload is not a personal failure.

It is a predictable response to environments that demand constant processing.

Sensory decompression breaks are not about escaping life.
They are about **staying in it without burning out**.

Reducing input for a few minutes can preserve hours of capacity.

That's not indulgence.
That's design.

