



# The ND Emotional Safety Checklist

*Quick way to check: Am I actually safe... or just overloaded?*

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## **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 grounding orientation

This is not a diagnostic tool.  
It's not a mental health assessment.  
It's not here to tell you how you *should* feel.

This checklist exists because many neurodivergent people have learned to **override their internal signals...** often for years... and are then left unsure whether what they're experiencing is:

- real danger
- emotional threat
- nervous system overload
- or simple exhaustion that *feels* like something is wrong

This tool helps you pause and ask a kinder, more accurate question:

**“What kind of unsafety... if any... is present right now?”**

You don't need to complete every section.  
You can skim, skip, or come back later.  
Checking *after* the moment still counts.

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## 1. Emotional safety is not the same as comfort

First, an important reframe.

Emotional safety does **not** mean:

- feeling calm
- liking what's happening
- being conflict-free
- having no difficult emotions

You can be:

- anxious *and* safe
- sad *and* safe
- uncomfortable *and* safe

Emotional unsafety is about something else entirely.

It's about whether your nervous system believes:

*“I can exist here without harm, loss of self, or relational danger.”*

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## 2. Why ND people often misread safety

Many ND people have lived in environments where:

- needs were minimised
- reactions were criticised
- boundaries were ignored
- emotions were inconvenient
- capacity was misinterpreted as attitude

Over time, this trains the system to:

- doubt its own signals
- normalise overload
- stay functional even when unsafe
- confuse collapse with weakness

So when distress appears, the question becomes:

“Am I overreacting?”  
instead of  
“Is something actually wrong here?”

This checklist helps correct that bias.

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## 3. Step one: Check physical and environmental safety first

Before analysing emotions, ground in the basics.

Ask yourself:

- Am I physically safe right now?
- Is there immediate threat to my body?
- Do I have the option to leave, pause, or step away?

If the answer is **no**, prioritising safety is not avoidance...  
it's appropriate.

If the answer is **yes**, move to the next layer.

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## 4. Emotional safety check: relational threat

Relational unsafety is one of the biggest triggers for ND nervous systems.

You might ask:

- Do I feel judged, evaluated, or monitored right now?
- Is there pressure to perform or mask?
- Am I afraid of disappointing, upsetting, or being rejected?
- Is tone, power, or expectation unclear?
- Do I feel I need to explain or defend myself to be okay?

If several of these land as “yes,” your distress may be about **relational threat**, not emotional fragility.

Your nervous system is responding to perceived risk to:

- belonging
- autonomy
- dignity

That response makes sense.

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## 5. Emotional safety check: permission and choice

Another key marker of emotional safety is **choice**.

Ask yourself:

- Do I feel I have any real options here?
- Am I allowed to pause, say no, or ask for time?
- Would withdrawing be punished, criticised, or moralised?

When choice disappears, even neutral situations can feel unsafe.

Feeling trapped doesn't require physical restraint.  
Perceived obligation is enough to activate threat.

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## 6. Overload check: capacity vs demand

Now check for overload specifically.

You might ask:

- How many demands am I holding at once?
- Am I processing emotion, information, and expectation simultaneously?
- Has anything been added recently without recovery time?
- Am I already tired, hungry, overstimulated, or depleted?

Overload often masquerades as:

- anxiety
- irritability
- shutdown
- emotional volatility
- hopelessness

But the core issue is often simple:

**Demand has exceeded capacity.**

That's not unsafety... it's **overload**.

And overload needs reduction, not analysis.

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## 7. Timing check: is this about now... or earlier?

A useful clarifying question:

“Is this feeling responding to *this* moment, or something that happened earlier?”

Many ND nervous systems:

- hold stress until it's safe to feel
- release later, when pressure drops
- react out of time

If nothing *current* feels unsafe, but your body is still reacting, the system may be:

- discharging earlier load
- processing delayed emotion
- coming down from prolonged activation

That doesn't mean you're imagining things.

It means your nervous system runs on **lag**, not instant feedback.

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## 8. Signal patterns: safety vs overload

These patterns can help differentiate.

**More likely overload when:**

- everything feels like “too much”
- rest improves things

- reducing input helps quickly
- you feel better after stepping away
- clarity returns with recovery

### **More likely emotional unsafety when:**

- a specific person, role, or context triggers distress
- symptoms spike around evaluation or conflict
- reassurance helps more than rest
- your body stays tense even when alone
- the same situation repeatedly destabilises you

Both are valid.

They require **different responses**.

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## **9. What helps if this is overload**

If overload is the main driver, support often looks like:

- reducing sensory input
- lowering expectations
- postponing decisions
- resting without justification
- simplifying the environment
- choosing containment over engagement

Trying to “talk through” overload often worsens it.

Capacity comes back through **less**, not insight.

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## **10. What helps if this is emotional unsafety**

If emotional safety is compromised, helpful responses may include:

- clarifying expectations
- slowing relational pace
- creating distance from threat
- naming boundaries internally
- seeking reassurance or repair
- changing the environment or dynamic

No amount of rest will fix a situation that remains unsafe.

This isn't about coping better.

It's about **noticing what needs to change**.

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## 11. When it's both (very common)

Often, it's not one or the other.

Many ND people are:

- overloaded *and* emotionally unsafe
- depleted *and* pressured
- dysregulated *and* rightly distressed

In those cases:

- reduce load first
- stabilise the nervous system
- then reassess the situation

Trying to solve safety while overloaded usually leads to confusion.

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## 12. A quick version (copy if helpful)

You can copy and paste this:

- **Right now, do I feel physically safe?**
- **Do I feel judged, trapped, or evaluated?**
- **Do I have real choice here?**
- **How overloaded is my system (low / medium / high)?**
- **Would rest help... or would something actually need to change?**

Answering one line is enough.

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## 13. What this checklist is *not* asking you to do

It is not asking you to:

- dismiss your feelings
- toughen up
- tolerate harm
- decide immediately
- justify your response

It's offering **orientation**, not instruction.

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## A closing permission

You are not “too sensitive” for needing emotional safety.

You are perceptive.

You notice threat early.

Your nervous system is doing exactly what it evolved to do.

You are allowed to:

- pause before responding
- treat overload as real
- take emotional signals seriously
- choose safety over performance
- step back without explanation

This checklist isn't here to tell you what's wrong.

It's here to help you ask a better question...

so you don't keep blaming yourself for signals that are actually **protective**.

Use what fits.

Leave the rest.

