ND Emotional Safety Checklists

Identifying whether environments support regulation, trust, and sustainable participation

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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.

Emotional safety is often talked about as a feeling.

In practice, it is a **set of conditions**.

Neurodivergent people regulate more effectively when environments reduce threat, ambiguity, and shame… and escalate more quickly when those conditions are absent.

These checklists help organisations and teams assess whether emotional safety is being **designed in**, or unintentionally undermined.

This is not about comfort.
It is about **functional safety**.

How to use these checklists

These are not pass/fail tests.

Use them to:

- spot early risk signals
- identify invisible stressors
- guide conversations and redesign
- prevent escalation, burnout, and withdrawal

If multiple items raise concern, that's not failure… it's **actionable information**.

Core principle

People don't feel safe because they are resilient.
They feel safe because systems are predictable, fair, and non-punitive.

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1. Emotional Safety… Structural Signals

What the system communicates before anyone speaks

Check whether:

- Expectations are explicit rather than implied
- Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined

- Priorities are stable or clearly explained when they change
- Policies allow discretion and context
- Adjustments are normalised, not exceptional

Warning signs:

- "You should know this by now" culture
- Inconsistent application of rules
- Sudden changes without explanation
- Reliance on informal norms

If safety depends on "reading the room," it isn't safety.

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2. Emotional Safety… Communication

How meaning is made clear (or not)

Check whether:

- Instructions are provided in writing as well as verbally
- Tone is neutral and not doing the work of clarity
- Urgency is stated explicitly rather than implied
- Feedback is specific and contextualised
- Silence is not interpreted as attitude

Warning signs:

- Vague feedback ("be more professional")
- Passive-aggressive communication
- Last-minute messages creating urgency
- Feedback delivered publicly

Ambiguity is a major emotional risk factor.

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3. Emotional Safety… Leadership Behaviour

How power is felt in the system

Check whether leaders:

- Explain decisions and changes

- Respond predictably under pressure
- Model boundaries and recovery
- Separate behaviour from worth
- De-escalate before disciplining

Warning signs:

- Arbitrary decision-making
- Public correction or shaming
- Emotional reactions from leadership
- "Because I said so" authority

Leadership behaviour sets the nervous-system tone.

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4. Emotional Safety… Day-to-Day Management

What happens when something goes wrong

Check whether managers:

- Ask "what happened?" before "why didn't you?"
- Look for system causes before personal blame
- Support regulation before resolution
- Adjust expectations during overload
- Follow up after difficult moments

Warning signs:

- Immediate escalation
- Moral framing ("attitude", "effort")
- No pause after emotional incidents
- Issues addressed only when they become formal

Escalation without stabilisation creates harm.

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5. Emotional Safety… Response to Emotion

How emotional expression is treated

Check whether:

- Emotional responses are contextualised
- Strong reactions are met with curiosity, not judgement
- People are allowed time to settle
- Emotional expression is not automatically penalised
- Support is offered without requiring disclosure

Warning signs:

- "Calm down" directives
- Emotional reactions treated as misconduct
- Expectation of immediate explanation
- Threat of consequences during dysregulation

You cannot reason with a nervous system in threat.

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6. Emotional Safety… Shutdown & Withdrawal

What happens when someone goes quiet

Check whether:

- Withdrawal is recognised as a regulation signal
- Silence is not assumed to be disengagement
- Reduced capacity is responded to with support
- Recovery time is allowed without penalty
- Re-entry is handled gently

Warning signs:

- Pressure to "push through"
- Attendance or performance concerns raised during shutdown
- Withdrawal framed as resistance
- No follow-up once capacity returns

Shutdown is protection, not refusal.

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7. Emotional Safety… Mistakes & Learning

Whether error increases threat or trust

Check whether:

- Mistakes are treated as information
- Learning is prioritised over blame
- Accountability includes system review
- People can admit uncertainty safely
- Psychological safety is practised, not stated

Warning signs:

- Blame-focused reviews
- Public fault-finding
- Retrospective judgement
- Fear of asking questions

Fear suppresses learning.

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8. Emotional Safety… Adjustments & Flexibility

Whether support is real or conditional

Check whether:

- Adjustments are offered proactively
- Support does not depend on diagnosis disclosure
- Flexibility is applied consistently
- Adjustments are reviewed, not fixed forever
- Managers understand how to implement them

Warning signs:

- "We'll see if it's necessary" framing
- Support only after crisis
- Adjustments treated as favours
- Removal of support without discussion

Support that feels risky is not support.

Patterns that indicate emotional risk

Emotional safety is likely compromised when:

- people mask heavily
- feedback is avoided
- conflict keeps recurring
- burnout and absence increase
- issues escalate suddenly
- "resilience" is praised over prevention

These are **system signals**, not individual failures.

What emotionally safe environments create

When emotional safety is designed in, organisations see:

- improved consistency
- fewer escalations
- better trust
- reduced burnout
- stronger collaboration
- earlier problem-solving

People do not become less accountable.

They become **more available**.

A final note

Emotional safety is not about eliminating discomfort.

It is about ensuring that **discomfort does not become threat**.

Neurodivergent people do not need protection from work.

They need systems that do not punish regulation differences.

When safety is structural, people stop bracing…
and start contributing.