When Everything Feels Like Too Much

An AuDHD guide to finding relief, reclaiming capacity, and making room for your needs

Start here if reading feels difficult

You do not need to complete this guide. Choose the line that sounds closest to what you are experiencing, try one option if it feels accessible, or simply save this for another day. Nothing here is a test of how well you manage autism or ADHD.

Everything feels too loud

Try less input: softer light, headphones, a quieter room, comfortable clothes, or a pause from conversation.

I feel restless and exhausted

Try gentle engagement: familiar music, slow movement, a low-effort interest, or something satisfying to hold.

I can't get started

Try less friction: ask for company, lay out one supply, use a ready-made option, or let a nonurgent task wait.

I can't handle another person

Try an availability boundary: “I care about you. I need quiet and will check back when I can.”

I wish I could disappear

When you wish you could disappear, consider what you may be longing for. Do you need solitude, fewer demands, or relief from emotional pain? Are you also wishing you were dead or thinking about suicide? These experiences can overlap, and you don't have to figure them out alone. If you're experiencing suicidal thoughts or feel unsafe, reach out to someone you trust and seek support. In the U.S., call or text 988; for immediate danger, call 911.

Permission slip: Your capacity may change. A response that helps today may not help tomorrow. You are allowed to adjust.

What is feeling like too much?

When every demand arrives at once, it can be hard to tell whether you need fewer sounds, fewer decisions, more engaging input, or someone to share the load. You do not have to identify a perfect answer. Start with what is most noticeable.

Sensory load

Sounds, lights, textures, smells, crowds, or multiple streams of information feel difficult to process. Possible adjustment: change one feature of the environment before asking yourself to endure more.

Social and masking fatigue

Conversation, monitoring your expression, interpreting tone, or appearing “fine” is taking effort. Possible adjustment: choose low-demand connection, shorter interactions, or time without performing.

Executive functioning friction

You know what you want or need to do, but starting, sequencing, switching, remembering, or finishing feels inaccessible. Possible adjustment: remove one step, ask for body doubling, or use a visual cue.

Understimulation or restlessness

Silence feels uncomfortable, the task is not engaging, or your attention keeps searching. Possible adjustment: add enjoyable, manageable movement, sound, novelty, or interest.

A question to return to: “What would make the next ten minutes more bearable?” It may be more useful than asking how to fix the entire day.

Remember: these experiences can happen together. You might need a quiet room and stimulating music, or solitude and the comfort of someone nearby.

Find the amount of input that fits

Regulation does not always mean sitting still in silence. For some AuDHD people, too little input feels as uncomfortable as too much. Your aim is not to reach a universal state of calm. It is to find what feels workable for your nervous system in this moment.

If the world feels too intense

Dim or change lighting. Use familiar textures. Lower background noise. Step out of a busy room. Choose a simple meal or fewer choices.

If the world feels too flat

Try a favorite playlist at a tolerable volume. Walk or rock gently. Doodle. Pick up an interesting object. Spend five minutes with a favorite topic.

If you need both

Keep the room quiet but engage your hands. Listen to one familiar audio track instead of several sounds. Take a short walk on a predictable route.

If you are unsure

Change only one thing and notice the effect. Sometimes the answer is not more or less stimulation but a different kind of stimulation.

The small experiment

What is bothering me most right now? What could I change without creating extra work? After a few minutes, do I feel more comfortable, less comfortable, or unchanged? There is no requirement to track or record the answer.

When a strategy is not working

You have permission to stop. Headphones, breathing exercises, mindfulness, movement, and sensory tools are options, not obligations. You know the difference between a support that fits and one that adds another demand.

If sensory changes are new, severe, or accompanied by other concerning symptoms, consider checking in with a medical professional rather than assuming AuDHD explains everything.

When you want two different things

You might crave the reassurance of a familiar routine and the spark of novelty, want to see a friend and need solitude, or feel desperate to rest while your mind searches for something interesting. These are not moral failures or evidence that your needs are invalid.

Pair supports instead of choosing sides

Structure + novelty

Use a familiar morning anchor, then choose among two or three optional activities. Keep the starting point predictable while leaving room to explore.

Quiet + engagement

Try a familiar craft, puzzle, game, or special interest in a low-stimulation setting. Engagement does not need to mean extra noise.

Connection + privacy

Share a room without talking, exchange voice notes asynchronously, or agree on a time-limited visit with a clear exit.

Intention + task friction

Put one item where you can see it, prepare the first step in advance, ask someone to join you, or use a simplified version of the task.

On days when capacity is scarce

Consider what can be reduced, delegated, delayed, or done differently. Convenience food is still food. A short reply can maintain connection. A half-finished chore does not erase the effort you invested. If you cannot meet a basic need safely, ask for practical help.

A gentler question

Instead of “Why could I do this yesterday but not today?” consider “What changed in my capacity, environment, support, or demands?” Ability and available energy do not always travel together.

Make room for yourself in everyday life

The cabin in the woods from the companion article symbolizes a life where you can choose the light, noise, pace, company, and expectations around you. You may not be able to change every circumstance, but some small elements of sanctuary may be possible where you already are.

Words you can borrow

When you need quiet

“I’m at capacity and need a little time without conversation. I care about you, and I’ll reconnect when I have more room.”

When plans no longer fit

“I wanted to see you, but my energy changed. Could we reschedule or do something lower-key?”

When starting is hard

“I know what I need to do, but I’m having trouble beginning. Could you sit with me for ten minutes while I get started?”

When you need direct communication

“It helps me when plans and expectations are clear. Could you tell me directly what you need and when?”

Your everyday sanctuary

Think about your imagined cabin. Is the relief in the quiet? The freedom to follow your interests? The predictable space? A door you can close? The ability to welcome someone without feeling required to entertain them? Choose one quality that matters to you, then consider what a smaller version might look like in your real environment.

Relationships matter too. Being understood can include a friend who respects delayed replies, a colleague who communicates clearly, or a therapist who takes your experience seriously without asking you to become less yourself.

Relief, support, and safety

“I want to disappear” can mean needing to withdraw from demands. It can also express hopelessness, a wish to be dead, or suicidal distress. The same person may experience more than one of these feelings. A handout cannot determine your safety, and you do not have to figure it out alone.

Questions you can ask yourself or say aloud

“Do I want to be away from people and responsibilities, or do I wish I were dead?” “Have I been thinking about ending my life?” “Do I feel safe right now?” If the answer is unclear or concerning, connect with someone who can help you assess what you need.

If you are concerned about your safety

Tell a trusted person or mental health professional directly. If you are thinking about suicide or need urgent emotional support in the United States, call or text 988. You can also visit 988lifeline.org. If you are in immediate danger, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department. If possible, remain with a supportive person while seeking help.

When the immediate moment has passed

Consider what has been overwhelming and which changes require support beyond individual coping skills. Persistent burnout, major changes in functioning, depression, or ongoing wishes not to exist deserve professional attention. You may need accommodations, medical evaluation, shared responsibilities, accessible services, or a safer environment, not another list of things to do.

About this resource

Created as a client-facing companion to When Existing Feels Exhausting: AuDHD, Burnout, and the Longing to Disappear. AuDHD is a community-used term for co-occurring autism and ADHD, not a separate formal diagnosis. Experiences vary, and none of these suggestions is a universal treatment.

Storm Haven Counseling & Wellness | In-person psychotherapy in Temecula, California, and online therapy throughout California.
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Further reading: Raymaker et al. (2020), Defining autistic burnout, Autism in Adulthood, DOI: 10.1089/aut.2019.0079; National Institute of Mental Health, Frequently Asked Questions About Suicide (nimh.nih.gov); 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988lifeline.org).

Educational resource only; not a substitute for individualized medical or mental health care.

A Note About This Resource

This guide is provided by Storm Haven Counseling & Wellness for educational and informational purposes. It is not intended to diagnose, treat, or replace individualized mental health care, medical advice, or professional assessment. The suggestions offered are invitations to explore what may support your unique needs, recognizing that every person's experience of autism, ADHD, burnout, and emotional well-being is different.

If you're experiencing persistent distress, significant changes in your ability to function, or thoughts about not wanting to be alive, consider seeking support from a qualified mental health professional. If you're experiencing suicidal thoughts or emotional crisis, call or text 988 in the United States for immediate crisis support. If you're in immediate danger, call 911 or seek emergency medical care.

Using this resource does not establish a therapist-client relationship with Storm Haven Counseling & Wellness.