A fact sheet about

Telling your partner what helps

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Telling your partner what helps

Why to agree it on a calm day, and the three lines to share.



Key points

- When you are overwhelmed, explaining is often one of the first things to go. So the explaining needs to happen earlier, on a calm day.
- Tell your partner the exact thing to do, not just how you feel. A feeling does not tell them what to do about it.
- Keep it to three lines: what to do, what not to do, and the signal you will use to show you need it.
- A plan like "when this happens, do that" is easier to follow under pressure than good intentions on either side.

Why it has to be agreed on a calm day

You are past the point of words, and the person you live with is trying hard. They ask what is wrong, they ask what they can do, and they come closer. Every kind question makes it worse. Later you both feel bad, and neither of you knows what should have happened.

Your partner cared, but they did not have clear instructions. The only time to give those is before the moment. This page says "your partner", but it means whoever you live with or lean on: a housemate, a family member, a friend or a support worker.

Stress that feels out of your control, even mild stress, can quickly switch off the part of the brain that plans. That is the part you need to explain anything. Many autistic adults say that speaking, typing or communicating gets much harder when they are overwhelmed. Many ADHD and other neurodivergent adults describe this too.

Even when words are still there, finding the right ones is hard.

So when you most need to explain, it is often hardest to do. Your partner is left guessing, and most people guess based on what would help them.

The three lines: do this, not that, and the signal

"I get overwhelmed and I need space" is true. But it leaves your partner to work out what space means. The three lines turn it into something they can do.

Do this. One action. "Sit in the same room and do not talk." "Take over dinner." "Bring me water and go."

Not that. The one thing that makes it worse. "Do not ask me what is wrong." "Do not touch me." "Do not try to fix it yet."

The signal. How you will show you need it without explaining. It could be a word you agree on, a hand flat on your chest, a card on the table, one emoji by text, or putting your headphones on.

Three is enough, because your partner has to remember it while you are struggling in front of them. A longer list is much harder to hold in mind.

Writing it down is a good way to share it. Autistic adults have said that good support includes people accepting the way they need to communicate, and that includes writing, and many other neurodivergent adults say the same.

A plan in the shape "when this happens, I will do that" is called an if-then plan. People who make one follow through more often than people who only mean to, because the choice is already made. In your plan, the signal is the "when". Your partner does not have to read the situation or decide anything: they see the signal, and they do the thing on the first line.

When your partner's instinct is the opposite of what helps

This is common, and it does not mean either of you is doing it wrong. People whose minds work differently often misread each other, in both directions. This is called the double empathy problem. To your partner, staying quiet may feel cold, and asking questions may feel like love.

Say that out loud when you show them the three lines. For example: "I know not asking feels wrong to you. It is the thing that helps me most."

If you are both neurodivergent, you may need opposite things. One of you may need quiet while the other needs to talk it through. One may want a hug that the other cannot bear. Write three lines each. Then agree what happens when you are both overwhelmed at once, such as going to separate rooms and checking in at a set time.

The same three lines work with a housemate, a parent, an adult child or a close friend.

This idea comes mostly from lived experience and from what the community shares about it. If-then plans have been studied, but the three lines with a partner have not been tested in research yet. Research has also often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups, so trust what you know about yourself. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: write the three lines today

Write them while you are calm, and keep each one to a short sentence. Then pick a calm time to show your partner:

- "Can I show you three things that help when I am overwhelmed? It takes five minutes."
- Or send them as a message, if writing is easier than saying them.

You can keep the three lines in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, so they are easy to find and easy to change.

After the plan has been used a few times, look at it together on a calm day. Change one line if something did not work.

Asking for something this exact can feel awkward at first. It is usually less than your partner was already trying to do, and much easier to get right. They will not get it right every time at first, because a new signal takes a few goes. There may also be times when you cannot give the signal at all. It helps to agree what your partner does if they can see it happening and no signal comes.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, for example if the same moment keeps going badly between you. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can also talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you both, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

All of this assumes the person is safe to ask. If someone you live with frightens you, hurts you or controls you, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732. You can call at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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