A fact sheet about

Pacing your sensory week

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Pacing your sensory week

What pacing is, why stacked days cost more, and one way to plan your week.



Key points

- Pacing (definition below) means spreading out the things that use up your senses across the week, instead of stacking them on the same day.
- Loud, bright or crowded things can cost more when they come one after another, because you have not recovered from the first before the next one starts.
- What counts as a heavy day depends on you, and people who avoid sensory input and people who seek it may need quite different weeks.
- A small step is to look at the coming week, move or space out one busy thing, and plan a gap to recover straight after it.

What pacing is

Some weeks look fine on paper: on Saturday you do the big shop, go to a child's birthday party and then out for dinner, and on Sunday you visit family. By Monday you feel worn out, and the week has hardly started.

Other weeks fill up in the middle: the dentist, a trip to the city and a school concert all land on Wednesday. Each one on its own would be fine, but together they may cost you the rest of the week.

Pacing is a way of planning your energy so it lasts. You spread the things that cost the most across the week, and you plan rest around them, rather than waiting until you run out.

The idea comes from people living with long-term illness. Spoon theory is one way to picture it, from an essay by a woman living with lupus. You have a set amount of energy each day, so you choose where it goes. Many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults use the same idea. Some call the part that noise, light, crowds, touch and smells use up their “sensory battery”. You can read more about why busy places wipe you out here. You can read more about recovering after people time here.

Autistic adults talking about burnout used a picture of balloons and rocks. In their words, "you need enough balloons to manage the weight of the rocks". The rocks are what weighs on you, and the

balloons are what lifts you. So pacing means spreading out the things that weigh on you, and keeping time for the things that lift you.

Why stacked days can cost more

The cost of a busy place often turns up later, once you are home. If the next busy thing comes before you have recovered, you start it with less charge.

So two loud things on one day may cost more than the same two things on different days.

How much you can take also changes from day to day.

Why your week may look different from someone else's

Senses work in very different ways. Some people mostly avoid sensory input, so a heavy day might be a shopping centre, a noisy party or a long drive in traffic. Others mostly seek it: they may feel flat after a quiet week at home and feel better at a busy market or a loud gig. Many people do both, by sense.

So for someone who avoids input, pacing may mean fewer loud things on the same day and a quiet gap after them. For someone who seeks it, it may mean making sure a quiet week has some movement, music or time outside in it. Their recovery gap may be a swim or loud music rather than a dark room.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: move one thing and add a gap

At a calm time, like Sunday evening, look at the coming week. Find the day with the most noise, crowds, light, travel or people. Then do two things:

- move one high-load thing to a quieter day, or space it out, if it can move
- put a recovery gap straight after the biggest thing that stays

A gap can be short. Choose what works for you:

- ten minutes sitting in the car before you drive home
- a quiet, dim room, or headphones with or without music
- a shower, a bath or lying under something heavy
- time on something you love, like a game, a book or a special interest
- a walk, a swim or loud music, if that is what settles you

Some things cannot move, like a medical appointment, a school event or a day caring for someone. Then look at what sits around them: you might shop online that week, take a quieter way home or say no to one extra plan.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for your planning time and for each gap. You can also keep a note there of how the week went, and look back on it next Sunday.

Pacing comes from what people living with long-term illness, and many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults, say helps them. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

A gap can feel like wasted time in a full week, but it may mean you still have something left by Thursday.

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, whether your week ends flat every time or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you plan a week around your senses, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If flat weeks have turned into months of feeling worn out, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

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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