A fact sheet about

Big feelings at work

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Big feelings at work

How to agree a way out at work before you need it.



Key points

- When a big feeling arrives at work, the hardest part is often getting out without having to explain yourself.
- The way out you need can be agreed ahead of time as a reasonable adjustment (definition below). That might be a place to go, a short break, or a phrase that pauses a conversation.
- In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act gives reasonable adjustments legal backing in paid work and in study.
- Telling anyone your neurotype is your choice. Many changes can be agreed without naming one.

What a reasonable adjustment is

"Work" here means anywhere you have to keep going in front of other people. That might be a job, a placement, a volunteer shift, a class or a caring role. It might be your own home, with a support worker or a tradie in it.

Halfway through, the noise, a change of plan or one comment tips you over. There is nowhere to go without explaining, and explaining is the thing you cannot do right now. What is often missing is a way out you agreed before you needed it.

A reasonable adjustment is a change to how, when or where you do something, so that something stops getting in your way. Most are small, and many cost nothing. It might be a quiet room you can use without asking, a desk away from the door, or being allowed to wear headphones.

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act backs this up. A person with a disability may need a reasonable adjustment. Under the Act, not making one can be unfair treatment under the law. An adjustment counts as reasonable unless it would cause "unjustifiable hardship" to the person who has to make it. It is up to them to show that. Disability in the Act is wide. It includes differences in how a person learns, thinks, senses or feels.

The Act covers paid work of every kind, including part-time, temporary and contract work, and it covers study. Volunteering is less clear, and a caring role or your own home is outside it. There, the same idea works as an agreement with the people involved, rather than as a right.

Why an agreed way out works better

In the first minutes of a big feeling, the part of you that plans and explains goes quiet. Autistic adults who have talked about their meltdowns often say thinking gets hard. They try to get away from people or be alone. Asking for a break right then is one more thing to do.

A way out agreed ahead of time turns a request into something you just do. The people around you already know what it means. Nobody has to guess, and you do not have to find the words.

Autistic adults with skilled training said a flexible, accepting workplace helped most. So did a respectful manager who spoke plainly.

People of every neurotype said they mask at work to protect themselves. But neurodivergent adults felt more pressure to, because neurodivergence is still little understood. For some people, masking keeps them safe.

Most of this research is with autistic adults in the UK and the US, often in office jobs. 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 case for an agreed way out is anchored in lived experience, in what the community shares about it, and in the law. It does not come from trials.

The one thing to try: ask for one way out, on a calm day

Start with one way out, the one you would use most often:

- a place you can go without asking, such as a quiet room, your car or outside
- an agreement that you can take ten minutes when you need to
- a phrase that pauses a conversation, such as "I need to come back to you on this"
- a signal to one person, such as a short message, that says you have stepped out

Ask on a calm day, and ask the person who can say yes. Put it in writing. A written request can be easier to make than a spoken one, and it leaves a record. Say what you need and what it changes, not why you are the way you are. For example: "When a room gets loud, I work best if I can take ten minutes somewhere quiet. Can we agree I can do that without checking first?"

You can keep a note of what was agreed, and who agreed it, in the Understanding Zoe app. An agreement can lapse when the person who made it leaves, so a written record helps. If the answer is no, you can ask what the hardship would be, and get advice before you ask again.

Outside paid work, the place to ask is a little different. If you study, it is usually the disability service. On a placement, you can start with your course provider. If you volunteer, ask the person who runs it. In a caring role or at home, tell the people who come in what your way out looks like. One sentence saves everyone guessing: "If I step into the garden for a few minutes, I am fine and I will be back."

Telling people your neurotype is your choice

You do not have to name a neurotype to ask for an adjustment. Many requests are simple enough that people agree without asking why.

The law applies to a disability, though. If you ever need to rely on the Act, your employer or provider will need to know there is one. Asking without naming anything means relying on goodwill. That is often enough, and you can tell people later if it is not.

Many neurodivergent adults say telling people at work feels like a big risk. It is up to you whether to tell, and who to tell.

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.

JobAccess is the Australian Government's free service for workplace adjustments. Its advice for people with disability is private, and its number is 1800 464 800. A GP is a good place to start, whenever you want support. Different health professionals can help you work out which adjustments would help, and your GP can help you find the right one. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If what you notice is closer to running out of energy fully, you can read more about autistic burnout here.

Sources

Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), sections 4(1) (definitions of disability, employment and reasonable adjustment), 5(2) and 6(2) (failing to make reasonable adjustments), 11 (unjustifiable hardship), 15 (employment) and 22 (education). Compilation No. 40, 1 July 2026, legislation.gov.au

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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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