A fact sheet about

Overwhelm and the threat response

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Overwhelm and the threat response

What your body and brain are doing, and one breath that may help.



Key points

- When you get overwhelmed, your body can react the same way it does to danger. This is called the threat response. It can show up as fight, flight, freeze or fawn (more on each below).
- When the threat response kicks in, the thinking part of your brain goes quiet first. That is why you cannot think your way out of it, and why what helps is something you do with your body, not your mind.
- A long, slow out-breath may help. It works best when you practise it on calm days, so it is there when you need it.

What the threat response is

The shop is bright and loud, someone reaches past you, and the music changes. Or at home, three people are talking at once and the smoke alarm starts beeping. Your heart may pound and your face may get hot. You may not be able to work out something simple, like which way the door is.

Your body is treating too much as if it were a danger. Something around you, like a loud noise, someone shouting or too much at once, has set off your threat response. That is your body doing what it was built to do.

The threat response is your body's alarm system. It gets you ready to act fast. Your heart speeds up, your breathing gets quick and shallow, your muscles tighten, and your stomach slows down. It comes in four main forms, and you may know one of them much better than the others:

- fight can look like snapping, shouting or sudden anger
- flight is the urge to get out, right now
- freeze is going still and quiet, and sometimes not being able to move or speak
- fawn is going along with what other people want to keep the peace: agreeing, pleasing, or saying yes when you mean no

Freeze can look like giving up, but it is not. Your body is putting a brake on movement while it works out what to do. You can read more about meltdowns, shutdowns and panic attacks here. Fawn is the newest of the four names. It comes from therapists who work with people who have lived through trauma, and it has been studied much less than the other three. For neurodivergent adults, fawn can look a lot like masking: hiding what you feel and fitting in to stay safe.

Your threat response does not only switch on when your life is in danger. It can also switch on when there is too much coming in: noise you cannot turn down, demands you cannot say no to, or a room you cannot leave. Stress you cannot escape or control hits thinking the hardest.

Why you cannot think your way out

The front part of your brain does the planning. It keeps a few things in mind at once and weighs them up. It also holds back a reaction long enough for you to choose a better one.

Under stress, chemical signals flood that part of the brain and switch it down. This can happen even when the stress is small but feels out of your control. Older, faster parts of the brain take over, and they react rather than think. As the stress settles, the planning part comes back.

Autistic adults say the same thing about their own meltdowns. In the middle of one, thinking and remembering get hard. The threat response happens in every human body. Research suggests that for many neurodivergent people it can switch on faster and feel stronger. Big feelings that are hard to settle are common in ADHD at every age.

So "just calm down" or "think it through" asks the part of you that is switched off to do the work.

What can set it off sooner

Many autistic adults react more strongly than other people to everyday sights, sounds, touch and smells. One small study scanned the brains of autistic children and teenagers, aged 9 to 17, who were strongly bothered by sensory input. The part of their brain that spots danger reacted more to mildly unpleasant sounds and touch than other young people's did. The difference was greatest when sound and touch came together, and the reaction did not settle down when they were repeated.

Load also builds up across a day. Many adults notice their threat response switches on sooner after little sleep, or when they have not eaten. A surprise, a change of plan, or hours of holding it together around other people can do the same. It helps to know your own list, because it tells you which days need more room.

ADHD adults describe sensory differences too: in one study, ADHD adults reported both stronger and weaker reactions to sights, sounds and touch than most people, whether or not they were also autistic. If you are neurodivergent in another way, your own list is the one that counts.

Research like this has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So your own alarm and your own list may look a bit different, and that is okay. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: a long, slow out-breath

Breathing is the one part of the threat response you can change on purpose. Your heart speeds up a little as you breathe in, and slows down as you breathe out. Slow breathing makes that change bigger.

In a review of slow-breathing studies, people said they felt calmer, more alert, and less anxious and angry.

Researchers call this breathing cyclic sighing:

- breathe in through your nose
- take a second, smaller breath in on top of the first
- breathe out slowly through your mouth until you are empty
- repeat, keeping the out-breath longer than the in-breath

Practise on calm days, because the trial tested daily practice, not use in the middle of overload. A breath your body already knows is much easier to find when your threat response is on. You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app to practise at the same time each day.

For some people, watching their own breathing makes them more anxious. If that is you, make a long out-breath without watching it. You can hum, sing something low, blow slowly through a straw, or sigh out loud. Each of those is a long breath out.

A slow out-breath does not switch it off straight away. It may turn it down enough for your thinking to start coming back. Some days it has gone too far for breathing to reach, and that is not your fault.

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 you get overwhelmed most days or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. Tell your GP if this happens with no clear cause, or if what is happening in your body worries you. 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 work out what is adding to the load and what would lower it. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

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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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hello@understandingzoe.com

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