

Part 2 Stress States Activities

Understanding your stress states is the first step.

Once you can recognize where your nervous system is, you can begin responding differently.

The tools in this section help you strengthen that awareness. They are simple practices that help you reconnect with your body and notice your internal signals earlier.

You do not need to do all of them. Even one small practice can begin building trust between you and your nervous system.

Replacing Old Survival Strategies

The goal of Flourish is to gently begin replacing coping strategies that once helped you survive but may no longer support your well-being.

Old Survival Strategies

- Pushing through fatigue
- People-pleasing
- Perfectionism
- Masking your needs
- Ignoring signals from your body

Many ADHD women learned these strategies in environments that required them to keep going, stay quiet, or meet expectations that did not match their nervous systems.

The skills in this section offer a different approach.

They help you reconnect with your body, protect your energy, and rebuild trust in yourself.

Up next, you will begin learning a few practical tools. Each one is optional. You can explore them at your own pace.

New Coping Skills: Body Awareness Tools

Neurodivergent women are often taught to disconnect from their bodies. Over time this can make it harder to notice signals such as fatigue, tension, hunger, or emotional stress.

Your body is constantly sending information about what you need. The tools in this section help you begin noticing and responding to those signals.

Four tools we will explore:



Body Awareness

Learning to notice physical sensations



Regular Check-ins

Using timers to reconnect with yourself during the day



Emotion Naming

Building vocabulary for feelings and body states



Self-Protection

Setting boundaries with yourself before reaching overwhelm



1. Body Awareness through Body Scans

Body Scan

A body scan is a way to check in with your body slowly, from head to toe, and notice what you are feeling.

This can help you become more aware of tension, discomfort, numbness, or other sensations in your body.

This practice is also available as a video and audio exercise in the group.

Try This

1. Close your eyes if that feels okay, or soften your gaze. Take a few slow breaths.
2. Bring your attention to your head. Notice your forehead, jaw, and neck.
3. Then move down to your shoulders, chest, arms, and hands. Notice any tightness, heaviness, numbness, or discomfort.
4. Continue down through your torso, hips, legs, and feet.
5. If you notice tension anywhere, take a slow breath and see if that area can soften a little.
6. You do not need to change anything. Just notice what is there.

Key Takeaway

The more often you check in with your body, the easier it becomes to notice what is going on and what you may need.

The word "Activity" is written in a colorful, playful font with each letter in a different color (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple).

2. 🕒 Timer Check-Ins

When you are overwhelmed or masking, it is easy to go hours without noticing how you feel.

Timer check-ins gently interrupt that pattern. They strengthen awareness and encourage attunement to your inner state..



Try this:

1. Set a timer two or three times a day.
2. When it goes off, pause and ask yourself:

What am I feeling right now?

What do I need?

What small action might help meet that need?

You can jot down your answers in a notebook, an app, or simply say them out loud.



3. Naming Emotions & Sensations

Many neurodivergent women have a hard time naming what they feel. This is not a personal failure. It may be harder if you were never taught this skill, have spent years pushing through, or struggle with interoception or alexithymia.

A good place to start is with body sensations. Sometimes your body gives you information before the emotion feels clear. A feelings wheel or emotion word list can help.

Why This Matters

Naming what you notice can create space between you and the overwhelm. That space can help you slow down and respond more clearly. You do not have to get it exactly right.

The word "Activity" is written in a colorful, playful font with each letter having a different color and a small decorative element.

This exercise begins with noticing your body. You do not need to figure everything out. Just start with what you notice.

Step 1: What do I notice in my body right now?

Circle, check or underline one:

- Tingly
- Tight
- Fluttery
- Empty
- Heavy
- Buzzing
- Still
- Clenched
- Warm
- Numb
- Shaky
- Don't know

Step 2: Where do I notice it?

Put a check next to any area where you notice something:

- Head or face
- Chest or heart
- Stomach or belly
- Arms or hands
- Legs or feet
- I'm not sure

("Don't know" is a valid answer. That is information too.)

BODY FEELINGS WORDS

tingly open clenched tight loose heavy swirly
itchy fidgety knotted

Eyes feel stinging
blurry or focused

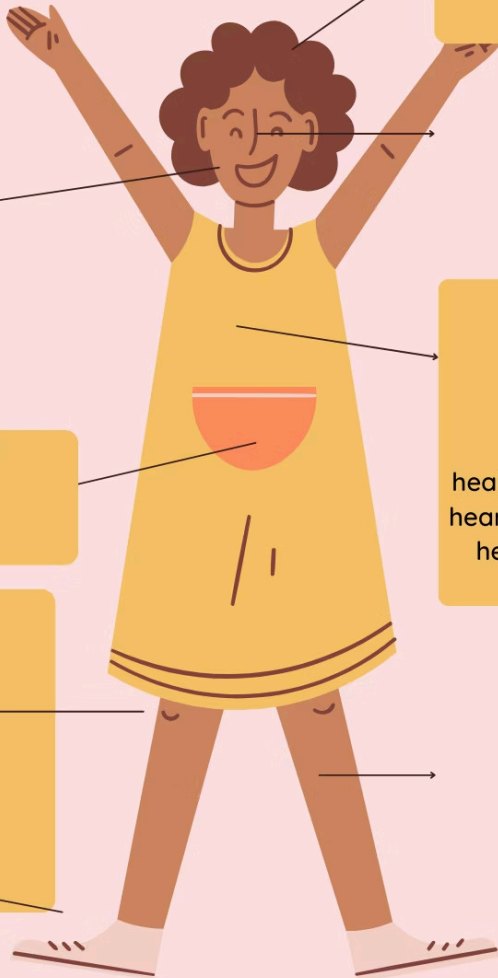
Head can feel buzzy,
neutral, clear, dizzy
swirly, heavy

Jaw can feel
clenched or tight

Chest
feels tight
fluttery
heavy
open
heart beating fast
heart beating slow
heart stopped

Stomach can feel
fluttery, calm,
neutral, knotted,
nauseous

Legs can feel
heavy, tingly
like they want to
run
like they are
stuck
like they are
numb



Flourish
A group for ADHD Women

credit to Dr. Megan Neff for this idea

Step 3: If I had to guess, this might be:

- Tired
- Nervous
- Calm
- Sad
- Excited
- Overwhelmed
- Irritated
- Ashamed
- Lonely
- Relieved
- Nothing / blank
- I don't know yet

You may notice more than one feeling, or no clear feeling yet.

Step 4: Respond with kindness

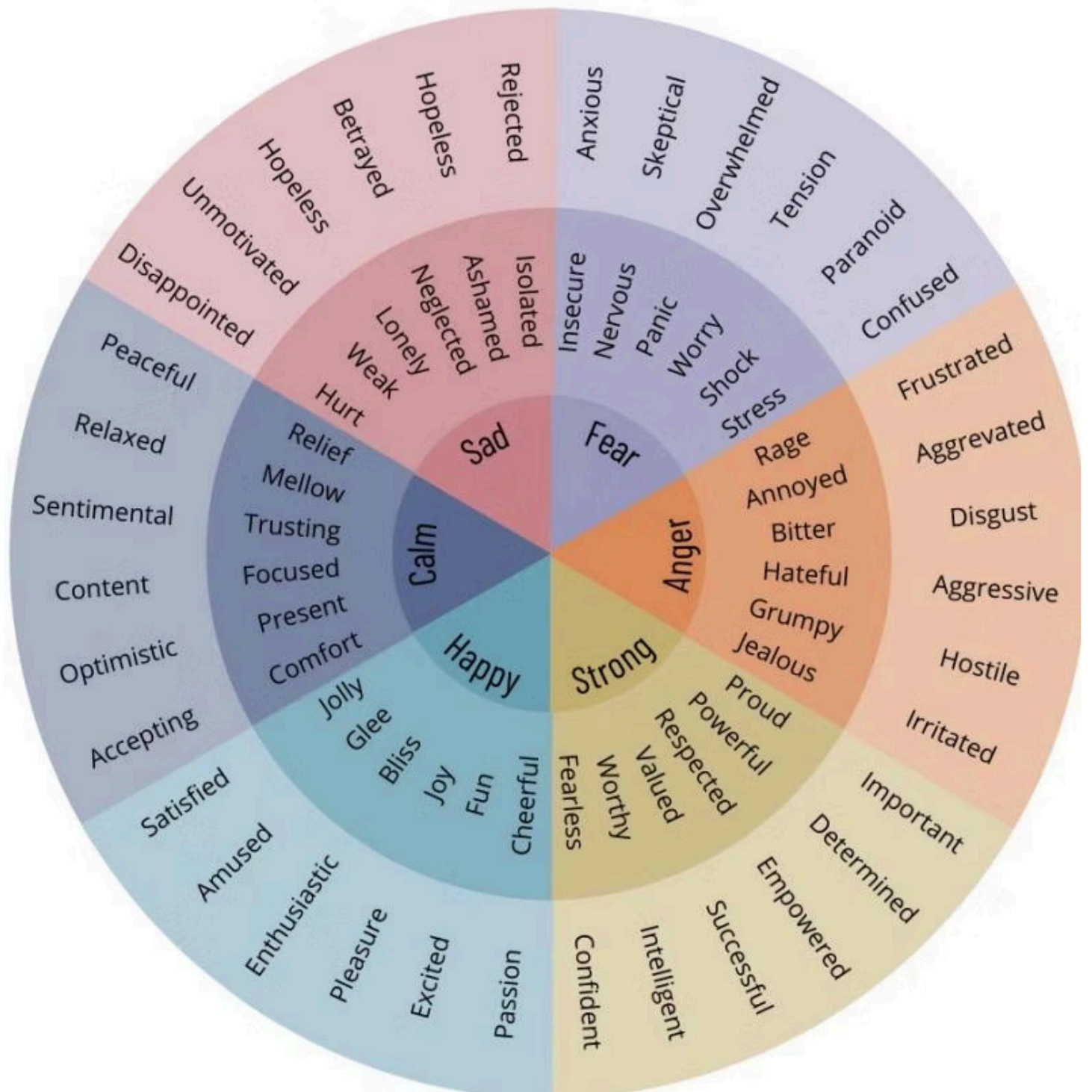
Say one gentle thing to your body. For example:

“Thank you for telling me something.”	“I do not fully understand this yet, but I am listening.”
“I may not feel clear yet, but I am paying attention.”	“This is enough for right now.”

Write your
own: _____

You do not need to figure this out right now. Just noticing it is a start.

- **If you need help putting words to what you feel, use the feelings wheel on the next page.**





4. Activity: How to Create Boundaries With Yourself Before Overwhelm

Many ADHD women have internalized the message: If I just try harder, I can keep up. But keeping up should not require abandoning yourself.

This is where self-boundaries come in. Self-boundaries help protect your energy, your body, and your nervous system before you are already depleted.

A self-boundary might sound like:

“If I feel my body getting tight, I step away, even if the task is not done.”

“I take a break after 90 minutes, no matter where I am in the task.”

“If I skip a meal, that is the red light. I stop and eat.”

“If I start doom-scrolling, I set a timer before it turns into a shutdown spiral.”

“I need 30 minutes between things. I do not stack appointments or calls anymore.”

“If I start overthinking an email, I send it or save it, but I do not reread it five times.”

“If I catch myself saying yes automatically, I pause and check in: Do I actually want to do this?”

This is one way self-trust gets built: by responding to your limits earlier, not after collapse.

Start with one. It may help to write it down so it is easier to remember and follow through. Keeping that boundary is one way to practice trusting yourself.

Practice for This Week

Try one of the following practices:



Body scan



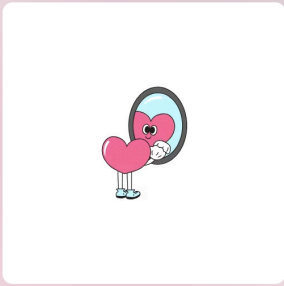
Timer check-in



Recognizing States



**Practicing Feelings or
Body States**



Exercise: Reflection Who Benefits from Your Overwhelm?

Let's Go Deeper

You were not born ignoring your needs. Many women learned to do that over time. These patterns often develop in families, relationships, workplaces, or systems that ask too much and leave little room for rest, limits, or support. This is not about assigning blame. It is about seeing the pattern more clearly so you have more choice now.

When did I learn to ignore my body?

Where did I learn that rest wasn't allowed unless I was completely exhausted?

Has anyone benefited from me being overloaded, overextended, or quiet about what I need?

Seeing these patterns more clearly can help you respond differently.



Flourish Shift

You do not need to push yourself into overwhelm to seem more neurotypical.

Many ADHD women get pulled into a pace of urgency, overfunctioning, and shutdown. That pattern makes sense in systems built around neurotypical expectations.

Over time, it often leads to burnout.

What helps is support that fits, pacing that your body can sustain, and learning to trust yourself earlier.

Final Reflection

Notice what you have learned.

You identified your stress states, noticed your body's signals, and practiced responding with more awareness.

That gives you more choice about what you need.

What Comes Next: Self-Compassion

In the next workbook, you will learn how to respond to yourself with more kindness and less criticism.

You will explore three parts of self-compassion: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness.

You have started building awareness. Next, you will learn how to support yourself when things get hard.



FLOURISH WORKBOOK 5

Stress States

Understanding Your Nervous System Landmarks



Introduction

In the last workbook, you explored emotional regulation. You learned that ADHD women often experience emotions as intense, sudden, or difficult to name. This is often connected to a sensitive nervous system, chronic stress, and years of pushing past your limits.

In this workbook, you will learn to recognize your **stress states**.

Your body constantly sends signals about how much stress it is holding. These signals can show up in your body, your thoughts, your emotions, your urges, your environment, or the images that appear in your mind.

Learning to notice these signals earlier helps you respond before stress builds into overwhelm.

This workbook introduces four common nervous system states:

- Rest
- Engagement
- Stretched
- Overwhelm

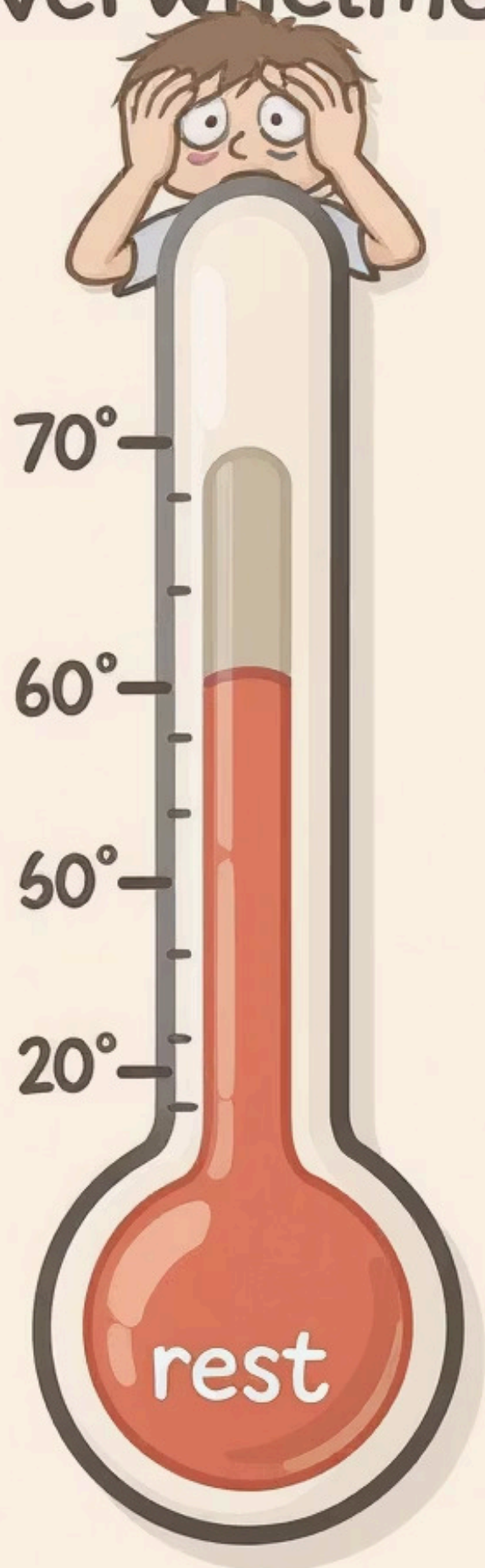
As you move through the workbook, you will begin identifying your own personal **stress clues** and building simple practices that help you stay connected to your body.

What Are Your Stress States?

Stress states describe how active your nervous system is at any moment.

At one end of the spectrum, your body may feel calm, steady, and connected. At the other end, you may feel overwhelmed, scattered, or shut down.

Overwhelmed



These states are not good or bad. They simply show how your body is responding to what is happening around you and inside you.

Stress states give us clues about how the nervous system is functioning. You can think of them as places on a map. Each state is a landmark that helps you notice where you are and what your body may need next.



The Four Stress States

1**Rest :**

Your body is regulated and calm. You feel safe, steady, and settled.

2**Engaged :**

Your body is still regulated, but with more energy. You feel focused, curious, and connected.

3**Stretched :**

Your nervous system is beginning to strain. You may feel tense, pressured, or like you are holding things together with effort.

4**Overwhelm :**

Your nervous system is dysregulated. You may feel flooded, scattered, frozen, or shut down.

Where do the Stress Clues Show Up?

Stress clues can appear in many places. These clues help you recognize which state your nervous system is in.

Common places where clues appear include:

1. **Body sensations**

Tension, fatigue, stomach discomfort, changes in breathing.

2. **Thoughts**

Racing thoughts, self-criticism, worry, or mental fog.

3. **Emotions**

Anxiety, frustration, sadness, irritability, calm, or contentment.

4. **Urges**

Wanting to withdraw, push harder, scroll, eat, escape, or rest.

5. **Activities**

Changes in sleep, productivity, focus, or energy.

6. **Mental images**

Scenes or pictures your mind creates, such as imagining failure, escape, safety, or pressure.

7. **Environmental cues**

Certain people, situations, or settings that activate stress.

8. **Sensory responses**

Sensitivity to light, sound, textures, temperature, or smells.

Recognizing Your Stress State

Now that you know the four stress states, the next step is learning how to recognize when you are in one.

Your body constantly sends signals. But many ADHD women learn to ignore those signals.

If you were called lazy when you slowed down, or praised for pushing through exhaustion, you may have learned to override your body's needs in order to be accepted.

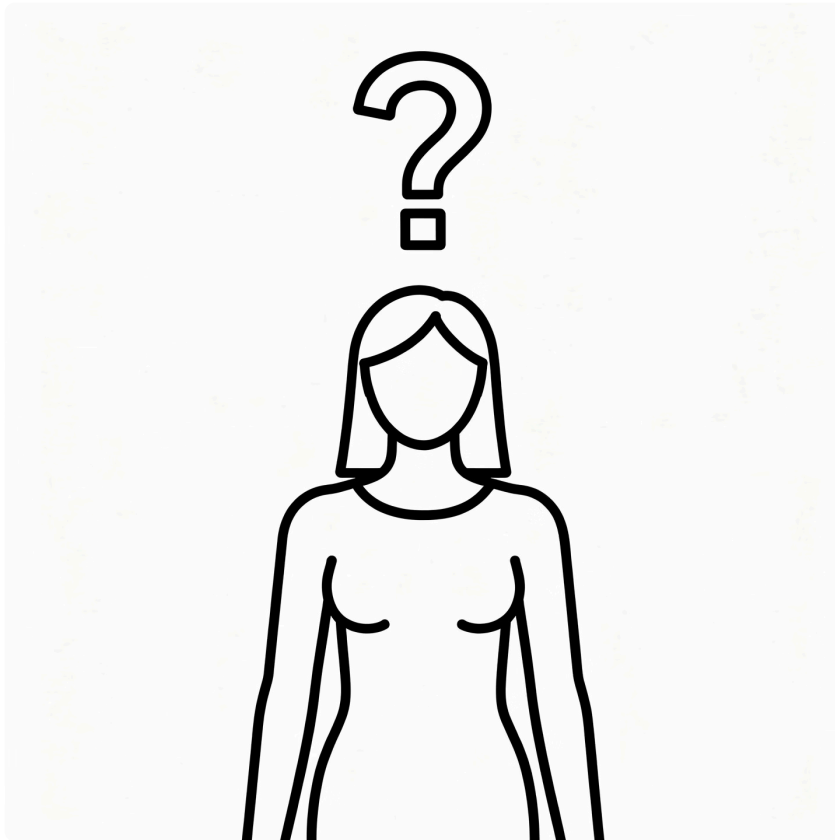
Over time this can make it difficult to recognize early stress signals.

Learning to notice those signals again is an important part of regulation.

Why does this matter?

When you can name what is happening inside you, you can respond sooner.

Catching stress earlier makes emotional dysregulation easier to manage. It can also protect your energy, support executive functioning, and reduce burnout.



Flourish Shift

Instead of ignoring or overriding your signals, you can begin practicing something different: listening to them earlier.

This shift helps you respond to your nervous system's needs before stress becomes overwhelm.

Learning about State 1: The Rest State

What is the Rest State?

Rest is the foundation of nervous system regulation. In this state, your body feels calm, steady, and safe.

For many ADHD women, rest can feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. The ADHD brain is often drawn toward problems, urgency, or high-interest stimulation. When the nervous system finally slows down, the experience can feel strange.



Why Is Rest Hard to Notice?

The ADHD brain is wired to notice problems, threats, or stimulation, not calm. So when your system enters a restful state, it may feel:

- **Boring**
- **Unimportant**
- **Like “nothing is happening”**

This is sometimes called **survival bias**. If your nervous system learned that rest was not safe or productive, it may stay activated even when things are calm.

You might crave rest but feel uneasy when it finally appears.

Learning to recognize rest as a valid state helps you build more of it into daily life. Over time, this can support your energy, focus, and emotional regulation.

Rest

Rest is not always obvious. When your nervous system is settled, the signals can be subtle. You may notice them in your emotions, thoughts, body sensations, or environment.

Below are some common clues that the nervous system is in a restful state.

Emotions You Might Feel at Rest



Rest can bring a range of emotions. Some may feel pleasant, while others may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

Pleasant emotions

- Calm
- Contentment
- Peace
- Gratitude
- Safety

Uncomfortable emotions

- Boredom
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Loneliness

Grief sometimes surfaces during quiet moments because the nervous system finally has space to process emotions.

Some people may also notice mild anxiety if they are not used to resting.

Thoughts That May Arise at Rest

When the nervous system slows down, thoughts may move between appreciation and uncertainty.

Q "This feels nice."

Q "I wish I could stay like this forever."

Q "I should be doing something."

Q "Am I allowed to rest?"

Q "Something must be wrong if I'm not busy."

Q "I wonder what I forgot to do."

Q "I'm finally safe."








State 1: Rest



BODY CUES and SENSATIONS

When the nervous system is resting, your body may signal it in small ways.

Examples include:

-  Slower breathing or heartbeat
-  Sighing or yawning
-  Warmth or coolness in your limbs
-  Heaviness or sinking into surfaces
-  Muscles softening
-  Stomach gurgling (digestion activates when safe)
-  Twitching or fidgeting (if stillness feels uncomfortable)

Environment of Rest

Rest often occurs in environments that feel quieter or less demanding.

Examples may include:

- A quiet room
- Softer light
- A slower pace, without urgency or frantic movement
- Fewer interruptions or demands

Urges and Sensory Experiences

In a restful state, you may notice urges to:

- Slow down or stay still
- Breathe deeply or stretch gently
- Soften your body
- Savor a small moment
- Connect calmly with someone
- Do nothing—without guilt

If rest feels unfamiliar, you may also feel the urge to distract yourself with electronics or activity.

Rest

Common Rest Activities

Rest does not always mean doing nothing. For many ADHD women, rest is easier when the body is allowed gentle movement or light activity.

The goal of rest is not inactivity. The goal is **low-demand activity that allows your nervous system to settle.**

Examples of restful activities include:

- Lying down or reclining
- Sitting with a blanket
- Reading something light
- Listening to music or nature sounds
- Looking out a window
- Petting a dog or cat
- Gentle stretching or body scanning
- Floating in water
- Slow journaling or doodling
- Drinking tea or warm water
- Holding a weighted object
- Daydreaming
- Closing your eyes without a plan

Restful activities are usually:

- Low pressure
- Slow paced
- Not goal-driven
- Easy to stop and start

These kinds of activities allow your nervous system to recover energy rather than spend it.

Rest State Self-Awareness

If you'd like, take a moment to notice your own experience of rest. Use the prompts below to reflect:

1	2	3
<p>Thoughts</p> <p>What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm resting? What thoughts are <i>absent</i>?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Body Cues Sensations</p> <p>What does my body feel like or want to do when I'm at rest (e.g., soft, light, still)</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Emotions</p> <p>What emotions are present in moments of true rest?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
4	5	6
<p>Activities</p> <p>What are my rest activities?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Images</p> <p>What visuals or metaphors come to mind when I imagine rest? (e.g., "floating," "quiet woods," "a warm bath")</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Environment</p> <p>What is my environment like when rest is happening?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>



State 2: Engagement State

What Is the Engagement State?

Engagement is a state of alert focus and meaningful activity. Your nervous system is active, but still regulated.

In this state you may feel interested, energized, and connected to what you are doing. Your mind and body are working together.

Engagement is often where learning, creativity, and problem-solving happen.



What Engagement Feels Like

In the engagement state you may notice:

- Curiosity or interest
- Energized focus
- A sense of purpose or momentum
- Light pressure that feels motivating
- Mild restlessness that helps you stay engaged

You may feel challenged, but not overwhelmed.

State 2: Engagement



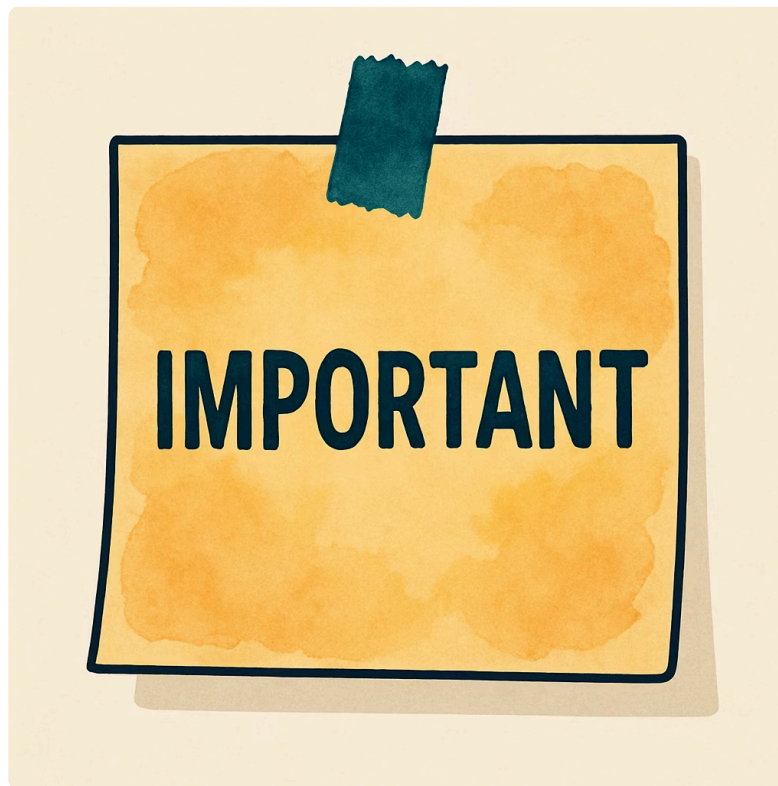
Why Engagement Matters

Engagement is an important state because it allows you to use your abilities and strengths.

In this state you are often:

- Learning new things
- Solving problems
- Expressing ideas
- Working toward meaningful goals

For many ADHD brains, engagement can be a **sweet spot**. Interest and a small amount of pressure can help support focus, creativity, and motivation.



Note for ADHD Brains

Engagement can also be delicate.

If the early signals are missed, engagement can sometimes shift into:

Hyperfocus

Losing track of time, physical needs, or limits.

Perfectionism

Feeling pressure to get everything exactly right.

Learning to notice the difference helps you stay engaged without tipping into overwhelm.

State 2: Engagement



Emotions in the Engagement State

You may notice a mix of pleasant and slightly activating emotions.

Examples include:

- Curiosity
- Excitement
- Interest
- Focus
- Satisfaction
- Hope

Some slightly uncomfortable emotions may also appear:

- Mild stress
- Restlessness
- Performance pressure
- Irritation

These emotions are usually manageable and do not feel overwhelming.

Thoughts in Engagement Statement

Thoughts in this state often reflect interest and forward movement.

- "I'm into this."
- "I want to see where this goes."
- "This matters to me."
- "I need to keep up."
- "This feels good."
- "I can do this."

State 2: Engagement State









Here are some common clues that show up in this state.



Body Cues and Sensations

Your body may show signs of active but regulated energy.

Examples include:

-  Muscles gently engaged (but not clenched)
-  Quickened, steady breath
-  Head tilted, eyes alert
-  Fidgeting to stay engaged (movement helps regulate)
-  Warm buzz of excitement or anticipation (“good jitters”)
-  Light stomach flutters—not the knots of anxiety, but the spark of interest
-  Gentle muscle activation
-  Alert, focused energy with room to breathe (irritation may flicker but stays manageable)

Environment

Your environment may include stimulation that supports focus.

Examples include:

- Controlled chaos
- Open tabs
- Stimulation with a purpose


Urges

You may feel urges to:

- To try something new
- To finish a task or make progress
- To ask a question or share an idea
- To move your body in a focused way (typing, walking, fidgeting with purpose)
- To create, solve, or organize
- To reach out, collaborate, or engage
- To pace yourself without urgency

State 2: Engagement

COMMON Engaged ACTIVITIES

 Engagement often appears during activities such as:

- Learning a new skill
- Solving a problem
- Brainstorming ideas
- Writing or designing something
- Practicing music or art
- Talking through meaningful ideas
- Taking a walk while thinking
- Working with others on a shared goal

These activities provide enough stimulation to hold attention without overwhelming the nervous system.

Engaged Self-Awareness

Check in with yourself. If you feel like doing an exploration activity, explore your own Engaged state and record the signs below. If not, simply move on and keep reading.

Use the following to reflect on your experience of engagement:

1

Thoughts

What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm engaged ?
 What thoughts are *absent*?

2

Emotions

What emotions are present in moments of engagement?

3

Activities

What are my engagement activities?

4

Images

What visuals or metaphors come to mind when I'm in an engaged state

5

Environment

What is my environment like when I am engaged?

6

Sensations

What does it feel like in my body when I am engaged?

State 3: Stretched



What Is the Stretched State?

The **stretched state** is when your nervous system begins to feel strained.

You are still functioning and coping, but it takes more effort to keep going. Your body is starting to send signals that stress is increasing.

You may feel tense, rushed, pressured, or mentally scattered.

This state often appears **before emotional dysregulation**, which makes it an important signal to notice.



What It Might Feel Like:

- A racing or fluttering heart
- Tightness in your chest, shoulders, or jaw
- Shallow breathing
- Mental fog or scattered thinking
- Feeling “on edge” or overstimulated

You may still be completing tasks, but it feels harder to stay steady.



Why the Stretched State Matters

For many ADHD women, the stretched state feels very familiar.

If you were taught to push through, stay calm, or keep performing even when overwhelmed, **over-functioning can become a survival strategy.**

This can make the stretched state feel normal.

But staying in this state for long periods of time is not sustainable. Over time it can lead to exhaustion, burnout, and emotional dysregulation.

Learning to recognize the stretched state earlier helps you respond before your nervous system moves into overwhelm.



The Flourish Shift

When you notice that you are in a stretched state, it can become a signal to pause and use new skills.

Examples include:

Self-accommodation

Adjusting expectations, workload, or pacing.

Self-advocacy

Communicating your needs or limits.

Self-care

Choosing actions that support recovery.

Self-compassion

Responding to stress with kindness instead of criticism.

These skills help prevent stress from building into overwhelm.

State 3: Stretched

Common Clues in the Stretched State

You may notice signals across several areas.

Common Activities

You may notice patterns such as:

- Multitasking or bouncing between things
- Re-checking messages, emails, or tasks
- Over-preparing or revising endlessly
- Starting and stopping tasks without clarity
- Ignoring meals, water, bathroom breaks
- Saying yes to plans while secretly dreading them
- Trying to create something but deleting it over and over
- Cleaning or organizing impulsively but without direction

Emotion

Common emotions in the stretched state may include:

- Irritation
- Restlessness
- Pressure
- Embarrassment
- Feeling on edge
- Feeling over-responsible
- Feeling disconnected or foggy

You may feel like you are **holding things together with effort**.

Thoughts

Thoughts may become more pressured or critical.

Examples include:

- "I should be able to do this."
- "Why can I not focus?"
- "I am falling behind."
- "Keep going."
- "Do not stop."
- "I just need to finish this one thing."
- "I can not stop now."

State 3: Stretched



Body Sensations

The body often gives clear early signals in the stretched state.

Examples include:

- Tension in your jaw, shoulders, neck
- Shallow or tight breathing
- Racing or fluttery heart
- Stomach knots or clenching
- Dry mouth
- Fidgeting, leg bouncing, or needing to move

Environmental or Sensory Clues

Your surroundings may start to feel harder to tolerate.

Examples include:

- Noise becoming distracting or irritating
- Lights feeling too bright
- Screens feeling overwhelming
- Workspaces feeling chaotic
- Losing track of time
- Feeling surrounded by reminders or unfinished tasks

Urges

You may feel urges to:

- Push harder and keep going
- Cancel plans or withdraw
- Hide or go quiet
- Say yes just to make pressure stop
- Apologize or over-explain
- Control every detail

Stretched Self-Awareness

You may want to explore what the stretched state looks like in your own life.

<p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p>Thoughts</p> <p>What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm stretched ? What thoughts are <i>absent</i>?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p>Emotions</p> <p>What emotions are present in moments of stretched?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p>Activities</p> <p>What behaviors tend to appear?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p>Images</p> <p>What mental pictures or scenes appear when you are stretched?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p style="text-align: center;">5</p> <p>Environment</p> <p>What is my environment like when I feel stretched ?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p style="text-align: center;">6</p> <p>Sensations</p> <p>What does it feel like in my body when I'm stretched?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

When stress continues to increase and the nervous system cannot recover, the stretched state may shift into the next state: **overwhelm**.

State 4: Overwhelm



What Is the Overwhelm State?

Overwhelm happens when the nervous system becomes flooded.

At this point the body is no longer calmly responding to stress. The system shifts into a survival response.

Thinking clearly becomes difficult. Decision-making slows down. The body may react strongly or begin to shut down.

This state is not a failure. It is a protective response from the nervous system.

What Overwhelm Might Feel Like

When overwhelm occurs, you may notice experiences such as:

- Emotional flooding or intense distress
- Numbness or emotional shutdown
- Difficulty thinking or speaking clearly
- Crying, panic, anger, or sudden withdrawal
- Feeling trapped, small, or helpless
- Wanting to escape or disappear

Some people experience **high activation** (panic, agitation).

Others experience **shutdown** (freezing, exhaustion, dissociation).

Both are forms of overwhelm.

Flourish Shift

Overwhelm means your body and brain **have reached their limit**.

What you need in this state is not more pressure. You need gentleness, time, and space to recover.

State 4: Overwhelmed



Body Sensations

What your body might do when you are overwhelmed:

- Tight muscles in the jaw, chest, shoulders, or stomach
- Rapid or pounding heartbeat
- Nausea or stomach discomfort
- Shakiness or dizziness
- Heavy or frozen limbs
- Tingling, buzzing, or crawling sensations in the body
- Feeling disconnected from your body

Some people experience intense tension. Others may feel numb or collapsed.

Environmental or Sensory Clues

What your surroundings might feel like when you are overwhelmed:

- Sounds becoming sharp or unbearable
- Lights feeling painfully bright
- Clothing or textures becoming irritating
- Smells becoming overwhelming
- Crowds or clutter feeling intolerable
- Feeling trapped in the environment

Your nervous system may try to reduce stimulation quickly.

Urges

What your body may want to do when you are overwhelmed:

- Leave the situation
- Hide or withdraw
- Sleep or lie down
- Seek silence or darkness
- Avoid communication
- Escape or disappear

These urges signal that your nervous system needs recovery.

Mental chaos or stormy imagery

Mental images may become intense or chaotic when you are overwhelmed.

Examples may include:

- Images of failure or catastrophe
- Feeling trapped with no way out
- Imagining escape or disappearance
- Replaying distressing moments repeatedly
- Stormy, chaotic, or fragmented inner scenes
- Blank or unfocused mental space

These images are another way the nervous system communicates distress.

State 4: Overwhelmed



Here are some common clues that show up in this state—through your urges, thoughts, emotions, environment, and what you're doing.

Common Activities you may be doing

Things you might find yourself doing when you are overwhelmed:

- Stopping tasks suddenly
- Leaving conversations or situations
- Lying down or shutting down
- Ignoring messages or responsibilities
- Canceling plans or withdrawing from others
- Seeking distraction or numbing behaviors

These behaviors often happen when the nervous system is trying to protect itself.

Emotions

Feelings that may appear in the overwhelmed state:

- Panic
- Rage
- Fear
- Shame
- Hopelessness
- Despair
- Emotional numbness

Some people experience **emotional flooding**, where feelings become intense and difficult to regulate.

Others experience **emotional shutdown**, where feelings become muted or hard to access.

Both responses are common signs that the nervous system has reached its limit.

Thoughts

Thinking may become extreme, chaotic, or difficult to access.

Examples may include:

- “I cannot do this.”
- “This is too much.”
- “I need to get out of here.”
- “I am failing.”
- “I cannot think.”
- “I just want this to stop.”

Sometimes thoughts may become blank or difficult to access.

Overwhelmed Self-Awareness

Check in with yourself. If you feel like doing an exploration activity you can explore your own stretched state and record the signs here. If not you can just move on and keep reading.

Use the following to reflect on your own experience of the overwhelmed state:

1

Thoughts

What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm overwhelmed?
What thoughts are *absent*?

2

Emotions

What emotions are present in moments of the overwhelmed state?

3

Activities

What are my overwhelmed activities?

4

Images

What visuals or metaphors come to mind when overwhelmed?

5

Environment

What is my environment like when I feel overwhelmed?

6

Sensations

What does it feel like in my body when I am overwhelmed?
