

Sensory Overload First Aid: When the World Is Too Much, Right Now

A 90-second in-the-moment protocol, a crash kit for the aftermath, and the scripts that get you out of the room with your dignity intact.

Why This Card Exists

Sensory overload is not a mood and it is not drama. It is your nervous system receiving more input than it can process – lights too bright, sounds too many, textures wrong, everything at full volume at once. By the time it's visible to anyone else, the meter has been climbing for hours. This card is for that moment: the middle of it, when you need something to do, not something to understand.

The 90-Second Protocol

- Stop adding input. The phone is an input device. The screen is input. The conversation is input. The goal of the next ninety seconds is subtraction, nothing else.
- Get your body to the darkest, quietest place available. Closet counts. Car counts. Bathroom at the party counts. The exit matters more than the excuse.
- Breathe out longer than you breathe in. Four seconds in, six seconds out. The exhale is the gear shift – it tells your nervous system the emergency has ended.
- One anchor object. Texture you like, a cold water bottle, a wall to lean on, the floor under your feet. One sensation that's yours, on purpose.
- Do not explain yet. Words are expensive right now. You can explain later, or not at all. Your only job is to lower the input.

When It's Past 90 Seconds

Sometimes the 90 seconds isn't enough. Sometimes the meter was already full when you walked in, and now you're in the parking lot, or the bathroom, or the floor of your own hallway, and your body is filing a complaint you can't ignore. That's not a failure. That's the system working – finally telling you the truth the room wouldn't let you hear.

The Crash Kit

- **Headphones or earplugs, so the world can wait its turn**
- **Sunglasses indoors, because the lights were never the problem you were told they were**
- **Something cold to drink – temperature is an anchor your nervous system trusts**
- **One comfort object with a texture you like – the tag cut out now, not later**
- **A planned exit line you didn't have to invent in the moment**
- **After the crash: rest that isn't a screen. The scroll is input. The dark room is medicine. These are different things.**

The Day After

The hour after is its own phase. Your nervous system just ran a marathon. The day after counts too. Recovery isn't weakness – it's the part of the system that puts you back together. The meter was never wrong. It was just never believed.

The 24-Hour Recovery

- **Schedule subtraction, not achievement. Today's win is fewer inputs than yesterday. That is the whole assignment.**
- **Same clothes, same food, same route – sameness is medicine for an overworked filter.**
- **Tell one person the truth: 'Yesterday was too much. I need a quiet day.' You don't owe them a diagram.**
- **If you can, find the trigger – not to fix it, just to know it. The grocery store at 5:30 p.m., the open-plan office, the family dinner. Knowing the trigger turns a mystery into a forecast, and forecasts let you plan.**

The Only Rule

You are not too sensitive. You are appropriately sensitive to an environment that is genuinely too much. The right response is not to toughen up. It's to change the environment – or leave it, early, with your head high. The exit is not a failure. The exit is the self-respect part.

When You Need to Leave

I need a minute. It's not you – it's the noise and the lights and the whole room. I'll be back when I've got the volume down.

When Someone Asks If You're Okay

I'm okay, I'm just full. My nervous system is done taking in input for today. I'm going to sit somewhere quiet for a bit. That's all.

When They Say You're Overreacting

I'm not being dramatic. The lights and the sound really are that loud for me. Believe the meter, not the face I was making.

When You're Done, Before You're Bad

I need to go home now. Not because anything is wrong, but because I'm at my limit and I'd rather leave early than spend tomorrow recovering.

Your First 24 Hours

Tape this card to the inside of your head or the inside of your notebook. You don't have to remember any of it in the moment – you just have to know the first move is always subtraction. Less. Quieter. Darker. Slower. Your nervous system has been drinking from a firehose your whole life. This card is the tap. If you're in crisis or need urgent support, please reach out to a professional or a crisis line in your country. You deserve real help, not just a strategy for surviving the lobby.

From The Unadulting Society | sfwagere.com