There’s a missed call on your phone.

Your stomach drops. You wonder if something’s wrong. You wonder if you’ve done something wrong. You rehearse what you might say if they call back. You don’t quite manage to call them yourself.

For many autistic and ADHD people, phones and video calls are not neutral tools. They’re real-time tests: can you process fast enough, answer clearly enough, sound “normal” enough, all while not quite knowing what’s coming?

At the same time, texts, instant messages and emails may feel easier, calmer and more natural. You get a moment to think. You can reread what’s been said. You’re not under pressure to fill every silence.

This article is about that gap: why real-time calls can feel so hard, why preferring written communication is not a character flaw, and some gentle ways to cope when calls really are unavoidable.

Quick Summary

- Many autistic and ADHD people find phone and video calls hard because they involve real-time processing, unpredictable questions, tone and eye-contact pressure, and no record of what was said.
- Texts, instant messages and emails often work better: you can think, reread, and reply in your own time. Preferring written communication is a valid access need, not laziness.
- It’s common to miss verbal and non-verbal “markers” on calls (like hints that someone is wrapping up or wants you to speak), which can add to the anxiety.
- When calls are unavoidable, you can make them gentler by preparing a few notes, using simple opening/closing scripts, asking what the call is about in advance, and writing down key points afterwards.
- It’s okay to ask for alternatives where it’s reasonable: “For anything non-urgent, could we keep it to email?” or “Phone is tricky for me—can we do this in writing?”

Why real-time conversations can feel so intense

On the surface, a phone call or video call is just “two people talking”. Underneath, a lot is happening at once:

- processing what the other person is saying
- working out their tone

- thinking what you want to say
- translating that thought into words
- monitoring how you sound
- on video, managing eye contact, facial expression, background

For a neurodivergent brain, each of these can use more energy than it does for other people. Put them all together, with no pauses and no script, and calls can feel like a performance exam you didn't revise for.

Common experiences include:

- needing more time to think than the other person gives you
- losing your words mid-sentence
- forgetting half the questions you meant to ask
- coming off the call and only then realising what you wish you'd said
- feeling oddly exhausted afterwards, even if it was "only a few minutes"

None of these mean you're incompetent or rude. They mean your brain is working hard in a context that doesn't give it much slack.

Missing cues and "markers" in conversation

Another thing that can make calls stressful is how much they rely on cues and "markers" that many neurodivergent people find hard to read.

On the phone, people often signal things indirectly, like:

- changing their tone to mean "we're wrapping up now"
- saying "right…" or "okay then…" and expecting you to take the hint
- leaving a pause that is supposed to be your moment to speak

On video calls, there are extra non-verbal markers:

- nods and glances that signal agreement or disagreement
- people leaning forward as if to speak
- small facial expressions that others seem to pick up instantly

If your brain doesn't automatically spot or interpret these markers, you can end up:

- talking past the natural end of a point

- staying quiet because you don’t notice the “now it’s your turn” signal
- missing the moment to leave a meeting, then feeling trapped or awkward

This isn’t you being rude or oblivious on purpose. It’s a difference in how your brain processes social information.

A couple of gentle ways to work around this:

- Use simple checking phrases, like: “Would you like me to say more about that, or have we covered what you need?”
  “Is now a good time for me to add something, or should I wait until later?”
- Create your own clear markers for ending, for example: “I think that answers my questions for now.”
  “Shall we wrap up there?”

You don’t have to magically learn every unspoken cue. You’re allowed to bring some of the structure out into the open so your brain isn’t guessing in the dark.

Why text, IM and email often feel safer

Many autistic and ADHD people prefer written communication when they can get it. There are good reasons:

- Processing time.
  You can read, pause, re-read and reply when your brain has caught up, rather than scrambling in real time.
- Clarity.
  You can see the exact words. There’s less guesswork about what was said.
- Memory.
  You have a record of what was agreed, instead of relying on recall.
- Reduced performance pressure.
  No need to manage tone of voice, facial expression or awkward silences.
- Drafting.
  You can write, edit and send, instead of watching words leave your mouth before you’re ready.

This isn’t about being antisocial or afraid of people. It’s about using a channel that fits your brain.

It can help just to name that for yourself:

> “I’m not broken for preferring text. My brain works better with written information. That’s a real thing, not a failing.”

When calls are unavoidable

Sometimes, you can’t avoid real-time conversations:

- GP and hospital calls
- school or nursery ringing about your children
- interviews and meetings
- certain work conversations that have to happen quickly

In those cases, the goal isn’t to make calls feel lovely. The goal is to make them less punishing.

Before the call

If you know it’s coming:

- Ask what it’s about.
  “Could you let me know roughly what the call will cover so I can be prepared?”
  Even a one-line answer helps your brain start organising.
- Write a few prompts.
  Jot down:
  - key points you need to say
  - questions you want to ask
  - details you mustn’t forget (dates, times, names)
- Set up your environment.
  If possible, move somewhere quieter. Have a notebook or notes app ready.

If the call is spontaneous and you’re not ready, it’s okay to let it go to voicemail and call back when you’ve had a moment to steady yourself—especially if it isn’t clearly urgent.

During the call

You don’t have to be slick. You can be honest in simple ways.

Some gentle phrases:

- To buy thinking time:
  - “Let me just think about that for a second.”
  - “I’m going to write that down as you speak, so there might be a pause.”
- If you didn’t catch something:
  - “Sorry, could you repeat that a bit more slowly?”
  - “I caught the first part but missed the last bit—could you say it again?”
- To check you’ve understood:
  - “So just to confirm: you’re saying X, and then I need to do Y by Z date?”

It may feel clumsy to say these things at first, but they’re completely ordinary from the other side.

After the call

Give yourself a tiny buffer if you can:

- write down what was agreed (your future self will thank you)
- note any follow-up actions with deadlines
- take a few minutes of quieter activity to let your brain reset

This is especially important if calls tend to domino into shutdown or burnout for you.

Video calls: the extra layer of sensory and social load

Video calls add a few more ingredients:

- staring at your own face (which can be distracting or distressing)
- feeling obliged to keep eye contact with the camera
- worrying about your background or how “present” you look
- more visual information to process (other people’s faces, screens being shared, chat popping up)

Some ideas that can make them gentler:

- Hide self-view if possible.
  Many platforms let you do this. Seeing your own face constantly can be exhausting.
- Ask if camera-on is really necessary.
  “Is it okay if I keep my camera off today? I find it easier to focus that way.”

- Use the chat box.
  Typing quick clarifications or questions in chat can be easier than interrupting out loud.
- Follow up in writing.
  If your brain fogs during video calls, it's perfectly reasonable to say:
  "Could we have a short summary in an email afterwards so I don't miss anything?"

Not all contexts will say yes to all of these, but you might get more flexibility than you expect if you ask plainly.

Asking for alternatives where it's reasonable

You won't always be able to avoid calls. But there are many contexts where you can gently steer people towards written communication.

At work:

- "For anything that isn't urgent, email works better for me than calls—it helps me keep track and respond properly."
- "If you need to talk something through, could you email me a short outline first? That gives me a chance to think before we speak."

With friends or family:

- "I'm not great on the phone, but I'm much better at texting. If you need me, send a message first and we can work out what's best."
- "Video calls are quite tiring for me. Could we mostly stick to messages, and have a short call when we really need to?"

With services (where they offer options):

- choosing text or email reminders rather than phone where that's available
- asking if follow-up information can be sent in writing even after a call

You're not being dramatic. You're trying to communicate in a way that gives you the best chance of actually taking things in.

Including this in a "how I work" statement

If you've written (or are thinking about writing) a neurodiversity / "how I work" statement,

you can include your communication preferences there.

For example:

> “I can manage phone and video calls when needed, but I process information more accurately in writing. Where possible, I prefer email or written messages for non-urgent communication and for follow-up after meetings or calls.”

And perhaps:

> “If a call is needed, it helps to have a short note beforehand about what it will cover, and a brief written summary afterwards so I don’t miss key details.”

This gives colleagues or tutors a clear, reasonable explanation rather than leaving them to guess why you seem reluctant to pick up the phone.

Being kinder to yourself about missed calls and delayed replies

It’s easy to build a harsh internal narrative around all this:

- “I’m pathetic for being scared of the phone.”
- “Real adults just answer calls.”
- “Everyone else manages this, why can’t I?”

From a neurodivergent perspective, that story leaves out a lot:

- the number of times you do push through
- the background stress you carry
- the years of being judged for social or communication differences
- the way one difficult call can knock out the rest of your day

You’re allowed to treat call-anxiety and call-fatigue as real things you live with, not personal moral failings.

You're also allowed to move in very small steps. For example:

- save one short script near your phone
- decide on one situation where you'll try calling back instead of avoiding forever
- choose one context where you will ask for written communication instead of just enduring calls

You don't have to become a phone person. You don't have to love video calls. You just get to experiment with making them slightly less harsh on your nervous system when they're unavoidable.

A quiet closing thought

Preferring texts, IMs or emails over phone and video calls doesn't make you childish, unprofessional or antisocial. It means your brain has noticed that some channels are gentler and more workable than others.

The world is still organised as if everyone can handle real-time, unpredictable conversations without difficulty. Many of us can't, or can only do so at a cost.

You don't have to justify your preferences to everyone. You don't have to explain your whole history of burnout just to ask for an email. You can simply say, "This way works better for me," and trust that the right people will meet you in the middle.

If one phrase from this article ends up next to your phone, or one idea helps you handle the next unavoidable call with a little less panic, that's enough.

You're not failing at being an adult. You're navigating communication in a body and brain that were built a bit differently. And that is allowed.

Andrew at Quietly Neurodivergent

I'm Andrew, the person behind Quietly Neurodivergent. I'm an autistic adult who spent many years trying to pass as "fine" – holding things together at work, showing up to meetings, hitting deadlines – and then unravelling in private. I know what it feels like to look competent on the outside while running on fumes underneath.

By day I work with student data in higher education; by night (and very early mornings) I'm a part-time PhD student thinking about education, inequality and how people move through systems that were never quite built for them. I've also spent nearly ten years as a town councillor and I volunteer as a Beaver Scout Leader, which means I've had a lot of practice navigating meetings, forms, responsibilities and sensory/social overload at the same time. That mix of lived experience, community work and research shapes how I write here: practical, plain-English pieces that sit somewhere between "this is what it's like" and "here are some things you could try".

I'm not a clinician and I don't offer diagnosis, therapy or miracle fixes. What I can offer are honest accounts of what has and hasn't helped me with study, work and everyday life, alongside small, realistic tools you can adapt for yourself. If you recognise yourself in the phrase "quietly neurodivergent", this site is for you.

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