There are days when your brain already feels crowded before you even open your inbox. You're holding work tasks, home logistics, study deadlines, kids' school things, and a general hum of "don't forget this, don't forget that". Then the calendar reminder pops up: meeting in ten minutes.

If you're autistic, ADHD, or otherwise neurodivergent, meetings can be especially draining. They are noisy, fast-moving, full of people talking over each other, and built around a style of communication that doesn't always fit how our brains process information.

From the outside, meetings are where work happens. From the inside, they can feel like you're being asked to listen, think, decide, socialise, self-monitor and take notes all at once.

This article is about meetings when your brain is already full: why they're so tiring, and some small, realistic ways to make them less harsh. What helps me won't fit everyone; please treat this as a menu of ideas, not a prescription.

Quick Summary

- Meetings can be hard for neurodivergent people because they combine sensory load, fast social processing, information overload and the need to multi-task.
- Agendas in advance, clear purposes and written action points afterwards make it easier to process what's happening and follow through.
- You don't have to turn into someone who loves meetings. Small tweaks – asking a few clarifying questions, taking brief notes, leaving short buffers before and after – can help.
- It's okay to use tools like ear protection, cameras off (when allowed) or chat functions to make meetings more manageable, especially online.
- Where it's safe, explaining that meetings are tiring for you and suggesting small adjustments can improve things for everyone, not just you.

Why meetings are so tiring for neurodivergent brains

Meetings often ask for several kinds of processing at once. For many autistic and ADHD people, each of these takes extra energy.

In most meetings you are expected to:

- follow what is being said in real time
- interpret tone, body language and group dynamics

- decide when to speak and how to phrase things
- take in any slides or documents shown on screen
- keep track of actions and decisions
- manage your own facial expression and behaviour

That’s a lot, especially if you already came into the room with low spoons.

In my own work, meetings, workshops and other high-interaction periods are noticeably tiring, even when they are positive and productive. Having an agenda in advance helps me prepare my thoughts. Having short written notes or action points afterwards means I can check that I’ve understood correctly and don’t have to hold everything in my head.

Without those supports, it’s very easy for me to walk out of a meeting with a vague sense that something important happened, but no clear memory of what I personally need to do next.

Not everyone experiences this the same way. Some people enjoy meetings and thrive on the energy. Others find particular types of meetings harder – large groups, unstructured chats, video calls. Your pattern may be different from mine. That’s okay. The goal is to notice what wears your brain out and what helps it cope.

Before the meeting: small things that make a big difference

A lot of the work of making meetings more bearable happens before you even join them.

Check whether you truly need to be there

This is a good question for almost everyone, not just neurodivergent people. For us, though, the cost of an unnecessary meeting can be especially high in terms of energy and recovery time.

You may not always have control over this, but where you do, it’s worth asking:

- “Do I need to be in this whole meeting?”
- “Could I join for the part that concerns my work?”
- “Would a short written update be enough instead?”

For external meetings, you may have less say over whether you are invited. Even then, it can help to clarify with the organiser what you are expected to contribute and whether you

need to be present for the whole time, or if a written summary or brief appearance would be acceptable."

You might not feel able to ask these questions in every workplace. If that's the case, you can still quietly notice which meetings are actually useful and which leave you drained without much benefit. That awareness can shape your decisions in the future.

Ask for an agenda or purpose

If a meeting invitation doesn't clearly explain what it's for, your brain has to hold several possibilities at once. That uses energy before you've even started.

Where it feels safe, you could reply with something like:

- "Could you share a brief agenda or the main aim of the meeting? It helps me prepare and make sure I can contribute usefully."

This is true. It also gives you a chance to think ahead: what information do I need, what questions might I have, what might they ask me?

Look after your sensory needs

If you know certain meeting rooms are noisy, echoey or bright, you're allowed to plan around that.

Options might include:

- choosing a seat away from doors, windows or noisy equipment
- using subtle ear protection or noise-reducing earbuds if that helps you concentrate and is safe to do
- adjusting the brightness of your laptop screen

Online, you might:

- reduce your own video window so you're not constantly watching yourself
- use headphones to reduce background noise

These are small things, but they can lower the sensory load enough that you have more capacity left for the actual content.

Leave a little buffer if you can

Going from one intense meeting straight into another, or straight into complex work, is hard. Your brain needs a moment to file what just happened.

Where your schedule allows it, even a five or ten minute buffer before and after a meeting can help. You might use that time to:

- skim any documents
- note down questions you have
- after the meeting, write your personal action list while it’s fresh

I know this isn’t always possible, especially in over-scheduled workplaces. But when it is, that tiny bit of breathing space can make a noticeable difference.

During the meeting: staying afloat

Once you’re in the meeting, the focus shifts to staying present enough to follow what’s happening without completely draining yourself.

Take simple notes (for yourself)

You don’t have to produce beautiful meeting minutes. Even very rough notes can help anchor your memory.

You might jot down:

- key decisions
- things that directly affect you
- any actions that sound like they belong to you

If writing by hand is easier, use a notebook. If typing works better, keep a simple document open. The aim is not to capture everything. It’s to have a few anchors you can use later.

Use quiet fidget tools if they help

For some of us, having something small and silent to fidget with can make it easier to stay grounded in a meeting. That might be a smooth stone, a simple spinner, a textured ring, another discreet fidget toy that lives in a pocket or lap, or even a pen or pencil you can roll or hold in your hand as long as it stays genuinely quiet.

I often use a small, hidden, silent fidget device in meetings. It gives my hands something to do, which makes it easier for my brain to focus on what is being said without ramping up my visible stimming.

If you try this, it's worth checking that:

- the fidget is genuinely quiet and not visually distracting to others
- you can still take notes or use your keyboard when you need to

You are not childish for needing something to fidget with. You are giving your nervous system a small outlet so you can stay present.

Notice when you've lost the thread

It's completely normal, especially in long or fast meetings, to suddenly realise you have no idea what the last five minutes were about.

If you feel able, you can gently bring yourself back into the conversation by asking for clarity:

- "Just to check I've understood, is the main decision here X?"
- "Could we summarise the actions before we move on?"

Often, other people will be grateful you asked. Many neurotypical people also drift in and out; they're just used to pretending they don't.

Use scripts if speaking up is hard

Knowing when and how to speak can be one of the toughest parts of meetings. Having a few default phrases can reduce some of the anxiety.

For example:

- "I have a question about how this affects [your area]."
- "From my point of view, the key issue is…"
- "I need a bit more time to think about this; could I come back to you by email?"

That last one can be especially helpful when you're put on the spot. You're not refusing to engage; you're asking for processing time.

Give yourself permission to be quieter

You do not have to talk as much as everyone else to justify being in the room. If you are taking things in, making notes, and speaking when you genuinely have something to add, that is a valid way of participating.

Some meetings are set up in ways that favour the loudest voices. You are not broken for finding that difficult.

In one of my roles, my manager used to be frustrated that I was the quiet one in meetings. Over time they realised that I tend to speak when I have something genuinely relevant or important to add, not just to sound involved. I'm not someone who talks for the sake of it, and once they understood that, my quietness stopped being read as disengagement and started being seen as a different, equally valid way of contributing.

After the meeting: turning noise into actions

A meeting isn't really over until you know what you're meant to do next.

Write your own action list as soon as you can

As soon as you're out of the meeting (or the call has ended), it can help to quickly list:

- what you personally agreed to do
- any deadlines or dates mentioned
- any information you still need

This doesn't have to be pretty. It can be a rough note in a notebook, a few lines in a document, or a task list in whatever system you use.

The important thing is to capture it while your memory is still warm, so you're not relying on a vague sense of "I'm sure there was something…" days later.

Ask for written notes or send a brief recap

If the person running the meeting doesn't routinely send notes, you might gently nudge things in that direction. For example:

- "Would it be possible to share a short list of actions from today? It helps me make sure I haven't missed anything."

Alternatively, you can send a short email yourself:

> “Just to confirm my understanding from the meeting: I’ll do X by [date], you’ll check Y, and we’ll review Z at [time]. Please let me know if I’ve misunderstood anything.”

This both clarifies expectations and shows that you were paying attention.

Build in a reset where possible

After particularly intense meetings, I find it helpful to have a short period of quieter work: something that uses my brain differently, like straightforward admin, data tidying or simple emails.

I don’t always get that luxury, but when I do, it stops the day becoming one long blur of interaction.

You might not be able to control your schedule entirely, especially in certain roles. Even so, choosing a gentler task immediately after a difficult meeting can help your nervous system settle.

When you can’t change the meeting culture (yet)

Some workplaces are open to changing how meetings run. Others are more rigid. You may not be able to get agendas in advance, clear actions, or breaks between meetings any time soon.

In those environments, it can help to focus on what *is* within your control, however small it seems.

That might be:

- taking your own notes, even if no-one else does
- using a small notebook or digital document to track your actions in your own words
- turning your camera off for parts of an online meeting if that’s acceptable and helps
- stepping out briefly if the noise or intensity becomes too much (where this is possible and safe)

You are not failing if you can’t make meetings neurodivergent-friendly all by yourself. You are one person in a system.

Sometimes, even very small changes – like using ear protection, bringing a quiet fidget, taking your own notes, or having a glass of water to hand – can make a noticeable difference to how survivable a meeting feels, even if the bigger culture doesn’t shift.

Talking about your needs (when it feels safe)

If you have a manager or colleague you trust, being open about how meetings affect you can sometimes lead to small but meaningful changes.

You might say something like:

> “I find meetings quite cognitively heavy, especially when there’s a lot of fast discussion. It really helps me if there’s an agenda in advance and a short list of actions afterwards, so I can process properly and make sure I don’t miss anything.”

Or:

> “After back-to-back meetings I struggle to do deep-focus work. Where possible, I try to leave a bit of quieter time after big meetings so I can reset and follow up on actions.”

You don’t have to mention autism, ADHD or neurodivergence if you don’t want to. You can frame it in terms of how you work best. The aim is not to demand special treatment; it is to set conditions that allow you to do your job well.

A quiet closing thought

Meetings are unlikely to disappear any time soon. For many of us, they are simply part of working life. But that doesn’t mean you have to accept every meeting as a mysterious, exhausting blur.

If you find meetings hard, it doesn't mean you are unprofessional, antisocial, or bad at your job. It means you have a brain that processes information, sensory input and social dynamics differently from the assumed norm.

You are allowed to ask for agendas. You are allowed to take notes. You are allowed to need a breather. You are allowed to use small tools that make noisy rooms and fast conversations even slightly more manageable.

If one idea from this article – a question to ask before a meeting, a way of taking notes, a short recap email, a tiny gap in your calendar – makes your next meeting feel 5–10% less overwhelming, that is enough.

Your brain is already doing a lot. You deserve meeting habits that recognise that, rather than pretending you're working with an empty head and infinite spoons.

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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