Email and messages are meant to help us stay connected. For many neurodivergent people, they mostly seem to arrive as a steady stream of demands, decisions and tiny emergencies.

You might know the feeling of staring at an inbox number that makes your stomach drop. Opening it feels risky, so you put it off, and the number quietly climbs. Or you may be the opposite: you cannot bear to see unread messages, so you spend all day firefighting your inbox while the rest of your work waits.

Different brains respond differently. In my house, I am the one who feels physically itchy if my inbox shows more than a handful of unread messages. I cannot relax until I have filed or deleted things. My wife is the opposite: she will quite happily show me an email on her phone while there are well over twenty thousand messages sitting in her inbox. It horrifies me; it does not trouble her at all. Neither of us is wrong. Our brains – and our tolerance for digital clutter – are simply built differently. Neither reaction is wrong. But if your brain is already full, the way email and messages are usually set up can make things much harder than they need to be.

This article is for autistic, ADHD and otherwise neurodivergent people who feel drained, scared or ashamed of their inbox. It will not ask you to become an inbox-zero superhero. Instead, it offers some small, realistic ways to make messages less harsh on your brain.

Summary

- Email and messages can be especially draining for neurodivergent brains because they combine uncertainty, hidden tasks and constant interruption.
- Avoiding your inbox is not a character flaw; it often reflects overload, decision fatigue and past experiences of bad news arriving by email.
- Simple structures like quiet hours, check-in blocks, triage labels and template replies can make messages more manageable.
- You can ask colleagues for clearer subject lines and expectations without sharing your whole neurodivergent story.
- It is okay to start very small: even one daily check-in block or one label can make your inbox feel less chaotic.
- Your worth is *not* measured by the number of unread messages.

Why email and messages feel so heavy

On the surface, an email or message is just a few lines of text. Inside your nervous system, it can be a lot more.

Many messages contain several things at once:

- A request you were not expecting.
- An implied deadline that is not clearly stated.
- A decision you have to make.
- A possible risk that you have done something wrong.
- A social layer: how you will sound when you reply.

For a neurodivergent brain that is already juggling sensory input, internal noise and other tasks, each message can feel like a bundle of unknowns. Until you open it, you do not know whether you will be dealing with a simple yes/no, a complex task, or criticism of something you did three weeks ago.

Some common friction points include:

- Task-switching. Every new notification asks your brain to drop what it is doing, change context and then try to pick up again later.
- Ambiguity. Vague subject lines and phrases like “just a quick one” or “when you have a minute” leave you guessing what is actually being asked.
- Notification overload. Sounds, pop-ups and badges may be small on their own but add up to constant background stress.
- Perfectionism and rejection sensitivity. You may worry about replying “wrong”, missing something, or being thought rude.

If you have had bad news by email in the past – complaints, criticism, significant changes at work – your brain may quietly file “inbox” under “danger”. Avoiding it is then a very understandable survival strategy.

How overload quietly builds up

Inbox overwhelm often develops in slow layers rather than one dramatic moment.

You might recognise a pattern like this:

- You see a message you do not have the energy to answer right now.
- You tell yourself you will deal with it later when you can focus properly.
- More messages arrive. The first one now comes with a side order of guilt.
- Opening your inbox means seeing not just tasks, but your own delay.
- Eventually the number is so big that looking at it feels unbearable.

At that point, even simple emails can feel loaded. Your brain may start telling stories such as “Everyone else can manage this”, “I am completely disorganised”, or “If anyone saw my inbox, they would be horrified”.

None of this means you are bad at your job or at being an adult. It means your current environment and tools do not fit how your brain works.

Building a gentler container for email

You may not be able to change the volume of messages you receive. You might have less flexibility if you are in a customer-facing or crisis-driven role. Even so, there is often some room to shape how and when you interact with your inbox.

Think of this as building a container: a predictable shape that messages can arrive into, instead of splashing over every part of your day.

Set quiet hours and check-in blocks

Many people feel they need to be available every minute. In reality, very few jobs require constant, instant responses by email or chat.

If your role allows, you could experiment with:

- Check-in blocks. Choose one to three specific times in the day when you will open email or chat, for example:
  - A 15–20 minute triage block in the morning.
  - A slightly longer block after lunch for proper replies.
  - A quick scan before you finish work.
- Quiet hours. During focused work, close the inbox and mute non-urgent channels. Let colleagues know when you are generally reachable.

You can adjust this to your reality. A support role might need more frequent, shorter check-ins. A project-based job might manage with two longer blocks.

The aim is not to ignore people. It is to stop email and chat taking little bites out of your attention all day.

Tweak notifications so they stop shouting at you

If your phone or computer shouts at you every time a message arrives, your nervous

system never really rests.

Where you can, you might try:

- Turning off pop-up banners and sounds for email.
- Setting Teams, Slack or similar apps to “mentions only” instead of every message.
- Removing email from your phone altogether, or at least disabling push notifications.

You may not be able to change everything. You can still start with what you control. Even muting one noisy channel can lower the background stress level.

A simple triage system for a tired brain

If you are used to opening your inbox and seeing one long undifferentiated list, it can be hard to know where to start. A light-touch triage system gives each message somewhere to live.

You do not need a complex productivity setup. Something like three or four buckets can be enough:

- Today – things you intend to respond to or act on today.
- This week – things that can wait a few days.
- Waiting for someone else – things you are paused on.
- Later / on hold – things you may want to keep but do not need to think about now.

You can create these as folders, labels or categories, depending on what your email system offers.

A quick decision script for each message

When you open a message, you can run through a simple set of questions:

1. Can I deal with this in under two minutes?
   - If yes, reply or take the action now if you have the energy, then file it.
2. If not a quick task, when roughly does it belong?
   - Today / This week / Later.
3. Does it depend on someone else first?
   - If you are waiting for a reply or action from another person, move it to the “Waiting” bucket and make a small note in your task system.

This is not about making perfect decisions. It is about reducing the number of times you have to re-read the same email without doing anything with it.

Template replies that save spoons

Writing from scratch every time takes energy, especially if you worry about tone. Having a few ready-made phrases can lower the barrier to responding.

One thing that has helped me is being very deliberate about putting an actual day or time in these replies, even if I later have to come back and renegotiate it. People are usually much more relaxed if they know roughly when they will hear from you again, and I find it easier to plan when I have committed to something concrete instead of “soon” or “when I can.”

You could keep these in a notes app, as email snippets, or wherever is easy to paste from.

“I have seen this and will come back to you”

> Thanks for this. I have seen your message and will need a bit of time to look at it properly. I will come back to you by [day/time].

Clarifying urgency

> To help me plan, could you let me know when you actually need this by? A rough latest date makes it much easier for me to prioritise.

Pushing back on impossible timelines

> I can do X by [date] or Y by [earlier date], but not both in that timeframe. Which is more important?

Keeping everything in one place

> To reduce the risk of me missing things, email is the best place to send me requests like this. If something is urgent-urgent, a quick message saying “Just emailed you about X” is helpful.

You can adjust the tone to fit your workplace. The important part is that you do not have to reinvent the wheel every time.

Asking for clearer subject lines and expectations

You do not have to mention autism, ADHD or any other label to ask for clarity. You can frame it as wanting to work reliably and avoid things slipping through.

Explaining what helps you

You might say something like:

> It really helps me keep track of things if the subject line includes what it is about and any deadline. For example: “Budget draft – feedback by Thursday”. Would you mind doing that when you send things my way?

Or:

> When emails say “asap” or “when you have a minute”, I find it hard to judge priority. If you can give me a rough latest date, it makes it much easier for me to plan.

Or, if people tend to stack several requests in one message:

> If there are separate tasks, it is easier for me if they are either numbered in the email or, where possible, in separate messages. Otherwise I am quite likely to miss one.

You can choose how formal or informal to be. You can also pick one change to ask for rather than trying to fix everything at once.

If you want to mention being neurodivergent

You may decide you feel comfortable sharing a little more context with some people. That might sound like:

> My brain does better with clear subject lines and deadlines. If you can be a bit more specific with those, it really reduces the chance that I miss something.

You do not owe anyone your whole history. You get to decide who needs this information and how much detail is appropriate.

When the inbox is already a disaster

If you currently have hundreds or thousands of unread emails, it may not feel realistic to gently triage your way through all of them. That backlog might not be about neglect at all. It could be the result of time off for illness, a long-overdue holiday, or a period when everything at work went wrong at once and you were dealing with a crisis that was not of your making. The thought of facing all of those messages at once might make you want to shut the laptop and walk away.

At that point, it can be kinder to stop trying to rescue everything and draw a line instead.

One way to do this is:

- Create a new folder called something like “Archive – before [month year]”.
- Move everything older than a certain date into that folder in one go.
- Trust that if anything from that pile is truly critical, the person will chase you.

Then, start using your simple triage system on new messages and anything recent.

This is sometimes called email bankruptcy. It can feel drastic, especially if you grew up being told to keep on top of everything at all times. For many people, though, it is less stressful than quietly living with a mountain you know you will never clear.

You can also start very small. For example:

- Decide on one daily check-in time that you try to keep.
- Create just one folder called “Today” and move a handful of important emails into it.
- Write one template reply that you know you will use.

If a change makes things even 5–10% easier, that still counts.

If you are the neurodivergent person reading this

You might be reading this with a knot in your stomach, thinking about the messages you have not answered, or the ones you replied to at 11 pm because it was the only time you had the capacity.

You are not lazy, weak or unprofessional for finding email hard. The way most workplaces use messages is not designed with autistic, ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent brains in mind.

You are allowed to:

- Set reasonable expectations with colleagues about when you will reply.
- Turn off some notifications, even if other people leave everything on.
- Use folders, labels and templates that look strange to someone else but make sense to you.

You do not have to fix your whole inbox this week. Choosing one small change that feels doable is enough for now.

Living with some uncertainty

It is unlikely that any system will make email feel completely neutral or pleasant. There may still be days when you dread opening your inbox, or when a single message throws your plans off course.

What you can do is make those days less frequent and less overwhelming. A few boundaries, a simple triage structure and some ready-made phrases can give your brain more of a chance to rest.

Your value is not the same thing as your response time. It is possible to care about doing your job well and also to protect your limited energy.

If this article leaves you with anything, let it be this: the way your brain reacts to email is

not a personal failure. It is information you can use to design something a little kinder for yourself.


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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