



NEURODIVERGENCE COACHING ACADEMY

State | Emotion Wheel™

A neurodivergent-informed framework for understanding your nervous system before naming your feelings.

Most emotional literacy tools start with feelings: happy, sad, angry, scared. That works well for many people.

But for many neurodivergent people — and for anyone in a moment of high stress — emotions aren't easily accessible. The experience arrives first as something physical. A heaviness. A buzzing. A blankness. Something is off, but it doesn't have a name yet.

The State | Emotion Wheel™ starts one layer earlier — with the *nervous system state* that is shaping your emotional experience. Once you know what state your system is in, the emotion becomes easier to understand. And once it's understood, it becomes easier to work with.

Emotion

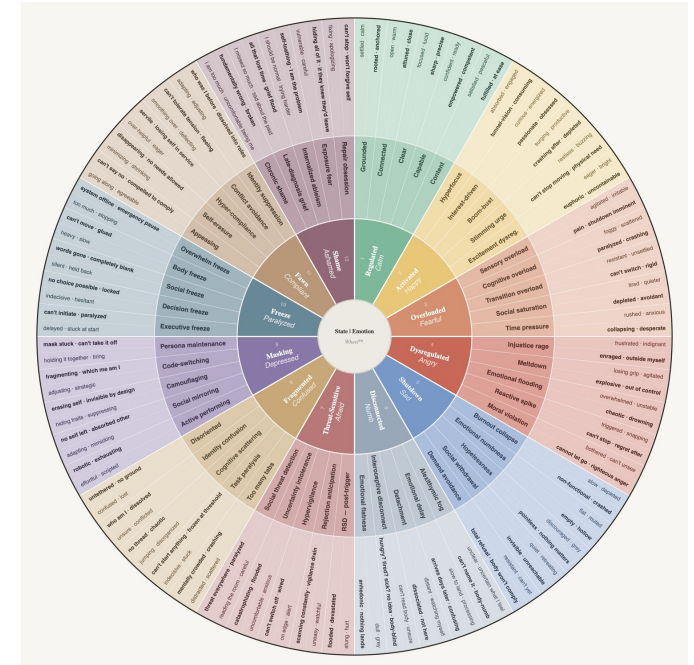
What am I feeling?

A specific feeling — shame, joy, fear, anger. Usually identifiable, relatively short-term, often directed toward something. *This is what traditional emotion wheels map.*

State

What condition is my system in?

A nervous system condition that shapes how you process everything — sensory input, emotional access, executive function, attention, energy, social capacity. *This is what the State | Emotion Wheel™ maps.*



State | Emotion Wheel™ © Alexandra Robuste
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Why this matters

When emotional experiences are disconnected from nervous system context, ND people are frequently pathologized for reactions that are actually regulatory responses. A meltdown becomes "anger." A shutdown becomes "laziness." Hypervigilance becomes "oversensitivity." Masking fatigue becomes "depression." The state disappears — and with it, any chance of accurate support.

Why 10 difficult states and only 2 positive ones?

This is intentional. It reflects the reality of many neurodivergent people's experience. We needed more language for the hard things — not because the good things don't matter, but because they usually already have words. The two positive states (Regulated and Activated) anchor the wheel. But the wheel doesn't pretend that everything is balanced, because for many people it isn't.

THREE EDITIONS AVAILABLE

- **Professional Edition** — precise psychological language
- **Plain Language Edition** — simple, reachable wording for high-load moments, for children and teens, and for anyone clinical language shuts out
- **Blank Edition** **NEW** — an empty outer ring you fill with your own words for how each state feels in your body

Download all three editions

<https://www.alexandrarobuste.com/post/state-emotion-wheel>

What Each State Means

Plain-language descriptions. States layer — someone can be Overloaded and Masking simultaneously. You don't have to pick just one.

● Regulated

Calm · Present · Okay

In the window of tolerance. Able to think, feel, and respond. Not perfect — but functional. This is the baseline the wheel works toward. Your Regulated may look different: it might include stimming, moving, talking fast. If you can think and be present — that's your Regulated.

grounded · connected · clear · capable · content · settled · anchored · open · warm · lucid

● Activated

Wired · Happy-agitated · Buzzing

The system is revved up. Restlessness, urgency, energy without a clear outlet. Can be exciting or overwhelming depending on intensity. Hyperfocus onset. Stimming urge. Boom-bust patterns. Not always negative — it can be enthusiasm that has nowhere to land yet.

can't stop · euphoric · irritable · uncontrollable · surging · eager · agitated · restless · bright · buzzing

● Overloaded

Fearful · It's too much

Too much input at once — sensory, emotional, or cognitive. Capacity exceeded. Not a choice. Overloaded often sneaks up: the trigger feels disproportionate because it is the last straw, not the whole story. Transition overload, social saturation, time pressure, and decision overload all belong here.

panicking · brain is full · can't switch · rushing · collapsing · desperate · anxious · depleted · rigid · crashed

● Dysregulated

Angry · I'm losing it

Emotional flooding. Reactive responses. Things feel wrong and out of control. Meltdown territory. The system can no longer contain what it's holding. Often misread as aggression or a character problem — it is the nervous system in a storm. The response is bigger than the trigger because of accumulated load, not bad intent.

enraged · explosive · outside myself · snapping · cannot let go · righteous anger · drowning · chaotic · fraying · triggered

● Shutdown

Sad · I've switched off

The system has gone quiet to protect itself. Burnout collapse. Emotional numbness. Hopelessness. Social withdrawal. Not laziness — a form of system-level self-protection. Often misidentified as depression. The system is not broken; it has done what it evolved to do when load exceeds capacity.

crashed · numb · no point · empty · hollow · invisible · slow · depleted · flat · nothing matters

● Disconnected

Numb · Not feeling anything

Dissociation. Going through the motions without being fully present. Hard to access emotions or thoughts. Can't read body signals — alexithymic fog. Disconnection is protective: the system has learned to stay away from its own signals. This is information about how much protection has been needed.

floating · body-blind · not here · dissociated · dull · watching myself · can't name what I feel · distant · unreal · guessing

● Threat-Sensitive

Afraid · On high alert

Scanning for danger. Hard to relax. RSD post-trigger. Hypervigilance. Uncertainty intolerance. Everything feels like a potential threat — even when it isn't. Often invisible from the outside: the person may appear calm while internally scanning continuously. The exhaustion this produces is real and significant.

scanning constantly · watchful · flooded · on edge · wired · can't switch off · catastrophizing · reading the room · uneasy · stung

● Fragmented

Confused · My brain is everywhere

Hard to focus, hard to finish, hard to hold a thread. Attention scattered. Tasks impossible to start or sequence. Identity confusion. Cognitive scattering. Can appear in anyone under high load or poor sleep — not only a trait. Often looks like ADHD at its worst but can emerge in any nervous system that is genuinely overextended.

lost · jumping around · no thread · disorganized · split · confused · crashing · can't start anything · scattered · indecisive

● Masking

Performing · I'm pretending

Functioning on the outside while struggling on the inside. Performing okay. Exhausting. Often invisible to others — and sometimes to oneself. Masking is rarely a conscious choice: it is a deeply learned adaptation. The exhaustion it produces is real and cumulative — often not felt until the mask can finally come off.

holding it together · tiring · which me am I · adjusting · erasing myself · invisible by design · robotic · scripted · effortful · absorbed other

● Freeze

Paralyzed · I'm stuck

Nothing is moving. Paralysis. Not laziness — the system has entered a protective stillness. Body freeze. Decision freeze. Executive freeze. Pushing harder into Freeze makes it worse. The way through is tiny, safe steps — not force. Freeze is the nervous system's last-resort protection when the load is perceived as unsurvivable through action.

glued · can't · heavy · slow · words gone · locked · completely stuck · delayed · no choice possible · halting

● Fawn

Compliant · I just go along

Appeasement as a survival strategy. Over-helping. Self-erasure. Can't say no. Compelled to comply. Losing self in service of others' comfort. One of the least-discussed trauma responses — developed to stay safe in relationships where authentic expression felt dangerous. It works. And it costs enormously.

can't say no · compelled to comply · going along · servile · shrinking · all off · smoothing over · minimizing · disappearing · any price for calm

● Shame

Defective · I am the problem

The feeling that something is fundamentally wrong with you — not just what you did, but who you are. Chronic shame. Late-diagnosis grief. Internalized ableism. Often the state underneath other states: it can appear as anger (defensive shame), withdrawal (collapse shame), or over-functioning (compensatory shame). Naming shame reduces its power — but only in safety.

I am wrong · hiding all of it · can't forgive self · should be normal · fundamentally wrong · late-diagnosis grief · internalized ableism · wanting to disappear

Same Wheel, Three Ways In

The twelve states don't change. The language does. Pick the edition that matches the capacity in the room — including your own.

Professional Edition

Precise psychological language

Interoceptive disconnect. Alexithymic fog. Demand avoidance. RSD post-trigger. The exact term, where the exact term matters.

Use it in supervision, in training, in case notes, in reflective work after the fact — anywhere a professional team needs one shared vocabulary that means the same thing to everyone.

Precision is a feature when the system is online. It becomes a barrier when it isn't.



Plain Language Edition

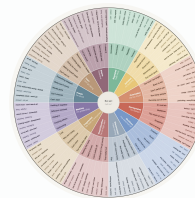
Simple wording, same twelve states

It survives a wild state. Mid-meltdown, mid-shutdown, two hours into sensory overload — complex language is the first thing to go. Reading "interoceptive disconnect" needs the part of your brain that just went offline. "Can't read my body" doesn't. The edition you can still read at your worst moment is the one that actually helps.

It works with children and teens. Young people connect with the simpler wording immediately, and they can point instead of speaking. No translation step. No feeling of being assessed.

It doesn't shut anyone out. Clinical vocabulary carries a message about who a tool is for. People who find that language alienating — and people reading in a second language — meet the same twelve states without the gate.

Not a simplified version. A reachable one.



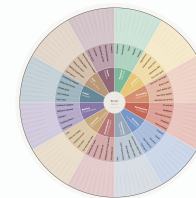
Blank Edition NEW

Your words in the outer ring

Twelve states, twelve situations, and an empty outer ring. You write what each one actually feels like in your body — in your language, not anyone else's.

This is where the wheel stops describing people in general and starts describing you. When "brain is full" becomes "like the fridge hum got into my skull," you've made the state recognizable to yourself. Next time it happens, you catch it earlier.

The naming is not the preparation for the work. The naming is the work.



FILLING IN THE BLANK WHEEL — FIVE THINGS THAT MAKE IT WORK

- 1 Do it regulated, not mid-state.** Writing from inside Overloaded produces one entry and a headache. Sit somewhere calm and remember instead. You know these states well enough to describe them from a distance.
- 2 Three or four words. Body first.** What does it feel like, where, at what speed. "Jaw locked, everything too fast" tells you more than "anxious" ever will.
- 3 Leave what you don't recognize empty.** A blank segment is information too — either you don't go there, or you don't have words for it yet. Both are worth knowing.
- 4 Use your words, not correct ones.** Static. Underwater. Gremlin hour. The flat gray. If it names the thing for you, it's right. Nobody is marking this.
- 5 Come back in three months.** The entries shift. That shift is data about what your life is currently doing to your system — and it's usually the most useful thing on the page.

Practical

Print at A3 if you can — the outer ring is small at A4. Laminate it and use a dry-erase marker if you want to rework it. Or fill it in once, photograph it, and keep it on your phone where you'll actually see it.

WHERE THE BLANK WHEEL EARNS ITS KEEP

On your own

You learn your early signals instead of the textbook ones. Most people can name their meltdown. Far fewer can name the twenty minutes before it.

In coaching

Send it home between sessions. A filled wheel tells you more in thirty seconds than an hour of careful questions.

In couples and families

Two filled wheels side by side end a surprising number of arguments. You find out what the other person's "I'm fine" is actually made of.

In teams

Each person keeps their own. Never collected, never compared, never named. The value is private and it stays private.

With alexithymia

Starting from the body, in your own words, sidesteps the vocabulary problem entirely. You don't have to find the feeling. You describe what's happening.

One rule

Never collect filled-in wheels. Somebody's honest outer ring is personal material — closer to a journal than a form. In any group, school, or workplace setting, it stays with the person who wrote it. Always.

For Yourself and in Sessions

The most important thing about using the wheel: don't make it a big deal. The more clinical or structured the introduction, the more distance you create. Keep it light. Keep it curious. Keep it human.

FOR YOURSELF — DAILY PRACTICE

Start with one question

Look at the wheel and ask: *'Where am I on this right now?'* You don't have to be precise. You don't have to be sure. Pointing is enough. You don't have to say it out loud — naming it silently to yourself is already doing something.

Use it before, not after

Check in before a difficult conversation, a demanding task, or a challenging event. If you're in Freeze or Overloaded, that's information — not failure. It tells you what you need before you begin, not what went wrong after.

Use it to communicate when words are hard

Mid-meltdown, shutdown, or overwhelm — speaking is often the hardest thing. Point to the wheel. Send a photo with a circle around the state. Hold it up. You don't have to explain. The state speaks for itself and that is enough. Keep the Plain Language Edition for these moments: it's the one that stays readable when everything else has narrowed.

Write your own outer ring

Once you know the wheel, fill in the Blank Edition. Your version of Overloaded has a texture the printed words can only approximate. Writing it down is what turns recognition from hindsight into early warning.

Track patterns, not just moments

Certain contexts, times, or people consistently produce the same states. Over time, patterns become visible. That's not a character flaw — it's data. And data can be used to design your life differently.

Your Regulated looks like yours

Regulated doesn't mean calm and still. Rocking, moving, stimming, hyperfocusing, talking fast — if you can think, respond, and be present, that is your version of Regulated. Trust it. Don't measure it against someone else's version.

IN SESSIONS — THREE WAYS TO INTRODUCE IT

1 Just show it

Put the wheel in front of the person without explaining it first. Let them look. Then ask: *'Does anything on here feel familiar right now?'* That's the whole introduction. No preamble needed.

2 Name your own state first

Before asking someone else to use the wheel, use it yourself. *'I'm noticing I'm a bit Fragmented today — a lot going on.'* This normalizes the language and removes the feeling of being assessed. The person sees that the wheel applies to everyone, including you.

3 Make it optional — always

Never require someone to use the wheel. *'This is something some people find useful — want to have a look?'* Autonomy matters. Especially for ND people who have often had their experience questioned or dismissed. The moment the wheel becomes required, it stops being a tool and becomes surveillance.

LANGUAGE THAT WORKS

- 'Where are you on the wheel right now?'
- 'Does any of this feel familiar today?'
- 'You don't have to pick just one — sometimes a few fit at once.'
- 'There's no wrong answer here.'
- 'You can just point if words feel hard right now.'
- 'Nothing fits right now is also a valid answer.'

LANGUAGE TO AVOID

- × 'What are you feeling?' — too broad, too demanding when dysregulated
- × 'You seem like you might be...' — leading, can feel presumptuous
- × 'Which one is most accurate?' — creates pressure for precision
- × 'You should try to get to Regulated' — states aren't choices, they're information

Using the Wheel Across Different Settings

The wheel adapts to any context where human beings show up. Here's how it works in the most common ones.

Coaching Sessions

The wheel works well at the start of a session as a check-in — before agenda, before goals, before anything else. *'Before we dive in — where are you on the wheel today?'* takes 60 seconds and often changes everything about how the session runs.

It also works mid-session when you notice a shift. *'Something just changed — can you find that on the wheel?'* gives the person a way to name what just happened without having to explain it in full sentences from inside the state.

Tip: Return to the wheel at the end of the session. 'Where are you now compared to where you started?' tracks change and shows the person that states are not permanent.

Leadership & HR

Use the wheel to check in with a team member before a difficult conversation. Knowing someone is Overloaded or Frozen before you launch into feedback changes how you deliver it — and whether it lands.

In team settings, make it optional and anonymous by default. The team that always uses anonymous check-ins is not less trusting — it is better designed. Never use someone's named state against them, in the moment or later.

Leader model first: 'I'm Fragmented today — lots going on. I'll need us to keep the agenda tight.' This models that states are information, not weakness. Do this before asking anyone else to name theirs.

Education & Classrooms

Use the Plain Language Edition here — always. Younger people and anyone that clinical language alienates connect with the simpler wording immediately, with no translation step in between. A check-in at the start of a lesson takes 2 minutes and gives you — and the student — genuinely useful information.

Never force a public share. Always make it private or optional. *'Which of these feels a bit like you today?'* works better than 'Identify your current state.' Keep it visual, keep it light, let them point.

With younger people: Let them point or draw a circle on a printed copy without speaking. Pointing is a complete communication. Older students can fill in the Blank Edition with their own words — for themselves, never handed in.

Therapy & Clinical Support

The wheel complements — it does not replace — clinical tools. It can serve as a between-session check-in, a way to open a session, or a homework tool for clients who find journaling or verbal reflection difficult.

Particularly useful for clients with alexithymia: starting with the state, rather than the emotion, often unlocks something that words alone couldn't reach. The state is the pre-conscious layer — accessible even when feelings aren't. The Blank Edition goes one step further: describing the body in their own words when no feeling word is available.

When someone is ashamed of their state: Don't push. 'You don't have to tell me — you can just notice it for yourself.' Offer to name a region rather than a specific state. Written naming often feels safer than spoken.

Relationships & Home

Keep it somewhere visible — on the fridge, as a phone wallpaper, on the desk. Use it when you notice 'something is off' but can't say what. Point to the state. That's enough. You don't have to do anything with it in that moment. Naming it is already doing something.

In partnerships: the wheel gives both people language for what's happening without requiring explanation from inside a difficult state. *'I'm at Overloaded right now'* is more useful than trying to find words for something that doesn't have them yet.

Develop the language together — in a calm moment, not in the middle of an activated state. Fill in a Blank Edition each and swap. Agreed shorthand ('I'm at three on the wheel') travels better than full explanations when capacity is low.

Creating Safety — Anonymous Formats

The wheel only works when people feel safe enough to use it honestly. In group settings, design for safety first.

- **Sticky notes, no names:** Write the state, place it on a shared board. Facilitator reads the pattern, not the individual.
- **Number codes:** Each state gets a number 1–12. People share only a number. No individual identified.
- **Anonymous polls:** Mentimeter, Slido, Google Form. Results as group pattern only.
- **Just point:** Place the wheel between you. Point without speaking. No words required.
- **Private journaling:** The wheel as a personal tool — no expectation of reporting back. The Blank Edition belongs here.

WHEN NOT TO USE THE WHEEL AS A GROUP

Trust is low

If psychological safety with each other or leadership is absent, any check-in will produce performance, not honesty. Build the container before the tool.

Acute distress

A person in crisis needs direct support, not a framework. Put the wheel down and be present. Tools get set aside for humans.

Culture punishes vulnerability

If showing difficulty has historically led to consequences, the wheel will not work until that changes. The wheel reflects the container it sits in.

It's mandatory

The moment the wheel becomes required, it stops being a tool and becomes surveillance. Always optional. Always.

What to Do With the State

Naming is the first step. Not the last. Here's what comes after — and honest answers to the questions people actually ask.

AFTER SOMEONE NAMES THEIR STATE — FIVE MOVES

1 Receive it without rushing to fix it

When someone names their state, your first job is to hear it. *'Thank you for telling me. That makes sense.'* Not: 'Let's fix that.' Not yet. Witness first. The experience of being seen accurately, without judgment, is itself an intervention.

2 Ask what they need — if anything

'What would help right now?' Not 'what should we do?' The person knows their system better than anyone. Sometimes the answer is: nothing. Sometimes it's: five minutes. Sometimes it's: help me think. Wait for their answer.

3 Adjust your approach

Freeze → remove pressure, one tiny step	Overloaded → reduce all input, simplify
Masking → reduce performance demands	Shutdown → warmth before tasks, no urgency
Activated → channel the energy, don't suppress	Shame → unconditional presence, no advice yet
Disconnected → gentle grounding, body first	Threat-Sensitive → safety cues, slow pace

4 Return to the wheel later

After the session, conversation, or day: *'Where are you on the wheel now compared to earlier?'* This tracks change, builds self-awareness, and demonstrates that states are not permanent — which is the thing people most need to know when they are in a hard one.

5 Track patterns over time

For people you support regularly, patterns emerge. Certain contexts, times, or demands consistently produce the same states. That is information for system change — not a character assessment. What does the pattern reveal about what needs to be different?

COMMON QUESTIONS — HONEST ANSWERS

'What if someone picks a state I don't know how to respond to?'

You don't need to know how to fix the state. Your job is to receive it. *'Thank you for telling me'* is a complete response. You can follow with *'What do you need right now?'* — but even that isn't required. Witness first. Fix later, if at all.

'What if someone picks multiple states?'

Completely normal. States layer. Someone can be Overloaded and Masking at the same time — Fragmented and Activated. Don't push for a single answer. *'Which feels most present right now?'* is useful only if they want to narrow it down.

'What if nothing on the wheel fits?'

'Nothing fits right now' is also information. Sometimes the state is too mild to show up clearly. Sometimes someone is too dysregulated to access even this level of self-awareness. Offer the wheel again another time. Don't push. If the wording is the problem rather than the state, hand them the Blank Edition and let them write their own.

'Which edition should I hand someone?'

When in doubt, Plain Language. It costs a fluent reader nothing and it opens the door for everyone else. Save the Professional Edition for calm, reflective, or professional contexts. Offer the Blank Edition to anyone who wants the wheel to be about them specifically.

'What if using the wheel makes someone more distressed?'

Name it without pressure to explore further. *'It sounds like even looking at this is a lot right now — we don't have to.'* Then co-regulate: slow down, breathe, be present. The wheel is a tool. Tools can be put down.

'Can I use this with children?'

Yes — with the Plain Language Edition. Keep it visual. Let them point rather than speak. Make it playful rather than serious. *'Which of these feels a bit like you today?'* works better than 'identify your current state.'

'What if I'm not qualified to use this?'

You don't need a qualification to listen and name. The wheel is a communication tool — not a clinical intervention. Teachers, parents, managers, friends: anyone who supports another person can use it. If something emerges beyond your scope, refer on. But naming a state is not clinical work. It's human work.

THREE QUESTIONS THAT WORK IN ALMOST EVERY SITUATION

1. 'Where are you on the wheel right now?'
2. 'What do you need — if anything?'
3. 'What would help you feel even slightly more Regulated?'

"The goal is not to always be Regulated. The goal is to know where you are — and have more choices about what happens next."

Alexandra Robuste · State | Emotion Wheel™ Facilitator Guide

Book a free discovery call

15 minutes on how the wheel fits into coaching, leadership, and neurodivergent-informed practice.

calendly.com/hello-neurodivergencecoachingacademy/discovery-call · Download all three editions: <https://www.alexandarobuste.com/post/state-emotion-wheel>

[Book Your Discovery Call →](#)

Fill In Your Own Words

One outer ring, twelve states, your language. Do it from a calm chair — three or four words per segment, body first. Leave empty what you don't recognize.

