

Workplace Gaslighting & Neurodivergent Professionals

What it is, why it happens, and what helps — for ND employees, managers, and the people who support them.

What Workplace Gaslighting Actually Is

A **repeated pattern** where a workplace, manager, or system causes an employee to question their own perception, memory, judgment, or reality. It is rarely dramatic. It is rarely intentional. And it is one of the fastest ways to destabilize a neurodivergent employee — because the environment was built around communication norms and energy assumptions that were never designed for the way ND brains actually process information.

It is NOT:

Disagreement. Conflict. Constructive feedback. A coworker remembering things differently. A single misunderstanding.

It becomes gaslighting when the message accumulates over time into: *'Your understanding of reality cannot be trusted.'*

Why It Lands Hard for ND Brains

Pattern recognition. ND brains detect contradictions, broken processes, and shifting expectations that neurotypical brains often miss. When the workplace denies the contradiction exists, the ND employee's nervous system runs out of fuel trying to resolve the unresolvable.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD). Neurodivergent people often experience rejection — even subtle or unintended — with significantly greater intensity. A casual 'let's move on' can register as a full social rupture.

Cognitive load + executive function. Ambiguity, shifting priorities, over- or under-documentation, and tone policing drain the exact resources ND brains need most to perform well.

Less than 10%

of employees report feeling psychologically safe at work — the baseline condition that makes hard conversations possible at all

Signs It's Happening

- Replaying conversations trying to figure out what you missed
- Over-documenting because verbal communication no longer feels trustworthy

- Intense anxiety before meetings
- Feedback that changes depending on who is talking
- Being told your tone is the problem more often than your actual work
- Apologizing constantly; chronically feeling 'too much'
- Exhaustion that sleep does not fix

What Actually Helps

Five moves for employees. Five moves for managers. Both work for everyone.

If You Are the ND Employee

- 1. Ask for everything in writing.**
Written records become the ground truth you can return to when memory is being challenged.
- 2. Use AI as a translator, not a mask.**
ChatGPT, Claude, or similar tools can reformat communication into the channel your brain processes best.
- 3. Find one trusted person who validates your read on reality.**
Inside the workplace if possible. A coach or external advisor if not.
- 4. Conserve cognitive bandwidth.**
Silence, rest, and physical movement are not luxuries — they are how your brain recovers.
- 5. Document patterns, not incidents.**
Single events get dismissed. Documented patterns become harder to wave away.

If You Are the Manager or Leader

- 1. Put it in writing — and structure it.**
Short paragraphs, bullets, bold section headers. The single highest-leverage change you can make.
- 2. Lock priority windows.**
Constantly shifting priorities are devastating. Make a call, then protect the window.
- 3. Make asking questions safe.**
Clarifying questions, especially 'why,' are not pushback. They are how ND brains process.
- 4. Give outcome-based feedback, never shame.**
Talk about the project, not the person. Never deliver hard feedback in a team meeting.
- 5. Ask: 'What's in your way today?'**
Two simple questions remove enormous cognitive and physical load: 'What's in your way?' and 'How can I make you more effective?'

The Universal Workplace Design Principle

What helps a small group helps everyone. The same structure that supports a neurodivergent employee also helps the team member taking care of an aging parent, the deaf colleague, the new hire, and the manager three meetings deep into their day.

Inclusive design is not a special accommodation. It is better design.

Want a community that gets this?

ND Hive runs 58+ hours/week of live coached body doubling sessions for neurodivergent adults — ADHD, AuDHD, autistic, Deaf, and everywhere in between. Free 7-day trial. No card required.

ndhive.com/pricing

Adapted from the conversation between Danielle Ralston (Founder & CEO, ND Hive) and Jamie D'Amico (Fortify Leadership Coaching & Training) on workplace gaslighting and neurodivergent professionals. For the full Authority Matrix series — including versions for managers, therapists, and Deaf ADHD professionals — visit ndhive.com.