

Neurodivergent Safety Tools

While these are primarily designed to help those who are neurodivergent, they can be used by anyone to make sure everyone is able to enjoy the game being played.

There are several categories in this set of tools; Before Playing, Neurodivergent Safety Checklist, Zones, Gestures, and Signals. Before Playing covers several things to consider when planning the game and for a session zero. The Neurodivergent Safety Checklist Zones are a way of informing everyone the acceptable level of certain activities during play. Gestures are something a player can do to indicate a need they have in the moment while Signals are done anonymously and typically represent a need they might be more uncomfortable asking for.

While these tools are meant to work in many situations, each table is unique. If there are parts of these tools that don't work for your table, do not feel obligated to include them and only use what is helpful for you and your players.

Before playing

Setting Expectations

Setting the expectations of your players is important normally, but is doubly so when running a game for neurodivergent individuals. The tone of the game, themes of the story, what the GM expects from the players (and vice versa), etc. are all things you want to go over before the first session. Everyone should be on the same page when playing to reduce possible issues that might come up. As such, it might be a good idea to keep a list of these in a document that can be updated periodically during long games. This can include a pitch for the story (or a recap of the story at the point of revising), the agreed upon expectations, a list of house rules that are being used, and whatever else you feel is important to keep present for everyone.

Normalize Neurodivergence

It is important that the players feel comfortable with their neurodivergence at the table. The GM and the other players need to help normalize it. This can be done a number of ways and the effect can come from small, simple gestures.

Here are a number of examples that might work for your table:

- Never act like someone's needs are weird or strange.
- Do not take someone's neurodivergence personally. They may seem blunt, distracted, loud, etc, but that has nothing to do with you personally.
- If you see an incompatibility between two people's neurodivergences, please try to help as best you can to mitigate the situation without calling too much attention to it and making one or both parties feel embarrassed.
- Check in regularly with others to make sure they are enjoying the game and that they don't have any needs going unmet. This is for both the players and the GM. (Remember, the GM is a player too.)
- If somebody seems to be overwhelmed and trying to push through it, maybe ask for a break yourself and, if possible, check in with them before the game begins again.
- As a GM, regular check-ins with players are extremely important. It's also great to do check-ins in smaller groups or one-on-one instead of with the entire table at once.

Other Safety Tools to Consider

Here are some other great safety tools you might want to incorporate in your game:

- Session Zero
- Consent Checklist
- X Cards
- Lines and Veils
- Open Door
- Stars and Wishes

Neurodivergent Safety Checklist

This is a checklist to have the players fill out in session zero or sometime before the first session. Similar to the consent checklist, this list is to make sure table conduct that might cause an issue is avoided. Each item has three possible selections: O (okay with occurring), C (okay with on a case by case basis with explicit consent), and N (not okay at

all).

O C N

- ☐ ☐ ☐ Touching
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Yelling or sudden loud noises
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Sustained loud noises
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Quick sudden movements
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Smells, such as perfume or cologne
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Stepping in to help without being asked
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Speaking for someone else (such as finishing sentences)
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Cursing/strong language
- ☐ ☐ ☐ Getting up from the table to move around/pace while playing
- ☐ ☐ ☐ _____
- ☐ ☐ ☐ _____
- ☐ ☐ ☐ _____
- ☐ ☐ ☐ _____
- ☐ ☐ ☐ _____

Zones

Zones are designed to help the players make sure that they are on the same page when it comes to tone and energy. Take strips of paper and divide them into a number of sections each or distinct pieces (index cards, sticky notes, etc.) to represent each section (or Zone) and place them somewhere on the table. This represents the Zones you want to monitor at the table. Each track represents a scale of where the mood of the table currently is. Each player takes a die, coin, or other token and places it on the current level they are okay with. The players then try to act in accordance with whatever is the lowest Zone that currently has a token in it. The players can change the position of their token whenever they feel comfortable doing so. For example:

The "Tone" track has three zones; Serious, Mixed, and Lighthearted. Some of the players find it difficult to interact when there are too many side jokes and quips being bandied about. At the start of the session 2 of the players place their tokens on serious, 3 on Mixed, and 1 on Lighthearted. In this case, Serious is considered the lowest Zone and the session starts with the players refraining from making

jokes. On a break the two players in the Serious Zone are feeling more comfortable and move their tokens to Mixed. Since there is no one in the Serious zone, the players can start to make jokes occasionally but try not to let it get out of hand.

Depending on the table you will want to change what these represent and potentially add or reduce the number of tracks and how many zones are in each (three zones is a good starting place). Here are some examples you might consider for the Zones:

Energy: The energy level of a game can get a little bit much at times, especially for neurodivergent players. This set of zones is used to allow players to know where the limit currently is. It consists of three Zones: Low, Medium, and High. Low is for players that might become overwhelmed by the high energy others might bring to the table while High is good for times when players feel comfortable with whatever might happen.

Tone: As discussed above, Tone is used to make sure everyone is okay with the level of seriousness and humor at the table. The three zones (Serious, Mixed, and Lighthearted) can really be configured with either serious or lighthearted as the lowest zone and the other as the highest. This all comes down to the players and what pulls them out of the game more.

Role-Playing: Sometimes players find it intimidating to fully roleplay their character when others are already doing so. This can help to make sure those players are not made to feel self conscious in their interactions. The four zones are: Tabletalk/None, Lite, Full, and Acting. Tabletalk/None is for times when an individual is not currently comfortable with others speaking in character, while the other three are the levels of Role-Playing that someone is comfortable with those around them engaging in. Lite involves some in character talk but usually does not include voices. Full is when players that are comfortable doing so speak in their characters voice and interact with others mostly as their character. Acting is what would be considered “Going all out” and is akin to the way one of the more produced actual plays (i.e. Critical Role or Dimension20) is presented.

Gestures

Pause Gesture

Neurodivergent people sometimes have difficulty processing words and can take longer to communicate with those around us. This can result in long pauses while talking while we try to “find our words”. In a one on one conversation this can be difficult, but can be debilitating if you are in the middle of roleplaying a scene. In a moment like this, the other players might think the speaker is done or potentially waiting for someone to step in. While this might be meant as helpful it can cause the speaker to not continue out of concern for interrupting or a feeling of shame.

To use the "Pause Gesture", simply hold up your middle and index fingers together vertically at the side of your face, resembling a pause symbol. Players can use this when they are having difficulty with finding the right words to allow them the time they need without being interrupted.

This can also be helpful for non-neurodivergent players as well. There are always times when we might be at a loss for words and need the safety provided to be able to communicate as effectively as possible.

Shroud Gesture

Roleplaying with others can be extremely rewarding but it can also make us vulnerable. This is because we often put aspects of ourselves into our characters and portraying this other side of yourself can make you feel exposed. All players experience this to some degree, but the effect is much more present with neurodivergent individuals. Both due to the way a person's particular neurodivergence presents itself and the experience of growing up in a neurotypical world, there can be a lot of difficulty changing the mask you present to others. To help mitigate this and make it easier to roleplay, you might want to include the “Shroud” gesture.

The “Shroud Gesture”, like the “Pause Gesture”, involves holding up your index and middle fingers together. The difference in this case is that you hold the fingers horizontally in front of your eyes for a moment to signal to the other players that you need less scrutiny while roleplaying this scene. All other players should now look elsewhere to help make it easier for the player invoking the gesture. The dialogue will

continue to happen as the scene plays out. Once the player is done being the focus, play resumes as normal.

The important thing to remember is, this is not a request for others to disengage with what is going on. Players should still be taking part in the scene along with the player who invoked the gesture. If you are all at the same table, you can absolutely look at other players while talking.

Signals

There are also a number of instances where a player might need something from the game, but does not wish to interrupt for various reasons. This is where signals come into play.

Signals are represented by a light, digital token, wireless speaker, or other device that all players can update anonymously. This can be done in several ways:

If everyone is playing in person a great method is to have an app controlled device like a color changing candle or other form of remote controlled lighting. This will need to be the kind that can be controlled by multiple people at once to allow for anonymity.

You might, however, have some players that have vision problems or are color blind. In this case you might consider sounds played through a wireless speaker, or several smaller speakers if needed. Predetermine a series of small audio clips that the players can play from their phone (through the wireless speaker) that correspond with the different signals.

If the game is being played using a virtual tabletop, there can be an adjustable token that all players have access to that can be changed as needed.

There are no wrong ways to implement this if it works for your table. Importantly, the option should be anonymous to make it easier for those that might have some shame about asking or not want to interrupt what is going on. Here are the recommended configurations for your signals, but feel free to change them to suit your group.

Normal: This will be the main mode of this light or token and it is set to this most of the

time. It's usually white or some other neutral color.

Break: This is to signal that someone needs a break for whatever reason and one should be called as soon as it is convenient. This would usually be a noticeable but not overwhelming color such as blue, purple, or green,

Repeat: The Repeat signal is designed to allow the players to request, shame free, that what was just spoken (by the GM or other players) get repeated. This should be more eye-catching in color, like a yellow or orange.

Overwhelm: There are times where a player may begin to feel overwhelmed by something currently happening, be that too many sounds from cross talk, too much stress from the events of the game, sensory issues, or any number of other factors. When the GM sees the Overwhelm Signal come up, they should stop play immediately and call a break. Once players return, the GM should help facilitate a smooth transition back to allow those feeling overwhelmed to get back into the flow of the game. The color for Overwhelm should be the most eye-catching like red or a bright pink.

(note: The Overwhelm signal functions very similarly to an “X Card” but is more about the factors outside the story that is being told. It should be used in conjunction with other safety tools such as “X Cards” and “Lines and Veils” to ensure everyone is able to enjoy the game.)