

The Needs-to-Tools Translator

A worksheet for translating behavior, frustration, and "problems" into possible unmet needs and experiments

Sometimes the thing everyone notices first is the behavior: "I keep leaving my seat." "I cannot hear the instructions." "I never start the assignment." "I shut down when people ask me questions." The behavior may be real, but it is not always the original problem. Use this tool to ask: What might this experience be telling me? and What could I try before deciding I am the problem?

How to Use This Tool

Start with the experience you can actually observe. Then look at a few possible needs underneath it. You do not have to find the one perfect explanation. Pick one or two experiments that seem worth testing. If they help, keep them. If they do not, try something else.

1. Body & Movement

I keep leaving my seat.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Movement
- ☐ More physical comfort
- ☐ Less pain or pressure
- ☐ More stimulation
- ☐ Less stimulation
- ☐ A break
- ☐ A change of task
- ☐ More autonomy

What I want to try: _____

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Standing desk or standing work
- ☐ Pacing while listening
- ☐ Movement breaks
- ☐ Fidget tools
- ☐ Different chair or seating position
- ☐ Sitting on the floor
- ☐ Shorter work intervals
- ☐ Walking while talking or thinking

I cannot sit still.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Movement
- ☐ Regulation
- ☐ Stimulation
- ☐ Anxiety release
- ☐ Physical discomfort
- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Better body positioning

What I want to try: _____

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Rocking, bouncing, or pacing
- ☐ Foot band or resistance band
- ☐ Fidgeting
- ☐ Standing
- ☐ Stretching
- ☐ Frequent movement breaks
- ☐ Alternative seating
- ☐ Doing part of the task while moving

I keep getting up for water, the bathroom, or random reasons.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ A real body need
- ☐ Escape from overload
- ☐ Movement
- ☐ A transition break
- ☐ Reduced task demand
- ☐ Privacy
- ☐ Time to regulate

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Scheduled breaks
- ☐ Water at the desk
- ☐ Permission to step out
- ☐ Shorter task chunks
- ☐ A quiet break area
- ☐ Movement before returning
- ☐ Checking whether the environment itself is uncomfortable

What I want to try: _____

2. Sensory Access

I cannot hear the instructions.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Less background noise
- ☐ More processing time
- ☐ Visual information
- ☐ Repetition
- ☐ Better seating or positioning
- ☐ Auditory support
- ☐ Fewer simultaneous inputs

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Written instructions
- ☐ Captions
- ☐ Sitting closer
- ☐ Asking people to repeat themselves
- ☐ Noise reduction
- ☐ One instruction at a time
- ☐ Recording or reviewing information later
- ☐ Quiet location for important conversations

What I want to try: _____

Everything is too loud.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Reduced sensory input
- ☐ Predictability
- ☐ Recovery time
- ☐ Control over the environment
- ☐ Fewer competing sounds

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Earplugs
- ☐ Noise-canceling headphones
- ☐ Quiet breaks
- ☐ Leaving during especially loud moments
- ☐ Lower-volume seating areas
- ☐ Advance warning before loud sounds
- ☐ Smaller groups

What I want to try: _____

The lights are making it hard to think.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Softer lighting
- ☐ Less visual stimulation
- ☐ Reduced glare
- ☐ Rest
- ☐ Migraine or sensory protection

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Sunglasses or tinted lenses
- ☐ Turning off overhead lights
- ☐ Lamp lighting
- ☐ Sitting near natural light
- ☐ Screen dimming
- ☐ Hat or visor
- ☐ Taking visual breaks

What I want to try: _____

I hate being touched.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Bodily autonomy
- ☐ Predictability
- ☐ More personal space
- ☐ Sensory protection
- ☐ Clear consent

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ No-touch greeting options
- ☐ Asking before touch
- ☐ More physical space
- ☐ Clear boundaries
- ☐ Seating near an exit or edge
- ☐ Alternative activities that do not require touch

What I want to try: _____

3. Attention & Task Initiation

I cannot start.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ A clearer first step
- ☐ Less overwhelm
- ☐ More structure
- ☐ More interest
- ☐ More urgency
- ☐ Less perfectionism
- ☐ Body doubling
- ☐ Reduced task size

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Write only the first step
- ☐ Five-minute start
- ☐ Body doubling
- ☐ Timer
- ☐ Start with the easiest part
- ☐ Make a rough version first
- ☐ Use a checklist
- ☐ Have someone help define the next action

What I want to try: _____

I keep getting distracted.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ More stimulation
- ☐ Less stimulation
- ☐ A clearer task
- ☐ Shorter work periods
- ☐ Movement
- ☐ Novelty
- ☐ Fewer interruptions

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Work sprints
- ☐ Music or background sound
- ☐ Noise reduction
- ☐ Fidgeting
- ☐ Phone out of reach
- ☐ One-tab rule
- ☐ Alternate boring and interesting tasks
- ☐ Visible task list

What I want to try: _____

I am staring at the page but nothing is happening.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Processing time
- ☐ A model or example
- ☐ Reduced cognitive load
- ☐ A different way to begin
- ☐ More information
- ☐ Less pressure

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Talk the answer out loud
- ☐ Use speech-to-text
- ☐ Draw before writing
- ☐ Look at an example
- ☐ Make a messy outline
- ☐ Ask one clarifying question
- ☐ Take a short break and return
- ☐ Reduce the task to one tiny action

What I want to try: _____

4. Memory & Information

I keep forgetting what I was supposed to do.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ External memory support
- ☐ Written instructions
- ☐ Fewer steps at once
- ☐ Reminders
- ☐ Better transitions
- ☐ Clear next steps

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Checklist
- ☐ Sticky note
- ☐ Phone reminder
- ☐ Written recap
- ☐ One central task list
- ☐ Calendar alerts
- ☐ Before-I-leave checklist
- ☐ Ask for instructions in writing

What I want to try: _____

I understand it when someone says it, but then it disappears.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Written reinforcement
- ☐ Repetition
- ☐ Processing time
- ☐ Active recall
- ☐ Fewer instructions at once

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Write it down immediately
- ☐ Ask for a text or email summary
- ☐ Repeat the instruction back
- ☐ Take a photo
- ☐ Record a voice memo
- ☐ Use one-step instructions
- ☐ Pause before moving to the next task

What I want to try: _____

I forgot again.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ A system, not more effort
- ☐ Environmental cues
- ☐ Redundancy
- ☐ Routine
- ☐ Reduced memory load

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Put the object where the action happens
- ☐ Use duplicate supplies
- ☐ Alarms
- ☐ Visual cues
- ☐ Checklists
- ☐ Automatic reminders
- ☐ Keep important items in one consistent place

What I want to try: _____

5. Communication

I know what I mean but I cannot say it.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ More processing time
- ☐ Less pressure
- ☐ Written communication
- ☐ More specific questions
- ☐ Reduced emotional intensity

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Writing instead of speaking
- ☐ Texting or emailing
- ☐ Asking for a few minutes to think
- ☐ Using notes during conversations
- ☐ Answering one question at a time
- ☐ Sending a follow-up afterward

What I want to try: _____

I shut down when people ask me questions.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ More processing time
- ☐ Lower social pressure
- ☐ Predictability
- ☐ Fewer questions at once
- ☐ Psychological safety
- ☐ Alternative communication

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Questions in advance
- ☐ Written responses
- ☐ Multiple choice or specific prompts
- ☐ Longer pauses
- ☐ One question at a time
- ☐ Taking a break before responding
- ☐ Bringing notes or a support person

What I want to try: _____

People keep misunderstanding me.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Clearer communication expectations
- ☐ More direct language
- ☐ Written backup
- ☐ More context
- ☐ Less reliance on tone, facial expression, or implication

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Say exactly what you mean
- ☐ Ask the other person to summarize what they heard
- ☐ Follow up in writing
- ☐ Use scripts
- ☐ Clarify expectations explicitly
- ☐ Ask direct questions instead of guessing

What I want to try: _____

6. Social & Emotional Load

I keep avoiding the activity.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ More predictability
- ☐ Lower social demand
- ☐ More choice
- ☐ Reduced sensory load
- ☐ Clearer expectations
- ☐ Less fear of failure
- ☐ More recovery time

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Preview the activity
- ☐ Observe before joining
- ☐ Participate in a smaller group
- ☐ Choose an alternative role
- ☐ Bring a support person
- ☐ Set a shorter participation goal
- ☐ Leave early if needed

What I want to try: _____

I get overwhelmed and stop responding.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Reduced demands
- ☐ Quiet
- ☐ Time
- ☐ Less language
- ☐ Physical safety
- ☐ Regulation
- ☐ Recovery

What I want to try: _____

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Fewer questions
- ☐ Quiet space
- ☐ Written communication
- ☐ Yes/no options
- ☐ Pause the conversation
- ☐ Sensory tools
- ☐ Time alone before problem-solving

I am fine until suddenly I am absolutely not fine.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Earlier awareness of stress
- ☐ More frequent breaks
- ☐ Lower cumulative demand
- ☐ Better pacing
- ☐ Easier exits
- ☐ Less masking

What I want to try: _____

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Check in with yourself earlier
- ☐ Take breaks before you feel desperate
- ☐ Track sensory and social load
- ☐ Shorten demanding activities
- ☐ Plan recovery time
- ☐ Leave while you still have energy
- ☐ Notice early body signals

7. Energy & Capacity

I can do this, but then I cannot do anything else.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Lower energy cost
- ☐ Pacing
- ☐ Recovery
- ☐ Fewer simultaneous demands
- ☐ Better task timing
- ☐ More support

What I want to try: _____

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Shorter sessions
- ☐ Schedule recovery afterward
- ☐ Break the task across days
- ☐ Remove nonessential steps
- ☐ Ask for help
- ☐ Do the hardest task during your best energy window
- ☐ Choose a lower-effort version

I can do it sometimes, so people think I should always be able to.

Possible unmet needs:

- ☐ Recognition of fluctuating capacity
- ☐ Flexible expectations
- ☐ Less pressure
- ☐ More recovery
- ☐ Accommodations that do not depend on visible impairment

Things to experiment with:

- ☐ Build flexibility into deadlines
- ☐ Use good-day / hard-day versions of tasks
- ☐ Explain that capacity changes
- ☐ Plan based on current energy, not best-day performance
- ☐ Reduce demands when symptoms or overload increase

What I want to try: _____

8. Make Your Own Translation

What is happening?

"I keep _____"

or

"I cannot _____"

What might I need?

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Movement | ☐ Predictability |
| ☐ Rest | ☐ More autonomy |
| ☐ Quiet | ☐ Social safety |
| ☐ Less stimulation | ☐ A break |
| ☐ More stimulation | ☐ Help |
| ☐ Written information | ☐ More time |
| ☐ More processing time | ☐ Another way to communicate |
| ☐ Clearer instructions | ☐ Something else: |
| ☐ Fewer steps | _____ |

Experiments I want to try:

Reminder

The goal is not to prove one perfect explanation. The goal is to notice a pattern, try a support, and learn from what happens next.