NSIF

Nervous System Infrastructure Framework

Capacity-Safe Design Standard

Version 1.0

> Every system built for humans was designed at full capacity.
> None of them work when the human operating them doesn't.

Published	2026 · Nervous System Infrastructure Framework
Author	Vanessa Williams · Founder, Whelmish LLC
Version	1.0 — First Public Standard
Status	Active — Open for Practitioner and Organizational Adoption
Domain	Human-Facing Product, AI, Organizational, and Environmental Design
Contact	capacitysafe.com · hi@capacitysafe.com

This document is the foundational intellectual property of the Nervous System Infrastructure Framework (NSIF). It may be cited, referenced, and applied with

attribution. Commercial use, reproduction, or certification claims require written authorization from Whelmish LLC.

Preamble

This standard exists because of a design failure so universal it became invisible.

For generations, every system humans interact with — schools, workplaces, productivity tools, medical environments, digital products, parenting frameworks, government services, AI interfaces — was architected around one assumption: the human using it is available. Regulated. Resourced. At capacity.

That assumption has never been true.

Humans move through states of overwhelm, shutdown, grief, depletion, hyperarousal, and recovery every single day. Children do it visibly. Adults learn to hide it. Entire industries are built around the pretense that it doesn't happen.

The result is a world full of systems that punish people for being human.

The Capacity-Safe Design Standard does not ask humans to adapt to broken systems. It asks systems to be designed around the actual range of human capacity — including its lowest points.

This is not accommodation. It is not therapy. It is not wellness culture.

It is infrastructure. The missing layer underneath everything else humans build, do, and become.

> Capacity cannot be demanded. It can only be restored.

This standard defines what it means for any human-facing system — a product, an interface, an organization, an AI — to be Capacity-Safe.

It is built on the science of nervous system regulation, the principles of trauma-informed design, decades of UX research, the lived experience of overwhelmed people, and the understanding that what the world calls a personal failing is usually a design problem.

Part I · Foundations

1.1 The Problem This Standard Solves

Most humans interact with systems every day that were designed for a version of themselves that rarely exists — rested, regulated, resourced, untraumatized, and operating at full cognitive and emotional capacity.

When real humans — depleted, grieving, overwhelmed, chronically stressed, neurodivergent, postpartum, caregiving, ill, or simply exhausted — encounter these systems, one of three things happens:

- They force themselves through at great personal cost
- They fail at tasks the system makes unnecessarily difficult
- They abandon the system entirely and call it their own fault

None of these outcomes serve the human. All of them serve the assumption that humans should be different than they are.

This standard names that assumption as a design error — not a personal one — and provides the framework to correct it.

1.2 What Capacity Means

In the context of this standard, capacity refers to the available bandwidth of the human nervous system at any given moment — its ability to perceive, process, decide, respond, connect, and act.

Capacity is not a character trait. It is not discipline or willpower. It is a biological reality that changes throughout every day, throughout every life stage, and in response to every experience a human has.

Capacity is affected by:

- Sleep quality and quantity

- Nutritional state
- Physical pain, illness, or chronic conditions
- Emotional load — grief, fear, shame, loneliness, joy, love
- Relational safety — who is in the room, who was in the room before
- Environmental inputs — sound, light, temperature, crowding, unpredictability
- Trauma history — both recent activation and long-term patterning
- Developmental stage — childhood, adolescence, postpartum, aging
- Cognitive load already carried — decisions made, problems solved, conflicts navigated
- Social and systemic marginalization — racism, poverty, housing instability, discrimination

Capacity is always a range, never a fixed point. Capacity-Safe design accounts for the full range — including the bottom.

1.3 The Science Underlying This Standard

This standard synthesizes and applies the following established bodies of science. It does not replace clinical or therapeutic practice. It translates scientific understanding into design requirements.

Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 1994)

The autonomic nervous system operates in multiple states — not the binary fight-or-flight model that dominated prior understanding. The state of the nervous system determines what a human can perceive, process, and do. Safety is a biological prerequisite for function, not a preference or luxury. Capacity-Safe design creates the conditions of perceived safety that allow function to occur.

Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 1999)

Every human has an optimal zone of arousal within which they can think, learn, connect, and act. Above this window is hyperarousal — flooding, panic, overwhelm.

Below it is hypoarousal — shutdown, numbness, freeze. Most human systems assume everyone is always inside their window. They are not. Capacity-Safe design recognizes where a person is relative to their window and responds accordingly.

Allostatic Load Research

Chronic stress accumulates as measurable physiological damage. This is not metaphor. Sustained exposure to systems that demand more than available capacity creates real biological harm over time. Capacity-Safe design reduces cumulative load rather than adding to it.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978)

The nervous system learns to regulate through relationship first, then develops internal capacity over time. Dysregulation is not weakness. It is a nervous system responding to learned experience. Capacity-Safe design meets people in their actual regulatory history, not an imagined ideal.

Interoception Research

The ability to read internal body states is learnable and trainable. When systems support rather than override internal signals, humans make better decisions, recover faster, and build genuine capacity over time. Capacity-Safe design supports interoceptive awareness rather than overriding it with external demand.

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988)

Working memory has limited capacity. Unnecessary cognitive load — unclear instructions, too many choices, dense interfaces, ambiguous language — directly impairs function. Capacity-Safe design minimizes extraneous cognitive load by design, not as an accessibility exception.

Trauma-Informed Care Principles (SAMHSA)

Trauma is pervasive, affects biology and behavior, and is often invisible to systems interacting with traumatized people. The six principles — safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, cultural sensitivity — are applied in this standard at the product and organizational design level.

Developmental Psychology

Capacity changes with developmental stage. Children are not small adults. Their nervous systems are forming, not formed. Their capacity for regulation, abstraction, delay of gratification, and executive function develops over two decades. Adolescents are in a distinct biological period of heightened sensitivity and identity formation. Capacity-Safe design for children and adolescents requires specific consideration of developmental stage, not simply scaled-down adult standards.

Part II · The Capacity Map

The Capacity Map is the foundational model of the NSIF framework. It describes five states of human nervous system capacity. These are not diagnostic categories. They are operational positions — descriptions of what is available and what is not at any given moment.

Unlike hierarchical models that imply permanent progression, the Capacity Map is fluid. A person may move between states multiple times in a single day. No state is a failure. All states are information.

State	Inner Experience	Cognitive Availability	System Response	Design Priority
GROUNDED	Regulated, present, available. Capable of full engagement.	Full. Can plan, decide, abstract, connect.	Standard. Full feature access. Normal pacing.	Full experience available. No modifications needed.
STRETCHED	Reduced bandwidth. Functional but taxed. Running on reserve.	Reduced. Can act but with higher error rate. Decisions costly.	Simplified. Reduce non-essential choices. Shorter tasks.	Streamline. Fewer steps. Clear language. Low friction.
FLOODED	Above window of tolerance. Overwhelmed. Can't process normally.	Severely limited. Logical processing impaired. Emotional brain dominant.	Protective. Collapse choices to one. Soft language. Easy exit.	One thing. No pressure. Shame-free. Clear path to stop.
FROZEN	Below window of tolerance. Shutdown. Numb. Disconnected.	Near zero. Body-first only. Abstract task impossible.	Body-first. Physical anchoring before any task. No catch-up demand.	Warmth. Breath. Presence. One physical prompt. No agenda.
FRACTURED	Chronic dysregulation. Infrastructure damage. Not a moment — a pattern.	Unreliable. Fluctuates unpredictably. High sensitivity to triggers.	Stabilization first. Long-arc support. Never performance pressure.	Consistency. Predictability. Zero shame. Human support pathway.

Every Capacity-Safe system must identify which state a user may be in and respond differently to each. A system that treats a Flooded person the same as a Grounded person has failed at the infrastructure layer.

2.1 Capacity State Detection

Capacity-Safe systems may identify a user's current state through one or more of the following methods. No method is required over another. The appropriate method depends on context, consent, and technical capacity.

Declared State

The user explicitly indicates their state. This is the most respectful and privacy-protective method. The system asks a simple, low-burden question — 'Where are you right now?' — and responds accordingly. Declared state should always be an option. It should never be required.

Behavioral Signal

The system observes interaction patterns — typing hesitation, repeated errors, abandoned tasks, session length, response latency — and infers capacity state. Behavioral signal must never be used to make assumptions about a user's emotional state without the option for the user to correct it. Inference is a starting point, not a conclusion.

Biometric Signal

With explicit consent, physiological data — heart rate variability, skin conductance, sleep data — can inform capacity state. Biometric signal requires the highest standard of consent, privacy protection, and user control. Biometric data must never be shared, sold, or used beyond the stated purpose. The user must be able to permanently delete all biometric data at any time.

Contextual Signal

Time of day, day of week, recent life events, and environmental context can inform default capacity assumptions. A system used at 2am by someone who has had the same

session three nights in a row may reasonably offer a different default than one used at 9am on a Monday. Contextual signal should always be overrideable by the user.

Part III · The Infrastructure Stack

The Infrastructure Stack describes the four layers of human functioning that must be addressed — in order — for any system to genuinely support human capacity. Most systems address only one layer. Many address none correctly. Capacity-Safe design addresses the full stack, always in the right sequence.

> You cannot repair the roof while the foundation is underwater.

3.1 Layer One — The Somatic Layer

The body is the foundation. Not metaphorically. Biologically. No cognitive, relational, or operational function is available when the somatic layer is offline.

The Somatic Layer encompasses:

- Physical safety — freedom from immediate threat or pain
- Physiological regulation — breath, heart rate, nervous system state
- Basic needs — food, water, sleep, warmth, movement
- Sensory environment — what the body is receiving through sight, sound, touch, smell

Capacity-Safe Design Requirements for the Somatic Layer:

- Systems must not demand cognitive function before acknowledging somatic state
- Environments must minimize unnecessary sensory load — visual noise, auditory overwhelm, unpredictable stimuli
- Interfaces must support rather than override breathing rhythm and physical pacing
- Rest and stopping must be designed as first-class features, not afterthoughts or failure states
- Physical anchoring prompts — breath, feet on the floor, one hand on a surface — are valid first steps before any task

3.2 Layer Two — The Cognitive Layer

When the Somatic Layer is sufficiently stable, the Cognitive Layer becomes accessible. The Cognitive Layer encompasses the brain's processing capacity — attention, working memory, decision-making, language, abstraction, and executive function.

The cognitive layer is the layer most human systems target first. It is also the layer that shuts down fastest under stress, trauma, and overwhelm.

Capacity-Safe Design Requirements for the Cognitive Layer:

- Choice architecture must match cognitive availability — fewer choices at lower capacity states
- Language must scale to cognitive state — shorter sentences, plainer words, slower pacing at lower capacity
- Instructions must be single-step at Flooded and Frozen states
- Visual complexity must reduce as capacity reduces
- Error messages must never communicate failure — only redirect
- Default paths must be the safest path, not the most feature-rich path
- Undo must always be available — capacity-limited decisions are reversible decisions

3.3 Layer Three — The Relational Layer

Humans regulate their nervous systems through other humans. This is not optional. It is biological. The Relational Layer encompasses the quality of connection available to a person — whether they feel seen, safe, met, and not alone.

Digital systems cannot replace human connection. They can, however, either reinforce isolation and shame or reduce it. This is a design choice.

Capacity-Safe Design Requirements for the Relational Layer:

- System voice and tone must never communicate judgment, impatience, or conditional acceptance
- Shame must be architecturally removed — no streaks, no failure states, no comparison metrics during low-capacity states

— Human connection pathways must be available and clearly marked — not buried in a help section

— Co-regulation features — shared states, partner check-ins, community presence — must be opt-in, never mandatory

— The system must be capable of saying 'this is enough' and meaning it

— For children: relational safety is the prerequisite for all learning and engagement. Adult presence and validation must be designable into child-facing systems.

3.4 Layer Four — The Operational Layer

The Operational Layer is what most systems only address. It encompasses the tools, workflows, environments, and tasks that the human is trying to navigate. Most productivity systems, workplace systems, educational systems, and digital products live entirely in this layer while ignoring the three layers underneath it.

Capacity-Safe Design Requirements for the Operational Layer:

— Tasks must be decomposable to their smallest viable unit — one step at a time is a design requirement, not a simplification

— Progress must be visible and persistent — a person who returns after shutdown must not lose their place

— Operational demand must always be proportional to detected or declared capacity

— Completion must be defined at the capacity level, not the task level — finishing enough is finishing

— Systems must protect recovery as a feature — rest states, exit paths, and return protocols are part of the product

— Environmental design must account for sensory regulation — lighting, sound, spatial arrangement, digital environment — as operational infrastructure, not decoration

Part IV · The Recovery Spine

The Recovery Spine is the NSIF delivery protocol. It is the path every Capacity-Safe system creates for a human moving from dysregulation toward function. It is not a rigid sequence of tasks. It is a sequence of conditions — each one creating the ground for the next.

The Recovery Spine applies to products, AI interactions, organizational processes, environmental design, and any other system that a human must navigate while their capacity is compromised.

> Safety before offload. Offload before simplification.
> Simplification before movement. Movement before protection.
> Protection before return.

Phase 1 · Safety

The Condition Being Created:
I am not in danger right now.

Design Requirements:

- The first interaction must not demand anything
- Welcome without agenda — presence before task
- Reduce environmental threat signals — harsh language, urgent colors, countdown timers, comparison metrics
- Acknowledge the person before addressing the problem
- Provide a clear, always-visible exit
- Never open with shame — no 'you've missed X days' or 'you're behind on...'
- For children: Safety phase includes physical and relational safety — adult co-presence signals and warm visual environment before any content

Phase 2 · Offload

The Condition Being Created:
The weight has somewhere to go.

Design Requirements:

- Provide an immediate, low-friction place to put cognitive and emotional load
- Brain dump, voice note, free write, or simple list — format does not matter; externalizing does
- The system receives what is put in without judgment, analysis, or immediate action
- Nothing that is offloaded should be lost — it is held by the system until the person is ready
- Offload must not immediately trigger solution or advice — receive first, respond later
- For children: Offload is often physical and verbal before written — drawing, speaking, moving are valid offload mechanisms

Phase 3 · Simplification

The Condition Being Created:
This is manageable.

Design Requirements:

- From everything that was offloaded, surface only what is relevant right now
- Filter by urgency and capacity — not every important thing is urgent, not every urgent thing is doable today
- Present the simplified view in plain language, single items, short sentences
- Offer one path forward — not a menu of options
- Eliminate visual and informational noise in this phase

- Simplification is not dumbing down — it is precision. The most important single thing.
- For children: Simplification is one concrete, physical, achievable action — never abstract

Phase 4 · Gentle Movement

The Condition Being Created:
I can do one thing.

Design Requirements:

- The one step must be genuinely small — 'send one message' not 'work on the project'
- Completion of the step must be definitive and acknowledged — not part of a larger visible progress bar
- The system must be capable of saying 'that's enough' after the step is complete
- Movement must never accelerate into momentum without the person's explicit choice to continue
- The system must not use completion of one step to immediately demand the next
- Celebration of small steps must be proportional and non-pressuring — quiet acknowledgment, not confetti and notifications
- For children: Movement phase is physical before cognitive — stretch, draw, build, before write or solve

Phase 5 · Recovery Protection

The Condition Being Created:

Rest is allowed. Return is possible.

Design Requirements:

- After movement, the system must actively protect recovery — not fill the space with the next demand
- A clear stopping point must be designed — not implied, not buried
- The system must not penalize stopping — no streak-breaks, no loss of progress, no shame on return
- Return pathways must be warm and frictionless — 'welcome back' not 'you've been away'
- Recovery is a phase with its own duration — it is not a gap between productive periods
- The system must hold the person's place indefinitely — capacity recovery has no deadline
- For children: Recovery protection means the environment stays safe after the hard thing — calm, predictable, no additional demand

Part V · The Twelve Capacity-Safe Design Principles

These twelve principles apply to every human-facing system that seeks Capacity-Safe designation. They apply to digital products, AI systems, organizational environments, physical spaces, and educational settings. They are not aspirational guidelines. They are requirements.

Principle 1	SAFETY BEFORE FUNCTION No system may demand task completion before establishing perceived safety. Safety is not a welcome screen. It is a condition the design creates.
Principle 2	CAPACITY IS THE STARTING POINT Every design decision begins with the question: what can a human at low capacity actually do with this? If the answer is nothing, the design has failed before it has started.
Principle 3	SHAME IS A DESIGN FAILURE Any feature, language pattern, metric, or notification that produces shame in a low-capacity user is a design error. Streak systems, failure states, comparison metrics, and urgency pressure are prohibited at capacity-compromised states.
Principle 4	ONE THING AT A TIME At any capacity state below Grounded, the system presents one thing. One choice. One step. One question. One action. Optionality is a privilege of full capacity.
Principle 5	STOPPING IS A FEATURE Stopping must be designed as a first-class user action with its own pathway, acknowledgment, and return protocol. A user who stops is not a failed user. A system that makes stopping difficult has failed the user.
Principle 6	LANGUAGE SCALES WITH CAPACITY At Grounded states, standard language is appropriate. At Stretched, simpler. At Flooded or Frozen, language reduces to its essential minimum — short sentences, plain words, no abstraction, no conditionality.
Principle 7	THE SYSTEM DOES NOT JUDGE No system language, visual design, notification, or interaction pattern may communicate judgment of the user's state, pace, absence, or choices. The system's job is to be available, not to evaluate.
Principle 8	CHILDREN ARE NOT SMALL ADULTS Child-facing systems must be designed around the child's nervous system, not a scaled version of adult

	design. Regulation support, relational warmth, physical engagement, and developmental appropriateness are non-negotiable requirements.
Principle 9	RECOVERY IS NOT PASSIVE Recovery is an active state that requires specific design support. Rest, integration, and transition back to engagement are phases with their own design requirements — not empty space to be filled.
Principle 10	ACCESS IS INFRASTRUCTURE Capacity-Safe design is not an accessibility add-on for a subset of users. It is the base standard. A system that only works for fully regulated people serves a minority. Capacity-Safe design serves everyone.
Principle 11	AI MUST KNOW WHAT STATE IT IS TALKING TO AI systems interacting with humans must be capable of detecting or accepting declared capacity state and modifying language, pacing, task complexity, and interaction length accordingly. An AI that responds identically to a Grounded and a Frozen user has not been designed for humans.
Principle 12	CAPACITY RETURN IS THE GOAL The purpose of a Capacity-Safe system is not to keep the user engaged. It is to support their return to full capacity. Any feature that extends engagement beyond what serves capacity restoration is working against the user.

Part VI · Application Domains

The Capacity-Safe Design Standard applies across all human-facing systems. The following domains are the primary areas of application. Each domain has specific implementation considerations.

6.1 Digital Products and Consumer Apps

Consumer-facing digital products are the most direct application of the Capacity-Safe standard. They are used by humans across all five capacity states, often at the exact moments of greatest need.

Required Implementation

- State detection or declaration mechanism available at every session entry
- UI responds visibly and meaningfully to declared or detected state
- At Flooded or Frozen states: choices collapse to one, language simplifies, colors soften, motion reduces
- No shame-based retention mechanics — no streak notifications during absence, no 'you've fallen behind' messaging
- Clear, warm return pathway after any period of absence
- Stopping is acknowledged, not penalized
- Recovery Spine available as a navigable path within the product

6.2 AI Systems and Conversational Interfaces

AI systems present a specific and urgent application of the Capacity-Safe standard. They interact with humans across all states, often at moments of acute distress, and have the capacity to either significantly support or significantly harm.

Required Implementation

- AI must accept declared capacity state as a primary input that shapes every subsequent response

- At Flooded or Frozen states: AI shortens responses, removes optionality, reduces complexity, slows pacing
- AI must never push a distressed user toward productivity or action before safety is established
- AI interactions must have a clearly designed end — infinite conversation loops are not Capacity-Safe
- AI must be capable of directing a user to human support without friction or shame
- AI must never simulate emotional intimacy in a way that substitutes for human connection
- AI voice, tone, and language must be calibrated to the user's capacity state, not the AI's default register
- Crisis pathways must be immediate, unambiguous, and human-connecting

6.3 Organizational and Workplace Design

Organizations are human systems. They are subject to the same capacity dynamics as any individual. Most workplace design operates at the Grounded assumption, failing the majority of its human participants some or most of the time.

Required Implementation

- Capacity-Safe physical environments: regulation of sensory inputs, access to quiet, lighting control, movement space
- Meeting design that accounts for capacity — agenda loads, energy timing, recovery time between cognitive demands
- Communication norms that allow for low-capacity response without penalty
- Performance systems that do not conflate output with worth or shame low-capacity periods
- Mental health infrastructure that is proactive, not reactive — built before crisis, not deployed at it
- Management training in capacity recognition, co-regulation, and shame-free feedback
- Return-to-work protocols that follow the Recovery Spine

6.4 Educational Environments

Schools interact with human nervous systems in their most formative period. The design of educational environments has lifelong impact on a child's capacity for self-regulation, learning, and safety.

Required Implementation

- Physical environment designed to support nervous system regulation — sensory considerations, movement access, visual calm
- Daily rhythm that accounts for capacity cycles — not continuous demand from arrival to departure
- Shame-free assessment — no public performance metrics, no competitive grading displays
- Co-regulation training for all educators — nervous system awareness is a professional competency
- Recovery time as a designed element of the school day — not a reward for compliance
- Transition design — between subjects, spaces, and social contexts — as a nervous system concern
- For children with trauma histories: individualized capacity assessment and specific Recovery Spine implementation

6.5 Physical Environments

Physical environments — healthcare settings, public spaces, homes, transit environments — are nervous system infrastructure. Their design either supports or undermines capacity at scale.

Required Implementation

- Sensory design as a primary consideration — acoustic management, lighting quality, visual complexity reduction
- Predictability built into spatial design — clear wayfinding, consistent environments, absence of sudden changes

- Rest and recovery space available — not as a medical accommodation but as standard infrastructure
- Healthcare environments specifically: capacity-aware intake, waiting space design, communication pacing
- Home environments: design support for the family nervous system — particularly for parents and children

Part VII · Children, Adolescents, and Developmental Capacity

Children and adolescents are not edge cases in Capacity-Safe design. They are the clearest illustration of what nervous system infrastructure must do — and what it costs when it fails.

A child's nervous system is under construction. It is not a smaller adult nervous system. It is a developing system that requires external support, relational warmth, predictability, and appropriate challenge to build its own regulatory capacity over time.

An adolescent's nervous system is in active renovation — heightened sensitivity, identity formation, peer regulation, and a biological drive for autonomy that coexists with continued need for safety.

7.1 Specific Standards for Child-Facing Systems

- The first principle of child-facing Capacity-Safe design is relational warmth — the system must feel safe before it asks anything
- Instructions must be developmentally matched — concrete, physical, visual, short
- No child-facing system may use shame, comparison, competition, or failure-state language
- Emotional regulation support must be embedded in the design — not added as a feature
- Every child-facing system must include a clear pathway to a trusted adult
- Play and physical engagement are valid regulatory activities and must be respected as such in product and environment design
- Progress must be celebrated without creating comparison — the only competition in a Capacity-Safe child system is with yesterday's version of the child
- Sensory considerations for children are more acute than for adults — sound, visual intensity, motion, and tactile experience must be carefully calibrated

7.2 Specific Standards for Adolescent-Facing Systems

— Adolescents require autonomy alongside safety — capacity-safe adolescent design does not infantilize

— Identity must be respected — capacity states in adolescence are often identity states, not just regulation states

— Peer context is a nervous system factor — design must account for social evaluation as a real somatic input

— Shame is more acutely harmful in adolescence than at any other developmental period — zero shame architecture is non-negotiable

— Mental health pathways must be private, accessible, and human-connecting

— Adolescent-facing AI must be specifically calibrated — no AI system should serve as a primary emotional attachment for an adolescent

Part VIII · What Is Not Capacity-Safe

Defining the standard requires defining its violations. The following design patterns are incompatible with Capacity-Safe designation regardless of intent or context.

8.1 Prohibited Design Patterns

Streak Systems	Any feature that tracks consecutive days of engagement and signals failure or loss upon absence. Streaks are shame mechanics dressed as motivation. They are categorically prohibited in Capacity-Safe systems.
Urgency Pressure	Countdown timers, 'last chance' language, scarcity signals, and artificial deadline pressure applied to personal development, wellness, or emotional regulation contexts. Urgency is a threat signal to the nervous system. It is not a motivator at low capacity.
Comparison Metrics	Public or private ranking of users against each other during low-capacity states. Competitive mechanics that make a struggling user aware of how others are performing are shame delivery systems.
Invisible Exits	Any design that makes stopping, pausing, or leaving difficult to find or socially costly. Exit paths must be first-class features at all capacity states.
Shame-On-Return	Any messaging, notification, or interface state that greets a returning user with information about their absence, their missed items, or their fallen-behind status. Return must always be welcomed, never indicted.
Infinite Demand	Systems that have no designed stopping point — that always have one more thing, one more prompt, one more suggestion. Capacity-Safe systems are designed to end. They protect the user from over-engagement.
Capacity-Blind AI	AI systems that respond identically regardless of the human's stated or detected capacity state. This is the AI equivalent of speaking at the same volume and pace to someone who is drowning.

Forced Disclosure	Any system that requires a user to explain, justify, or disclose their emotional state in order to access a modified or supportive experience. Capacity support must be available without interrogation.
Wellness Theater	Features that perform care without providing it — generic affirmations, surface-level mindfulness prompts, and encouragement language applied without any actual response to capacity state. Performative wellness is more harmful than no wellness because it substitutes visibility for function.

Part IX · Capacity-Safe Certification

The Capacity-Safe Mark is the designation awarded to products, organizations, AI systems, and environments that meet the requirements of this standard as verified under the Capacity-Safe Design Standard.

The Mark is not a logo. It is a promise. It tells every person who encounters it: this system was designed around what you can actually handle, not what we wished you could.

9.1 Certification Levels

Foundation	The system has implemented the twelve core principles, the Recovery Spine, and the basic Capacity Map response at the product level. This is the entry-level certification.
Full Standard	The system has implemented the complete Infrastructure Stack response, full state-based UI adaptation, and all prohibited pattern elimination across all user-facing surfaces.
Advanced	The system demonstrates measurable capacity return outcomes, has integrated biometric or behavioral state detection with full consent architecture, and contributes to the NSIF research base.
Institutional	The organization has implemented Capacity-Safe design across all human-facing systems — digital, environmental, and procedural — and has certified all relevant personnel in NSIF principles.

9.2 Certification Requirements

Certification is reviewed annually. The following is required at all levels:

1. Self-assessment against the twelve principles with documented evidence
2. Third-party review by a certified NSIF Practitioner

3. User-reported capacity safety data from a representative sample
4. Zero use of prohibited design patterns as verified by UX audit
5. Public commitment to the Capacity Return Principle
6. Annual renewal — certification does not transfer to updated versions of a product without re-review

Part X · Glossary of NSIF Terms

These terms are specific to the NSIF framework. Where a term overlaps with existing clinical or scientific usage, the NSIF definition applies within this standard.

Capacity	The available bandwidth of the human nervous system at a given moment — its ability to perceive, process, decide, respond, connect, and act.
Capacity Map	The NSIF model of five operational states of human nervous system capacity: Grounded, Stretched, Flooded, Frozen, Fractured.
Capacity Return	The measurable restoration of functional bandwidth following a period of reduced capacity. The goal of every Capacity-Safe system.
Capacity-Safe	A design designation indicating that a system has been built to function for humans across all capacity states, including the lowest.
Capacity-Safe Mark	The certification designation awarded by the NSIF Institute to systems that meet the requirements of this standard.
Capacity State	The specific position within the Capacity Map that describes a person's current nervous system availability.
Co-regulation	The biological process by which one nervous system supports the regulation of another through proximity, tone, rhythm, and attunement.
Flooded	A capacity state characterized by overwhelm above the window of tolerance. Logical processing is impaired; emotional responses are dominant.
Fractured	A capacity state characterized by chronic dysregulation and infrastructure damage. Not a momentary state — a long-arc condition.
Frozen	A capacity state characterized by shutdown below the window of tolerance. Numbing, disconnection, and body-first experience dominate.

Grounded	A capacity state of full regulation and availability. Complete access to cognitive, relational, and operational function.
Infrastructure Stack	The NSIF model of four layers — Somatic, Cognitive, Relational, Operational — that must be addressed in sequence for genuine capacity support.
Nervous System Infrastructure	The NSIF framework itself — the missing layer underneath every human-facing system, defining the conditions required for humans to actually function within those systems.
Recovery Spine	The NSIF five-phase delivery protocol: Safety, Offload, Simplification, Gentle Movement, Recovery Protection.
Shame Architecture	Any design pattern that produces shame as a byproduct of normal human behavior — absence, error, pace, need.
Stretched	A capacity state of reduced but functional bandwidth. Capacity is taxed but not overwhelmed. Simplified support increases effectiveness.
Window of Tolerance	The optimal zone of nervous system arousal within which cognitive, emotional, and relational function is available. (After Siegel, 1999.)

Closing · Why This Standard Exists

> I am regulated, therefore I can.

Every person who has ever abandoned a planner, quit an app, failed to show up, disappeared from a system, or called themselves broken for not being able to keep up — was not failing.

They were in a capacity state that the system was not designed for.

The failure was the design.

This standard exists to end that particular failure. Not for some users. For all of them. Not as an accommodation. As the base requirement.

Human capacity is not a bug in the system. It is the system. Everything built for humans must be built around it.

The Capacity-Safe Design Standard is Version 1.0. It will be revised as evidence grows, as practitioners apply it, as users report their experience, and as the world changes. What will not change is the foundational argument:

> Every system built for humans should work for humans as they actually are — not as the system wishes they were.

That is the promise of Nervous System Infrastructure.

That is what NSIF is for.

Vanessa Williams
Founder, Whelmish LLC
Creator, NSIF — Nervous System Infrastructure Framework

Version 1.0 · Published 2026