

Autistic burnout

How to identify, manage and prevent it

You have likely heard of “burnout”, which is caused by juggling life’s demands such as work, study, finances and relationships. “Autistic burnout”, however, is different, coming from living in a world that is not designed for Autistic people. In this information sheet, we explore what Autistic burnout feels like, why it happens, and how we can manage and prevent it.



What is Autistic burnout, and why does it happen?

For an Autistic person, it can be stressful living in a world that often overlooks neurodiverse needs. There’s the pressure to mask Autistic traits, adapt behaviour and navigate overwhelming environments without proper support. All of this adds up and can lead to burnout: a sense of overwhelming exhaustion, decreased functionality and heightened sensory sensitivity.

What are some signs of Autistic burnout?

Burnout presents differently in everyone, but typical symptoms are:

- extreme tiredness that doesn’t get better with rest
- withdrawing from social interactions

- having noticeably more trouble with day-to-day tasks
- feeling more sensitive to sensory stimuli than normal
- a general feeling of being more overwhelmed or emotionally dysregulated than usual.

What does Autistic burnout look like in children?

Given what we know about burnout in Autistic adults, it’s fair to think that children experience it too – especially in times of high stress, like starting a new school. However, burnout may show up differently for children than in adults. Increased meltdowns, slipping academic performance or increased sensory sensitivity may initially look like behavioural issues – when instead, they could be indicators of burnout.

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Understanding, engaging
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interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.



Feeling burnt out? Here are some strategies to recover.

There's no one-size-fits-all way to recover, but there are some practical steps that may help.

- **Take time out for self-care.** Cut back your activities (and sensory/social exposure) to a manageable level, and take time to rest and recover gradually. It's important to set realistic expectations, instead of putting pressure on yourself to rush back to your usual routines.
- **Activate your support networks.** Connect with friends, family or communities that understand and affirm neurodiversity – they can provide valuable validation and support.
- **Seek professional help.** Autism specialists may have useful techniques to help with things like stress management and emotional regulation.
- **Accept and embrace your unique self.** It may not be easy, but accepting your Autistic identity (rather than hiding it) and celebrating your true self can relieve a lot of pressure, and make you feel more genuinely fulfilled.
- **Advocate for accommodations.** If there are adjustments or practical supports that could make your life easier (whether it's at work, school or home), don't be afraid to ask for them!
- **Keep an eye on your mental health.** Issues like depression and anxiety can come hand-in-hand with burnout; if this is the case for you, let your healthcare professional know so they can incorporate appropriate therapies into your recovery plan.
- **Know your limits.** Check in with yourself when you think you may be feeling stressed or overwhelmed. The sooner you can understand why you feel this way, and do something about it (such as take a break or reset a boundary), the more effectively you can stop things from reaching burnout stage.
- **Find your people.** Engaging with the Autistic community can provide a sense of belonging and mutual support, whether it's through online forums, support groups or local events.
- **Keep learning.** Keep an eye out for resources that talk about neurodiversity and Autistic burnout – knowledge can empower you to make informed decisions.

How do we prevent Autistic burnout in the first place?

While we can't completely eliminate the triggers for burnout, we can reduce the risk of it happening by making some key changes.

- **Create designated 'safe' spaces.** This might involve adapting your workplace to your sensory needs, or taking time out by being in environments where you don't have to mask your Autistic traits.
- **Talk about it.** By raising awareness of autism and Autistic burnout, and advocating for what you need, you can help push for more supportive, autism-friendly environments.

In the words of an Autistic person, burnout is like "having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure and being left with no clean-up crew." So, if you're feeling depleted – step back, be kind to yourself and seek support where you can.



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on the spectrum.**



Useful resources

Web

Reframing Autism: reframingautism.org.au/navigating-autistic-burnout-self-care-strategies-to-recover-and-recalibrate/

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/autistic-burnout

Attwood & Garnett Events: attwoodandgarnettevents.com/what-is-autistic-burnout/

The Autistic Advocate: theautisticadvocate.com/an-autistic-burnout/

Dr Alice Nicholls: dralicenicholls.com/how-to-get-out-of-autistic-burnout/

Neurodivergent Insights: neurodivergentinsights.com/misdiagnosis-monday/autistic-burnout-vs-depression

References

Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, A., ... & Nicolaidis, C. (2020). "Having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure and being left with no clean-up crew": Defining autistic burnout. *Autism in Adulthood*, 2 (2), 132-143.