

Autistic Burnout

Understanding Autistic Burnout

What is Autistic Burnout?

Autistic Burnout “is a state of physical and mental fatigue, heightened stress and diminished capacity to manage life skills, sensory input and social interactions, which comes from years of being severely overtaxed by the strain of trying to live up to demands that are out of sync with your needs” - Judy Endow.

For some, autistic burnout is so harrowing and so very debilitating that it is life-changing, with many autistic people unable to attend or engage with school, college, university, or work. It has affected individuals so much that many lose the ability to speak (a sign of shutdown), and some even lose their voice for some time. Many don’t leave their bedrooms for months on end, cannot engage with anyone and don’t leave the house either. During burnout, they might lose many of their brain’s executive functions (working memory, emotional regulation, decision making, task initiation, etc), and their sensory system goes into overload, often leading to increased meltdowns and shutdowns. All this takes its toll, and the cost is sometimes so high for many autistic people.

The problem is that autistic burnout does not respond to medical treatment or mental health treatment and treating burnout as depression can be debilitating for the autistic person. The autistic person’s brain is in extreme survival mode and needs the rest their body and brain are desperate for to experience recovery.

How do I know I am experiencing autistic burnout?

The main characteristics of autistic burnout are:

- Extreme fatigue
- Withdrawing more and more from social situations to a safe space
- Loss of executive function skills (working memory, emotional regulation, decision-making, focus, task initiation, self-control, etc)
- Sensory overload increases significantly.
- Cognitive slowdown
- Anxiety increases
- Increased shutdowns and meltdowns
- Some may also experience intrusive or suicidal thoughts.

Autistic burnout does not happen overnight. It might take a prolonged period to develop but can become cyclical and hard to get out of unless significant life changes are made. The person needs rest (psychological and physical) to lower demands regulated by spending time with their interests and passions. Recovery takes time, sometimes a long time.

Why do autistic people burn out?

Many people talk about burnout, and often they are referring to occupational burnout and burning the candle at both ends; this can happen to anyone. Autistic burnout, however, is linked to more complex issues and is mainly caused by prolonged masking, prolonged sensory overload and demands outweighing capacity.

What can help autistic burnout?

If you're going through what you think might be autistic burnout, the most important thing to know is that you're not alone. It's a common experience among many autistic individuals, but recovery is possible with time — rushing won't help. Connecting with other autistic individuals can be beneficial; it increases the chances of feeling accepted and valued while reducing the need to mask. You'll find various online groups and social media platforms to connect with like-minded individuals.

Recovery from burnout is about your nervous system getting out of survival mode and feeling safe again. Some strategies that might help ease autistic burnout include:

- Connecting with other autistic people online. This can be especially beneficial if there are no in-person outlets.
- Resting and not pushing yourself is essential, as recovery takes time.
- Lower demands and expectations. What needs to stop? What demands and expectations are exhausting you? This could include people, environments, tasks, experiences.
- Understanding what helps you regulate your emotions and sensory system is important.
- Gaming, creativity, sudoku, music, sensory aids, weighted blankets, pets, walking, watching your favourite films or TV, being in nature, reading, etc. are just some things that can help some autistic people.
- Allowing yourself to stim whenever you need to (stimming helps with regulation).
- Spending time with your passions and interests can help you feel safe and regulated.
- Learning about how to be and celebrate your authentic autistic self; often this is easier with other autistic people.