



## What is Autistic Burnout?

Autistic burnout is mostly the result of prolonged periods of time ‘surviving’ as an autistic person in environments that are not in sync with their different needs and therefore not safe. It is not as many might think a mental health condition, but in fact a **whole body experience**, mind, body and emotions. Most autistic people can relate to what we call ‘social hangovers’, finding themselves feeling wiped out mentally and physically by too much time spent in social environments. This might happen regularly and even daily. Without sufficient time spent away from these kind of social environments, often time spent on their own to rest and reset, then the inevitable toxic stress builds up and can lead to burnout.

Many if not most autistic people experience acute periods of burnout that last for weeks or months, but for some their experience is chronic and enduring, lasting sometimes for many years. It can be devastating for too many autistic people, leading to significant physical and mental health related issues, even suicide in too many cases. It is important to note here that autistic people are too often defined by crisis, only discovering they are autistic once they hit burnout. Many have spent years struggling and surviving in social environments by masking and didn’t even understand that this is what was happening.

Judy Endow, an autistic advocate, described Autistic Burnout as ‘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’

Research by Dr S. Arnold and Julianne Higgins et al, found that the most common characteristics experienced were:

- Chronic exhaustion 72%
- Sensory overload 80%
- Heightened anxiety 90%
- Low mood 95%
- Increased shutdowns 80%
- Loss of skills 90%
- Suicidal thoughts 64%
- Intrusive thoughts 59%

The Royal College of Psychiatrists describes autistic burnout as "a state of exhaustion, associated with functional and cognitive deterioration and an increase in autism symptomatology, as a consequence of coping with social interaction (including masking) and the sensory environment. It may be a short-lived state (as at the end of a working day), relieved by a relatively brief withdrawal from the stress. However, longer and more severe stress can produce a more sustained state (which entails some form of innate change) which has to wait on its natural remission. It overlaps symptomatically with anxiety and depression, and there may be a heightened risk of suicide".

## Depression and Autistic Burnout

There are many crossovers between depression and autistic burnout, but it is important to understand the distinct differences. Some treatments for depression, particularly certain talking therapies, will often not work for an autistic person and may even be harmful especially when experiencing burnout; it may actually exacerbate their experience and exhaust them further. "While Autistic Burnout may co-occur with depression, it is distinct from it. Historically, Autistic Burnout may have been understood as depression. You may even have been diagnosed with depression by your GP when your symptoms might be more accurately understood as Autistic Burnout"  
Dr Alice Nicholls, Clinical Psychologist.

Some recent peer reviewed research papers:

- **Measuring and validating autistic burnout (2024)**

Jane Mantzalas , Amanda L Richdale , Xia Li , Cheryl Dissanayake et al

- **Confirming the nature of autistic burnout (2023)**

Samuel RC Arnold, Julianne M Higgins, Julian N Trollor et al

- **Defining autistic burnout through experts by lived experience (2021)**

Samuel RC Arnold, Julianne M Higgins et al

## Some of the main causes of autistic burnout

- Prolonged periods of life spent masking (often fawning, hiding aspects of self, adaptive morphing, suppressing and identity management) in social situations and environments. Masking is mainly the result of the stigma that exists surrounding autism and is a mostly subconscious protective trauma response, due to feeling internally unsafe in social environments. Many people who are unaware that they are in-fact autistic can mean they might have been masking for many years prior to being identified and this can have a huge impact upon identity formation.
- Prolonged periods of time spent in social situations & environments that are not inclusive or adjusted and drain an autistic person of energy, because the environments are not in sync with the needs of autistic and other neurodivergent people - causing anxiety, social hangovers, exhaustion and sensory overload for example.
- Too many *neurotypical* demands and expectations. These demands can be neuronormative social expectations that lead to autistic and other neurodivergent people conforming in relation to communication, socialising and executive functioning, etc. Other demands relate to things like sensory overload and deprivation, lack of structure, uncertainty, to many changes of focus, and many other things.
- Other causes can be unidentified and undiagnosed co-occurring physical conditions that are commonly experienced by autistic and other neurodivergent people that cause fatigue, such as Ehlers Danos Syndrome, Hypermobility and PoT's for example.
- Being multiply neurodivergent (which it is likely most if not all autistic people are) such as being AuDHD, can mean a person is more at risk of experiencing burnout and also mental health challenges.
- Missed and misdiagnosed autism - many (particularly women and people AFAB) have been missed and often misdiagnosed with things such as BPD or depression rather than being identified as autistic. This can in many cases lead to an autistic person being identified only once they hit crisis. They hit crisis because they have never understood their true authentic self or been understood by others and have often received treatments for depression or personality disorders that can be harmful for autistic people.

# Masking differences

Traumatised

Sensory  
overload

Emotionally overwhelmed  
Physical health

Fight/flight

Pushing

Meltdowns increase

Too many demands

Restricted eating

Losing weight Self care affected

Overwhelmed

Cannot focus

Anxiety

Stomach aches

No energy

No more energy for masking

Shutdowns increase

Cannot stop

Mental Health Worsens

Self harm

Push through

Intrusive thoughts

Suicidal thoughts

Exhausted

Freeze

No resources left

CRASH

## Signs of Autistic Burnout might be:

### Sensory overload/seeking increases:

- Increased sensory seeking/stimming
- Sensory overload increases significantly esp auditory for many
- Find it hard/harder to communicate feelings
- Self-harming starts or increases (can sometimes be linked to sensory overload)
- Not getting dressed due to increased sensitivity
- Experiencing more meltdowns due to sensory overload

### Executive Functioning affected (loss of skills):

- Cannot focus on usual interests/passions
- Difficulty with: working memory, emotional regulation, impulsivity, motivation, organising, decisions, focus, brain fog, starting and finishing tasks, problem solve
- Find it hard/harder to communicate thoughts and feelings
- More rigidity in thinking and less able to be flexible
- Struggling to motivate self to do usual activities
- Regularly experiencing mental/emotional overwhelm

### Communication:

- Struggling with communication– may stop taking, messaging (shutdown)
- Talking is exhausting

### Self care:

- Struggling with self-care-dressing, showering, brushing hair/teeth, eating
- Losing weight due to restricted eating
- Demand avoidance increases (which may affect self care)

### Exhaustion:

- Physical fatigue
- Shutdowns increase
- Stopped doing things you enjoy as so exhausted
- No more energy to mask

### Mental Health:

- Heightened anxiety
- Some experience depression when in burnout
- Intrusive thoughts
- Suicidal thoughts
- Rejection sensitivity dysphoria increases
- Cynicism
- Self harm

### Emotional:

- Anxiety
- Increased anger and irritability
- Increased fear
- Low mood
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Meltdowns increase
- Struggling to regulate emotions
- Feeling numb
- Dissociation

### Physical experiences:

- Sleeping less /Sleeping more (might become nocturnal)
- Headaches/Migraines
- Aches and pains
- Pain increases
- Stomach aches and gut related issues
- Joint pain
- Amplified symptoms of co occurring physical, inc chronic conditions

### Social:

- Cannot attend school
- Withdrawn from social events and situations, inc family events
- Unable to attend social events/groups etc once enjoyed

## What helps an individual experiencing autistic burnout?

**Rest:** There are 7 types of rest: Physical, Mental, Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Sensory and Creative. Resting is crucial for recovery from autistic burnout and it can take time, for some a very long time. Recovery is a journey, taking a day at a time and cannot be rushed. For someone in employed work they will need a good amount of time off agreed with their employer wherever possible.

A child or young person cannot experience recovery whilst they are in the school environment/s that triggered burnout and caused school trauma. Education can only restart once they have capacity and the education will usually look very different (alternative provision, home education or EOTAS)

**Time with interests:** Because autistic brains and nervous systems are 'interest based' (due to being 'monotropic') having plenty of time in flow states with their interests and passions is crucial and a way to rest, regulate, reset and heal. Sometimes in burnout the autistic person may have temporarily lost their interests and passions and may have also lost capacity for these also; it can take time for these to be renewed and for them to have the capacity for them again.

**Significantly lower demands and expectations:** High neuro-normative demands and expectations are often triggers for autistic burnout and so it is important that ordinary everyday demands and expectations, education or work demands, social and communication demands are all significantly reduced or even completely removed wherever possible.

**Time:** You cannot rush recovery from autistic burnout. It is a process and you cannot set timescales either - as it is different for each autistic individual.

**Understanding capacity:** Autistic people have differences in their energy (physical, mental and emotional energy). Their energy levels in social environments can be affected by numerous things including: masking (which uses a lot of energy) sensory differences and too many demands upon them that are not in sync with their needs. When their social battery is low an autistic person may naturally withdraw, stop communicating, shut-down and seek out more alone time, as their nervous system seeks to rest and reset.

**Neurokin and co regulation:** Autistic people will often feel *safer* with neurokin (usually other Autistic people they have a strong connection with). It is easier to be unmasked when there are no neuronormative social demands and expectations. Co regulation can also be an important part of recovery for an autistic person “Co-regulation needs trust as a foundation. You can't co-regulate if there is a battle of power dynamics; co-regulating is about being together as humans and connecting at a deeper level, as equals.” Helen Edgar, Autistic Realms

There are lots of ways to help with regulation and feeling safer such as:

Spending unrestricted time with passions and interests (if they have capacity to)

Time alone away from social environments

Gaming

Re-watching favourite TV programmes or films

Sensory aids - noise cancelling headphones, fidget toys, therapy putty, etc

Listening to music

Drawing, doodling, crafting

Reading

Stimming and gentle somatic movement

Time in nature

Yoga

Viv Dawes Autistic Advocate

[www.autisticadvocate.co.uk](http://www.autisticadvocate.co.uk)

[www.autisticburnoutnetwork.com](http://www.autisticburnoutnetwork.com)