



## 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” (J Endow)

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”.

Recent 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 masking (often fawning, hiding, suppressing and identity management) in social situations and environments. Masking is a mostly subconscious protective trauma response to feeling unsafe in social environments – usually not a choice an autistic person makes. Masking is mainly the result of the stigma surrounding autism.
- 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 demands and expectations. These demands can be neuronormative social expectations that lead to autistic 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 and other neurodivergence such as ADHD.
- Missed and misdiagnosed autism - many have been missed and often misdiagnosed with things such as EUPD rather than autism being identified. This can in many cases lead an autistic person being identified only once they hit crisis. They hit crisis because they have never understood their true authentic self and have often recieved treatments for depression or personality disorders that are 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
- Increased irritability
- Some experience depression when in burnout
- Intrusive thoughts
- Suicidal thoughts
- Rejection sensitivity dysphoria increases
- Cynicism

### Emotional:

- Anxiety
- 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

There are many crossovers between depression and autistic burnout, but it is important to understand the distinct differences. Treatment for depression does not work for an autistic person experiencing burnout and may actually exacerbate burnout 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, ND Clinical Psychologist.

## **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.
- A child or young person cannot experience recovery whilst they are in the school environment/s that triggered burnout. 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; it can take time for these to be renewed and for them to have the capacity for them again.
- Low/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 demands, social and communication demands are all significantly reduced 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.  
For autistic children and young people it often means attending school, college or university is usually impossible and more often alternative education pathways are required when the child or young person is ready and has capacity.

- Understanding capacity: Autistic people have differences in their social energy (made up of physical, mental and emotional energy). Their social energy can be affected by numerous things including: masking, sensory overload and too many demands upon them. – these are all exhausting. When burnt out, doing more and being in more social situations will exacerbate their experiences. Often, they naturally will seek out more alone time, as their nervous system seeks to heal.
- Neurokin and co regulation – autistic people can often feel safer with their neurokin (usually other autistic people they feel a connection with). It is easier to be unmasked when there are no neurotypical social expectations. Co regulation is also an important aspect of healing for an autistic person, especially when PDA – regulation, trust, connection and synchronicity with another person they trust.
- Autonomy – this is something autistic people need more of but especially if they have a PDA profile and it is really important in the recovery journey. Autonomy and having a sense of agency and equity is crucial for feeling safe when PDA, or the trauma response is easily triggered.

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