

Burnout

Exhaustion or Fatigue and Burnout can happen in anyone, but can occur more frequently in people with Autism, due to everyday pressures such as social situations and sensory overload. Trying to deal with these pressures over an extended period of time can lead to extreme exhaustion or burnout. Burnout can also occur from making or camouflaging Autistic traits, suppressing stimming, not meeting expectations and changes in routine.

For people with Autism, burnout can look like:

- Increased meltdowns and sensory sensitivities
- Reduced tolerance to stimulus
- Physical pain and headaches
- Physically shutting down, including loss of speech
- Chronic exhaustion
- Feeling they can no longer cope
- Struggling to function and loss of skills
- Difficulties in school/work/relationships
- Effects to mental and physical health
- Suicidal thinking

"So this combination [of stress, masking, social isolation, loss of an important support person], along with the overwhelming confusion of what was 'wrong' with me, why I couldn't really connect with anyone, why people singled me out or played tricks or used me ... just kept hitting this wall over and over again, was what led me to crash and burn out - my physical body and mind started shutting down. I could feel each system in my body closing off as gravity got heavier than it had ever been. I didn't know what to do - did not understand what was happening to me - I had no way to communicate this. It was like a switch had gone off, my verbal ability to convey what was going on in my mind and body was gone. I did not want to die, I've never wanted to die. I needed to step out. I needed to remove myself from the environment and take myself elsewhere; I needed to escape."

Kieran

An autistic burnout. The Autistic Advocate: Autistic People Have a Voice. Vol 2018: http://www.theautisticadvocate.com/2018/05/an-autisticburnout.html?m=1; 2018.



Autistic Burnout vs Depression

Although there are numerous differences between Autistic burnout and depression, some signs and symptoms overlap, such as feelings of worthlessness and exhaustion. Although they are distinct from one another, Autistic burnout can lead to depression.

Depression

Autistic Burnout

Typically responds well to behavioral activation

Intense sense of worthlessness

Negative thoughts about the self, world & future. Negative thoughts may respond well to CBT.

Persistent depressed mood, lasting at least two weeks

Loss of pleasure

Behavioral activation may make worse Appetite changes

Socially withdraws

Lack of motivation

Concentration difficulties

Executive functioning difficulties

Reduction of/slowing down of physical movements

Tearfulness, emotionally upset more easily

Sense of emptiness

Increased sensory sensitivities

Attempts to reframe negative thoughts may increase shame

Benefits from rest, sensory detox time, unmasking, & time in special interests

Typical onset after busy season with high sensory & social demands

Sleep changes Fatigue

Chronic exhaustion

Suicidality Loss of skills



Burnout recovery

- **Acceptance and support** this can come from family, friends, and communities.
- Unmask allow yourself to do what you enjoy and engage with your special interests
- Formal support have reasonable adjustments put in place at work or school, psychical adjustments such as someone getting your shopping, and mental health support
- Reduce load take time off, have breaks, reduce stressful activities
- **Self-advocacy** learn to set healthy boundaries and expectations, and ask for help
- **Self-knowledge** learn to recognise your triggers and early signs of burnout, understand your own patterns of behaviour and feelings.

Spending time unmasking Stop Suppressing Stimming Resting Alone time Basic needs supported Using AAC No social demands No talking Sensory regulation Inner circle interaction only Drop unnecessary demands Set Boundaries Sensory safe environment Nourish the body Incorporate sensory soothers Movement Engaging with special interests

Recovery Supports



Acceptance



Social Support



Leaning into Autistic Strengths



Formal Supports



Reducing Load



Self-Advocacy



Self-Knowledge



Engage in sensory "detox"

Autistic Burnout Recovery

Ensure appropriate level of supports/accommodations

Support your sleep interests