A fact sheet about

Energy through midlife changes

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Energy through midlife changes

What spoon theory is, how your energy changes with life, and a weekly check.



Key points

- Spoon theory (definition below) is a way to think about energy as a set number of spoons each day, where every task uses some.
- How many spoons you have, and what takes them, can change as life changes: a new job, caring for someone, perimenopause and menopause, or getting older.
- So a plan that worked at one stage of life may not work at the next, and that is not a failing on your part.
- A small step is to look once a week at where your spoons went, and choose one thing to hand over or drop for the next week.

What spoon theory is

You may have had a way of getting through the week that worked for years. Then something shifted: a child started school, a parent needed help to get to the doctor, or your sleep and body began to change. Now the same week leaves you worn out by Wednesday.

It can feel as if you are coping less well than before. But your week is asking more of you than it did, and you may have fewer spoons to give it.

Spoon theory comes from an essay by Christine Miserandino, a woman living with lupus. She handed a friend a bunch of spoons to show that she only had so much to spend each day. Each small task, like getting dressed, used one up.

It is an idea from lived experience, not from research, and nobody has measured a spoon. Many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults now use it to explain their own energy. You can read more about how busy places use up spoons here. You can read more about planning your week around your senses here.

Spoons also go on things nobody else can see. Masking, planning, noise and staying on alert for a child or parent all use them up.

How your spoons can change across life

Autistic adults say burnout builds up when life asks more of them than they have, over and over, with not enough help. That can happen more easily when a lot changes at once.

Caring for a child or an older parent takes spoons every day. It often takes the time you would have used to rest, too.

Perimenopause and menopause can change your spoons too. Perimenopause is the years of hormone change before periods stop. It most often starts in the mid-40s, but it can start earlier, and it can affect women and some trans and non-binary people. The first review of research on autism and menopause, led by autistic researchers, found that many autistic people noticed big changes. Noise, light, touch, smells and heat often got harder to bear. For some, tiredness became too strong to push through as before, and keeping up a mask got harder or stopped working altogether. In one large study, women with ADHD were more likely to have severe perimenopause symptoms, and these often started younger, in their late 30s. This research is still new, so if this sounds like you, a GP can talk with you about it.

Research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: a weekly look at where your spoons go

Once a week, at a calm time, look back over the last seven days. You do not need to count spoons exactly. Just notice which of these took the most:

- work, or looking for work
- your home: cooking, cleaning, shopping and admin
- caring for someone else
- you: time alone, rest, special interests and the people who are easy to be with

Then choose one thing to hand over or drop for the next week. Take it from the things that use spoons, not from the last group, because those are what give spoons back.

It could be small:

- a sibling takes one of your parent's appointments
- groceries delivered instead of a trip to the shops
- the same few easy dinners all week
- one extra plan you say no to
- a phone call swapped for a text

You can set a weekly reminder in the Understanding Zoe app, and keep a note of what you handed over. Over a few months, that note may show you which part of your life is asking the most right now.

This advice comes from what autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults say helps them. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Handing things over can feel like giving up, but it is a way of making your spoons last.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point. A GP is a good place to start, and it can check for health reasons you may be tired, and talk with you about menopause and the years before it. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you plan your energy, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you have been running low for months, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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