A fact sheet about

# Preventing the next burnout

UnderstandingZoe

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# Preventing the next burnout

**Your early signs, what tends to come before burnout, and a plan for next time.**



## Key points

- Burnout usually builds over weeks or months. Its first signs are small and easy to explain away.
- Your early signs are personal. The best guide to them is what happened before your last burnout.
- Common things that come before burnout include poor sleep, skipped meals, more sensory input, changes of plan, a long stretch of masking, and too many demands at once.
- To prevent it, write down your first three signs from last time, and decide now what you will drop when the first one turns up. You can keep this list in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app.

## What early signs are

Looking back on your last burnout, you may see signs you missed at the time. Maybe your sleep got worse first, or you stopped cooking, or the radio in the car became too much. Each time, maybe there was a reason that seemed to explain it, like a busy month or a cold.

By the time burnout is clear, the part of you that would decide to slow down is already worn out. That is why it helps to decide what you will do before it starts.

Autistic adults describe burnout as tiredness that lasts a long time. Everyday things get harder, and noise, light and people get harder to bear. You can read more about what autistic burnout is here.

Burnout builds when life asks more of you than you have, again and again. Some people call the stretch before it "brownout". In a brownout, you are running low and things are slipping, but you can still make changes.

The idea behind it does come from research. Autistic adults describe signs that burnout is coming, such as meltdowns or shutdowns happening closer together and extreme tiredness. Some say that resting at the first sign helped them avoid or delay a full burnout.

People describe small, ordinary things getting a bit worse:

- sleeping badly, or needing more sleep and getting less
- forgetting to eat, or eating only your safe foods, or finding even safe foods hard to eat
- needing more time alone than usual
- speaking, typing or communicating getting harder, especially at the end of the day
- noise, light or touch getting harder to bear than usual
- meltdowns or shutdowns happening closer together

Many autistic adults say they noticed burnout too late. Each sign can make the next one more likely. Poor sleep makes noise harder to handle, and that makes the supermarket harder, which leaves less energy for the evening, and then sleep gets worse again.

At the first sign, a small change can be enough. Later on, you need a much bigger change, at the time you have the least energy to make it. So make the decision now, while you are well.

## The common triggers

The things that come before burnout tend to fall into a few groups. Which ones matter will be different for each person:

- sleep: going to bed later, or waking more often
- food: skipping meals, or only noticing hunger once it is urgent
- sensory input: more noise, light, crowds or travel than usual, for longer
- changes: surprises, changes of plan, a new routine, a move, or losing or starting a job
- masking: a long stretch of looking fine around people, at work, with family or at events
- too many demands: more requests, more admin or more caring, with nothing taken away

Masking is the one autistic adults name most often. Masking can help you get through, and for some people it keeps them safe. But it also costs a lot of energy over time.

So stepping back from it is your choice, and only where it is safe.

Most of the people in these studies were white women who found out they were autistic as adults. More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So your signs and triggers may look different, and this is still about you. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

ADHD adults talk about burnout too, but research has not defined it in the same way yet. You can read more about ADHD burnout here.

## The one thing to try: write down your first three signs

The advice here comes from what autistic adults say has worked for them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Think back to the start of your last burnout, or the last time you came close. Write down the first three things you noticed, in the order they came. Then choose one thing you will drop when the first sign comes back.

A list might say "stopped cooking, then stopped answering messages, then could not stand the radio". The order matters most, because the first sign is the one you act on.

Choose the thing you will drop now:

- one regular commitment, for two weeks
- the social plan you were least looking forward to
- cooking, by switching to the same easy meals for a week
- one errand that could wait or be delivered
- the latest extra thing you said yes to

Take it from your demands, not from the things that help you recover: time alone, special interests and people who are easy to be with stay in.

If you cannot remember the order, ask someone who was around at the time. People close to you often notice the first sign before you do.

You can keep your list in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, and set a reminder to read it once a month. Your signs can change as your life changes, so update the list after each close call.

## 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, whether you are noticing the first signs or burnout has already started. A GP is a good place to begin. A GP can also talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you build a plan around your own signs. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if you notice flatness, where nothing feels good, even the things you usually enjoy. That can be a sign of depression, which can happen alongside burnout. You can read more about how burnout and depression differ here.

## Sources


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**for more information, you can contact**

*hello@understandingzoe.com*

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