A fact sheet about

Protecting your social battery

UnderstandingZoe

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Protecting your social battery

What the social battery is, why it drains, and how to plan your exit.



Key points

- Your social battery (definition below) is the energy you use when you are with people, and even time you enjoy can use it up.
- The cost often turns up hours later, once you are home and things go quiet.
- Hiding how you really are, or being with people who communicate in a very different way from you, can use more of it.
- Deciding before you arrive which part you most want, and when you will leave, may help you get home with something left.

What the social battery is

You go to a family lunch and it is a good day: the food is nice and you like most people there. You help clear up and head home, and then it costs you the evening: you cannot answer a text, and a simple question from someone at home feels like too much.

At work it might be a day of meetings, and pushing through did not stop the cost from coming.

The social battery is a name for the energy you spend on being with people. It is a phrase from the community rather than from research: many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults use it. Like a phone battery, it runs down with use and charges again with rest.

Being with people uses charge in small ways: getting your point across, listening, reading faces and working out what someone meant. Busy places can use it too, through noise, light and crowds. You can read more about why busy places wipe you out here.

For some people, time with the right people fills the battery, but others need time alone after almost any contact. Both are common.

Why the cost turns up later, and why some time costs more

In a study of adults in general, time with people lifted their mood at the time, but three hours later they felt more tired. The more people they had met, the more tired they felt. So feeling fine while you are there does not mean the battery is still full.

Who you are with matters too. An autistic researcher named one reason the ‘double empathy problem’. When two people communicate in very different ways, each finds the other hard to follow: so the hard part is shared, and neither person is to blame.

In a study, when autistic people passed a story along to each other, they kept as much of it as non-autistic people did. But mixed groups lost more of the story, and they felt less close. Autistic adults have also said they feel more at ease with autistic friends and family, with less to explain. So a lunch with people who communicate like you may cost less than a meeting with people who do not. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, some of this may fit you too.

Masking can use charge as well. Masking means changing how you come across so that you fit in: your face, your voice and how you move: it can be tiring. At work, many neurodivergent adults say they feel extra pressure to mask.

For some people masking keeps them safe, so masking less is your choice, and only where it feels safe.

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: decide your best part and your exit before you arrive

On a calm day before your next event, decide two things:

- the part you most want to be there for
- the time, or the sign, that means you leave

The best part might be seeing one cousin, the meal, the speeches or the first hour before the music gets loud: spend your battery there, and keep the other parts shorter or skip them.

The exit can be a time, like three o'clock, or a point in the day, like after the cake. If your body's signals are hard to read, a time may work better than waiting to feel tired.

If you can, tell one person your plan, so you do not have to explain yourself when you go. A short line can do it: "I'm heading off now, it was lovely to see you."

Leave a gap after the event, like an easy next morning. You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for your leaving time. And you can also keep a note there of how each event left you, and look back on it before the next one.

This step is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. Leaving early can feel rude, or like letting people down, but leaving with some ‘charge’ (in your social battery) may mean you can still reply to texts that night.

When you cannot leave

Some events you cannot leave early: maybe a wedding, a day looking after someone or a family holiday. Then small breaks inside the event can do the job of an early exit. Some ideas to choose from:

- a job that gives you a reason to step away, like washing up, walking the dog or a trip to the shop
- arriving a bit later, or in your own car, so you control the end
- a few minutes alone in the bathroom, outside or in the car
- headphones on the way there and back
- one person to sit with who you do not need to perform for

At work, a short break after a long meeting may help, or having your camera off for part of a video call. You can ask for this at work as a small, fair change. You can read more about agreeing changes like this at work here.

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 this happens every week or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. 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 week around 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 a flat battery after events has turned into months of feeling worn out, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

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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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