A fact sheet about

Decompressing after people time

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Decompressing after people time

What decompression is, why people time needs recovery, and how to protect it.



Key points

- Decompression (definition below) is time on your own terms after being with people, so you can let go of what you held in and come back to yourself.
- It can be time alone, a special interest, a walk or a swim, and not only doing nothing.
- Many autistic adults say time alone after people time helps them settle and then feel ready to see people again. If you are neurodivergent in another way, this may fit you too.
- A small step is to decide your decompression before the event, and protect it as you would any other plan.

What decompression is

You get home from a family dinner and it went well...Then someone at home wants to talk about it, and you need the door closed and the lights low before you can communicate again.

It might be the end of a day of visits, a kids' party you hosted or a long day at work with people. You may need an hour, or you may need the whole next day. Some people feel guilty about this, or worry that it looks rude.

Decompression means coming back to yourself after time with people. It is a word people use in the community rather than a word from research. You spend time on your own terms, with nothing asked of you, until you feel like yourself again.

It does not have to mean lying still. For many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent people, doing nothing is not restful at all. Decompression can be time on a special interest, a game, a book, a walk alone or a swim. It can also be a dark room, a shower or loud music in the car.

This page is about the time after. You can read more about planning the event itself and when to leave here.

Why people time can need recovery time

Being with people can mean holding a lot in. Masking means changing how you come across so that you fit in: your face, your voice and how you move. In one study, many autistic adults said masking left them worn out. You can read more about what masking can cost you here. A lot of them said they needed time alone afterwards to let go of what they had held back, and to ‘be myself’.

ADHD adults describe masking too, like acting as if they are following, or holding back from cutting in. Some said they needed days to recover after a long stretch of it. So how long you need may depend on how much you held in, not only on how long you were there.

But for some people masking keeps them safe. Being able to mask less is a privilege, and for many BBIA and LGBTQIA+ people, and others in marginalised communities, it may not feel safe to unmask. Where you do have a choice, it is yours to make.

Time alone is not the same as pulling away from people. Autistic adults in one study said time alone let them step back from too much noise and people, then settle and recharge. After that, many of them felt ready to see people again.

Autistic adults who have been through burnout say the same thing on a bigger scale. Rest, time alone and a break from noise and light were among the things that helped them recover. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, some of this may fit you too.

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 decompression before you go

Before your next event, decide two things: what you will do afterwards, and for how long. Then keep that time free, like any other plan.

Some ideas to choose from:

- an hour in your room with the door shut and a sign that says "not now"
- time on a special interest, like music, gardening, fixing something or reading about a favourite topic
- a walk or a drive on your own, or a swim
- a shower or bath, then headphones on
- an easy next morning with nothing booked

If you live with other people, tell them before you go, not when you get home and find it hard to communicate. A short line can do it, like "after the party I need an hour on my own, then I'll be fine".

If you cannot get time straight away, a small version still counts, like ten minutes in the car before you go inside. Some people get up early or stay up late to get time alone. That can cost sleep, so try to find time in the day first.

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app for your decompression time, and keep a note of what helped most after each event.

This advice comes from what autistic adults say helped them, and more broadly neurodivergent adults may find it useful too. It is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Taking time out can feel selfish, but it may be what lets you say yes to the next invite.

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 need a short break after people or whole days. 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 find ways to recover that suit you. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you often need days to recover, and this has gone on for months, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

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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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