A fact sheet about

Autistic burnout and depression

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Autistic burnout and depression

How the two differ, why they get mixed up, and what to tell a GP.



Key points

- Autistic burnout and depression can look alike from the outside. Both can bring exhaustion, pulling away from people and doing far less than usual.
- Burnout tends to ease when demands come off. Depression tends to bring a flat or hopeless mood and a loss of enjoyment that stay even when life gets quieter.
- The two often happen together, so it is rarely just one or the other.
- A doctor or other health worker can help you tell them apart. A few lines on what changed, when, and whether rest helps will make that talk easier.

What each one is

You may have stopped answering the phone, and the washing may be piling up. Things you managed for years may feel out of reach. Someone suggests depression, and you wonder if it is burnout instead.

It is worth knowing which, because what helps one does not always help the other. Both can also be going on at once.

Autistic burnout is a long stretch of exhaustion. Skills you usually have get harder, and noise, light and people get harder to bear. Many people also pull away from others. Autistic adults defined burnout themselves, and they say it builds when life asks more of you than you have, for months, without enough support. You can read more about whether you are in burnout here.

Depression is a mental health condition. It can bring a low or flat mood that lasts, or a feeling that nothing will get better. You may also lose interest in things you used to enjoy. It can also follow a hard time in life, so what came before does not show which one it is.

How they tend to differ

The clearest difference is what happens when demands drop. Autistic adults say burnout eases slowly as the load comes off. Their skills come back as their energy returns. In depression, the low mood and loss of enjoyment tend to stay, even after life gets quieter.

Enjoyment is the other place they tend to differ. In the first study that defined burnout, autistic adults rarely described losing enjoyment or sleep problems, which are common in depression. Some said they still enjoyed things and wanted to do them, but found them much harder to manage. Time on their own interests was one of the things that helped them recover most.

These are general differences, not rules, and some autistic adults who live with both say the two feel different from the inside.

Why they get mixed up

From the outside, both can look like pulling away, tiredness and doing less. In one survey, autistic adults said they had often been told their burnout was something else, and the most common wrong answer was depression.

Depression questionnaires do not settle it either. Only a few have been checked with autistic adults, and none of them separates depression from burnout. On paper, burnout and depression scores tend to rise together. Researchers say scores cannot yet fully tell them apart, so talking with a GP or another health worker matters more than any score.

Burnout and depression often come together. In one survey, nearly half of the autistic adults in burnout had also been assessed as having depression at the time. Some said burnout led to depression starting or coming back. Researchers think burnout probably makes depression more likely, but each can still happen on its own.

If burnout is taken for depression, the help you are offered may not fit what you need. That is a reason to name both, not a reason to avoid help for depression.

Most of this research comes from 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 this may not match your life exactly, and it can still be about you. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: two or three lines before a GP visit

Before the appointment, write two or three lines about three things:

- what has changed, such as something you can no longer do, or no longer enjoy
- roughly when it started, and what was going on in your life then
- whether rest brings any relief at all, such as a quiet day, a week with fewer demands, or time on your interests

Then say both words to the GP. For example, you could say you are wondering if this is autistic burnout, depression, or both.

Appointments are short, and words can go when you are stressed. A written note means the GP hears when it started and whether rest helps. You can hand the note over instead of saying it. This is not a test, and you are not scoring yourself.

You can keep the lines in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, and set a reminder for the day before.

You may be told it is one when you think it is the other. Many autistic adults felt their burnout had been misread. You can ask whether both have been thought about, and ask to see someone who knows autistic adults.

Getting support

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

You can ask for support at any point. See a GP soon if your mood is flat or hopeless, or if nothing gives you any enjoyment. Please also see a GP soon if you have thoughts of not wanting to be here. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Since November 2025, the plan needs to come from your usual GP or the practice you are registered with. Other health workers can help too, 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 are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night. If your life is in danger, call 000.

Sources

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