A fact sheet about

# ADHD and autistic burnout

UnderstandingZoe

https://understandingzoe.com

Copyright 2026

UnderstandingZoe

# ADHD and autistic burnout

**What research knows, what the two may share, and one habit to let drop.**



## Key points

- Research has not answered this yet. Autistic burnout has been studied and defined with autistic adults, and ADHD burnout has not been studied in the same way so far.
- What the two may share is the cost of compensating. This is the constant extra effort of keeping up with a world not built for how you work.
- For ADHD adults, that effort often looks like masking. It also looks like the checking, rehearsing and over-preparing you do so nothing gets dropped.
- Around 40% of autistic people are also ADHD, and some studies put it as high as 70%. If you are both, the question may not split into two, and you can act on your burnout either way.

## What is known so far

For years you may have run your life on lists, alarms, double-checking and arriving early, and it worked. Then for a month or two it stopped working. Everything took more out of you than it should have. You started to wonder if this was burnout, and which kind.

Autistic burnout has a research definition, and autistic adults helped write it. It describes deep exhaustion and pulling away from people. Thinking and everyday tasks get harder, and autistic traits become easier to see. It is also described as different from depression. You can read more about what autistic burnout is here.

ADHD burnout is a term ADHD adults use about their own lives. It does not have a research definition yet, and very few studies have looked at it. So nobody can tell yet whether it is the same as autistic burnout, something close to it, or a few different things sharing one name.

Being both autistic and ADHD is common. A large review of 63 studies found that about 40% of autistic people are also ADHD, and some studies put it at 50% to 70%. If that is you, you do not need to sort your burnout into an autistic part and an ADHD part before you act on it. You do not need an assessment for this page to be useful either.

## What the two may share: the cost of compensating

Compensating means the extra work you do to fit in and keep up. For autistic adults, the cause of burnout they name most often is masking. Masking means hiding or covering your traits to fit in. It helps people get by, but over time it wears them out.

ADHD adults mask too. In one recent study, more than nine in ten said they hid their ADHD traits at least some of the time. They described pretending to pay attention, holding back fidgeting, copying other people and over-preparing. Many said it left them exhausted, sometimes for days.

Then there are the systems you use so nothing gets dropped. You might check the door three times or rehearse a phone call. You might set four alarms for one appointment, or read a message five times before you send it. These keep life working, but each one costs a little energy every time.

Research shows masking takes a toll in both. The idea that everyday systems add up to burnout in ADHD comes from what ADHD adults describe. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So your experience may look different, and this can still be about you. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

## The one thing to try: let one compensation drop

Name one thing you do every day to keep up. Then let it drop once this week, somewhere a slip would not matter much:

- over-preparing: go to a casual catch-up without planning what to say
- rehearsing: book a table or a haircut without a script
- re-reading: send a message to a friend after reading it once
- holding still: let yourself fidget or pace on a call with someone you trust

Afterwards, notice how the rest of the day went compared with a usual day. The aim is to find out what the habit was costing you, it is not to prove you can manage without it. Many of these systems are what make your life work, and nothing here asks you to give them up.

Letting a habit drop can feel risky, even when little is at stake. Many of these habits started because something went wrong once. Your body may remember that, even when your head knows the door is locked.

Some of these habits protect you, and for some people masking keeps them safe. So keep them where being misread could cause real problems, such as with a landlord, a doctor or a boss. Start where nothing much rides on it.

Knowing the cost can help you find swaps that cost less. A written list can replace rehearsing an appointment. One alarm you cannot ignore can replace four that you can. Time with people who already know you are ADHD or autistic is also time when you can stop compensating.

# 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. If you are wondering whether you are autistic, ADHD or both, a GP can explain how assessment works in Australia. If you are already running on empty, a GP is also a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. 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.

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 is different from burnout and can happen alongside it. You can read more about how burnout and depression differ here.

# Sources


Higgins, Arnold, Weise, Pellicano and Trollor (2021). "Defining autistic burnout through experts by lived experience: Grounded Delphi method investigating #AutisticBurnout." Autism 25(8), 2356-2369. doi:10.1177/13623613211019858

Raymaker, Teo, Steckler, Lentz, Scharer, Delos Santos, Kapp, Hunter, Joyce and Nicolaidis (2020). "'Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew': Defining Autistic Burnout." Autism in Adulthood 2(2), 132-143. doi:10.1089/aut.2019.0079

Arnold, Higgins, Weise, Desai, Pellicano and Trollor (2023). "Confirming the nature of autistic burnout." Autism 27(7), 1906-1918. doi:10.1177/13623613221147410

Hull, Petrides, Allison, Smith, Baron-Cohen, Lai and Mandy (2017). "'Putting on My Best Normal': Social Camouflaging in Adults with Autism Spectrum Conditions." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 47(8), 2519-2534. doi:10.1007/s10803-017-3166-5

Mylett, Boucher and Iarocci (2026). "'I wish I could just be myself': Experiences of social camouflaging in adults with ADHD." Research in Neurodiversity 2, 100018. doi:10.1016/j.rin.2026.100018

van der Putten, Mol, Groenman, Radhoe, Torenvliet, van Rentergem and Geurts (2024). "Is camouflaging unique for autism? A comparison of camouflaging between adults with autism and ADHD." Autism Research 17(4), 812-823. doi:10.1002/aur.3099

Bradley, Shaw, Baron-Cohen and Cassidy (2021). "Autistic Adults' Experiences of Camouflaging and Its Perceived Impact on Mental Health." Autism in Adulthood 3(4), 320-329. doi:10.1089/aut.2020.0071

Rong, Yang, Jin and Wang (2021). "Prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in individuals with autism spectrum disorder: A meta-analysis." Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders 83, 101759. doi:10.1016/j.rasd.2021.101759

Hours, Recasens and Baleyte (2022). "ASD and ADHD comorbidity: What are we talking about?" Frontiers in Psychiatry 13, 837424. doi:10.3389/fpsyt.2022.837424

Australasian ADHD Professionals Association (2022). Australian Evidence-Based Clinical Practice Guideline for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), first edition. adhdguideline.aadpa.com.au

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.

**for more information, you can contact**

*hello@understandingzoe.com*

*Copyright 2026*