A fact sheet about

Autistic burnout

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Autistic burnout

What autistic burnout is, why it builds up, and one way to notice it.



Key points

- Autistic burnout is a long stretch of exhaustion (definition below). Skills you usually have get much harder, and noise, light and people get harder to bear.
- Autistic adults defined it themselves, they say it builds when life asks more of you than you have, for months, without enough support.
- It is different from a bad week, because the rest that usually helps with tiredness does not seem to help.
- The useful comparison is with your own usual self, not with anyone else. This page cannot tell you whether it is burnout.

What autistic burnout is

Something you have done for years without thinking may now need planning: cooking dinner, texting your sister or going to the shops can take a lot of effort. Some days it does not happen at all. Sounds you used to tune out may become too much. You may also want to be on your own more than ever before.

Sleep and a quiet weekend have not changed it... This is often when people first come across the words "autistic burnout".

Autistic people talked about burnout among themselves for years before researchers studied it. When it was studied, autistic adults helped to define it.

They describe three things that happen together and last:

- deep exhaustion that is more than tiredness, and does not go away
- losing skills you usually have, such as talking easily, cooking, keeping on top of admin or looking after yourself
- finding light, sound, touch and conversation harder to bear than before

Many people also pull away from others. Their autistic traits may become more visible, with more stimming and stronger sensory reactions, and they may also have much less energy to mask. Masking means hiding or changing how you really are around other people.

Burnout is about autistic people, including people who are both autistic and ADHD. In one survey, about four in ten autistic adults in burnout were also ADHD. If you are ADHD and not autistic, you can read more about ADHD burnout here. For some adults, burnout is what led them to be assessed as autistic in the first place.

Most of the research so far comes from white women who found out they were autistic as adults. More broadly, many groups have often been left out of research on autism and neurodivergence, including BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people and LGBTQIA+ people. They also include people with higher support needs and people who communicate in other ways. So burnout may look different for you, and this can still be about you. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

Why it builds up

Burnout comes from carrying too much for a long time. It is not caused by one thing. The autistic adults who defined it named the same causes again and again. These were masking, places that do not suit their senses, social contact, change, and all the thinking it takes to run a life. On top of that, there was not enough support or time to recover.

The problem is the gap between what people expect of you and the help you get. In one survey, none of the autistic adults said burnout came from not being able enough. They said they were exhausted and never got a break.

That is why burnout can come after a time that looked fine from the outside. A move, a year of caring for a parent, a death in the family or a new baby can all be managed day by day. The cost tends to come later.

The one thing to try: compare yourself with yourself

Burnout is a change from your own usual energy and skills. It is not about how you compare with anyone else. Someone else may never have found phone calls easy. What matters is whether something has changed for you.

So write down one thing you could do six months ago that is much harder now, and roughly when it started to change:

- "making dinner most nights, harder since about June"
- "answering messages, stopped over winter"
- "going to the shops on my own, since the move"

If several come to mind, write the one that bothers you most and stop there. This is not a score, and no number of changes means burnout. It is a note in your own words that you can take to someone who can help.

A note like "I stopped being able to cook in June" is easier for a GP to work with than "I am exhausted". It also helps you notice later if that skill comes back as life gets easier.

If writing is hard right now, you can record it on your phone instead. Or you can ask someone close to you what they have seen change, because they sometimes notice it first. You can keep it in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app. You can also set a reminder to add to it over the next few weeks.

Getting support

This page describes what autistic adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you whether what you are going through is burnout.

You can ask for support at any point. A GP is a good place to start. Being very tired can have other causes, and a GP can check for them. In one survey, six in ten autistic adults who answered said burnout explained something they had first been told was something else, most often depression. So it helps to see someone who knows autistic adults, and to use the words "autistic burnout" yourself. You can read more about how burnout and depression differ here.

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 with burnout, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sources

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