A fact sheet about

Wiped out after busy places

Understanding Zoe

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Wiped out after busy places

Why ordinary places can use up your energy, and how to plan rest.



Key points

- Spoon theory (definition below) is a way to think about energy. You have a set number of spoons each day, and every activity uses some, even ordinary ones.
- Busy, bright and loud places can use up spoons on taking in what is around you and on holding yourself together, even when nothing hard happens.
- You often feel that cost later. That is why a 40 minute shop can cost you your whole evening.
- Which places drain you most depends on you. A useful step is to find your two most draining places and plan rest straight after the worst one.

What spoon theory is

You go to the supermarket for six things, and you are home within the hour. Nothing went wrong, nobody was rude, and you got everything on the list. Then the evening is impacted. You are on the couch and cannot start dinner or answer a message.

The same can happen after a train ride across town, a family lunch or a day in the office. From the outside it can look as if nothing happened. That makes it hard to explain, to other people and to yourself.

Spoon theory comes from an essay by Christine Miserandino, a woman living with lupus. A friend asked her what being ill was really like. So she gathered spoons from the diner tables and handed them to her friend. Each spoon stood for some energy, and each part of an ordinary day, like showering or getting dressed, cost one.

She started each day with a set number of spoons: when they were gone, there were no more. Many people never have to count, because they have more spoons than they will use...

Spoon theory is an idea from lived experience, and many autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults use it now.

Why some places drain you more than others

Part of what a busy place uses up is your senses. Many autistic adults say they react more strongly than other people to everyday sights, sounds, touch, smells and tastes. ADHD adults describe both stronger and weaker reactions, and sound often stands out. When more of what is around you gets through, your brain has more to sort out and deal with.

A supermarket can bring a lot of this at once. There are bright lights, music, announcements, beeping registers, people moving in ways you cannot predict, and a choice on every shelf. Public transport adds strangers close enough to touch and stops you do not control.

Input you cannot predict tends to cost more than steady input, while input you control tends to cost less. A song you chose may be fine, while the same volume from a stranger's phone is not.

Holding yourself together costs spoons too. Keeping your face, voice and body looking calm takes effort, and autistic adults who mask describe it as exhausting. This is why a family lunch can drain you, even in a quiet house. For some people, masking also keeps them safe, so it is not always something they can drop.

You often do not notice the cost while it is happening. It turns up later, when things go quiet and there is nothing left for the next thing.

You may have read that autistic people find shops overwhelming. Some do, and many do not. People's senses work in very different ways, whether they are autistic, ADHD or neurodivergent in another way.

Some people mostly avoid sensory input, some mostly seek it, and many do both depending on the sense. A person who seeks input may come home from a busy market full of energy and may find a silent waiting room much harder.

How much a place costs can also change from day to day. Many people say they can cope with noise and light after a good sleep and a calm day. They find the same things much harder when they are stressed or tired.

The research backs up the sensory differences and the cost of masking. More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So if shops are fine for you but phone calls or family lunches are not, the idea still works with your own list. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: find your two most draining places

For one week, notice which two places or activities drain you the most. You do not need to count spoons or give anything a score. At the end of each day, write down the one thing that left you flattest, in a few words.

By the end of the week, two will usually stand out. Take the worst of the two. Then put something that helps you recover straight after it, instead of the next errand. Choose what works for you:

- ten minutes sitting in the car before you drive home
- a dark, quiet room, or headphones with or without music
- a shower, or lying under something heavy
- time on something you love, like a game, a book or a special interest
- moving your body or loud music, if that is what settles you

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

Resting after a shop can feel like you have not earned it, because the shop was not hard. But rest straight after the draining thing goes further than rest after three more errands. If you cannot rest straight away, a small version still counts, like five minutes in a parked car.

Some draining places cannot be avoided. You could shop at a quieter time, wear sunglasses or earplugs, or use the self-checkout. Writing your list in the order of the aisles can help too.

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. A GP is a good place to start. Being wiped out a lot can have physical causes, and a GP can check for those. Different health professionals can help you plan a week with room to recover. Your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If tiredness after one day has turned into months of it, that may be closer to burnout. You can read more about autistic burnout here.

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