

# Autistic Burnout

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## What is autistic burnout?

Burnout is a form of extreme exhaustion and an inability to keep up with the demands of life.

'Autistic burnout' is a state of complete overload and fatigue arising from the additional stressors that come from being autistic.

Causes of autistic burnout can include:

- Masking. Using additional energy in everyday life to hide or suppress autistic traits to present or appear as neurotypical can come at a significant cost.
- Sensory differences and sensitivities. Sensory sensitivities can make daily life very difficult and oftentimes painful.
- Communication differences and difficulties.
- Executive dysfunction
- Lack of accommodations
- Being in a transitional phase of life, e.g. changing schools, graduating from school, moving out of home, etc. Autistic people often struggle with changes or transitions.

On top of all the usual stressors that everyone deals with in everyday life, autistic people often have an extra layer of factors to consider, many of which are invisible and considered insignificant to most people.

## What does autistic burnout look and feel like?

When someone is in autistic burnout, their autistic behaviours and traits may become more exaggerated or obvious.

- They may not mask as much.
- They may seek out more specific sensory input.
- They may be more sensitive to stimuli. They may find certain sounds, smells, lights, flavours or textures to be more intense than usual.
- They may have more meltdowns or shutdowns.
- They may be more anxious.
- Autistic burnout can also lead to skill regression.

Being in autistic burnout can feel like everything is consuming way more energy than it's supposed to. It becomes frustrating, and they can feel like a failure, like things shouldn't be that hard. They may keep pushing through because they have no other choice or because people around them are telling them that they need to, and eventually they simply have no more energy to do so. They just can't do anymore.

But sometimes, because autistic people have difficulties with identifying how they're feeling, they may not notice how tired they're becoming, their body starting to hurt or things becoming harder. They may not notice until it's too late.

## Autistic burnout vs. depression

Autistic burnout and depression may look similar in the sense that in both cases the person may have very little energy or motivation, may not want to engage in things they would usually be interested in, or they may even be suicidal or start self-harming.

When a person is experiencing depression, getting out of bed, and engaging in activities and normal routine is important. It's important to not get into a slump because it can cause their mood to become worse. However, if a person is experiencing autistic burnout, engaging in activities, or going out and doing things they don't have the energy for, could just push them further into burnout.

## What to do if you or your child is experiencing burnout

- It is okay and important to rest. Don't beat yourself up for resting or letting your child rest.
- Reduce demands as much as possible.
- Do the things you enjoy. Find some new things you enjoy. Perhaps some painting, gaming, playing music, etc.
- Create routine and familiarity.
- Reduce expectations and pressure. Engage in new things but stop when you have had enough. Don't feel like you need to push further than you're comfortable going.
- Therapy. Finding a good therapist can make a big difference. It could be helpful to find an occupational therapist who might be able to give some advice on how to manage any sensory difficulties, or even executive functioning.
- Put accommodations in place to prevent burnout happening again. Once you get out of burnout, it's important to make sure you've put things in place to try to avoid it getting to that point again. If you go back to doing the exact same things you were doing before you burnt out, chances are, it will happen again.
- Could you reduce your workload? If you are studying in New Zealand, you may be able to apply to study under Limited full time. This means that Study link would consider you a full-time student while you study part time.

- For some autistic people, it can be nice to find other autistic people who understand or relate.
- Having safe spaces to just be yourself. Spaces where you don't need to mask or justify anything.
- Having a good support network

For parents:

- Would homeschooling be a suitable option? Or perhaps a different type of school like Montessori, Steiner or nature school.
- If your child/teen just can't do their schoolwork right now, don't panic, there are ways to catch up. Take it at whatever pace they can keep up with. And if they are a teen and they need to drop out, again, it's not the end of the world. Their life and wellbeing are more important, and they can catch up later if they decide they want to get further qualifications.
- Listen to your child when they describe how they're feeling and don't minimise or dismiss it. It might seem comforting to tell them that a lot of people feel the same way, but it may only make them feel misunderstood or like they are a failure for being unable to cope.
- Sometimes it can be nice to get some reassurance from an autistic adult who has been through it and can tell you that you're doing okay. It can be hard when the advice for autistic burnout can contradict what society tells you is the right thing to do.

For friends, family, and wider support networks:

- Take some time to understand autistic burnout so that you understand the depth of the exhaustion.
- Validate the way the autistic person is feeling.
- It's important to also understand giving praise for getting out or doing things deemed as success, also places pressure on the autistic person. It's okay to remain neutral about whatever the day brings, be that staying in bed and doing nothing, or getting out and trying a new activity. Both activities are meeting different needs. It's only important that the autistic person is learning to listen to their body and do what is best for their wellbeing.

## **For more information:**

<https://autismunderstood.co.uk/struggling-as-an-autistic-person/autistic-burnout/>