



Autistic Burnout

“Autistic burnout is a severely debilitating condition with onset preceded by fatigue from masking autistic traits, interpersonal interactions, an overload of cognitive input, a sensory environment unaccommodating to autistic sensitivities and/or other additional stressors or changes. Onset and episodes of autistic burnout may interact with co-occurring physical and or mental health conditions”

(‘Investigating autistic burnout. Final report’ Dr S. Arnold, Julianne Higgins et al Feb 22)

Research by Dr S. Arnold and Julianne Higgins et al, found that the most common characteristics experienced were:

- Chronic exhaustion 72%
- Sensory overload 80%
- Heightened anxiety 90%
- Low mood 95%
- Increased shutdowns 80%
- Loss of skills 90%
- Suicidal thoughts 64%
- Intrusive thoughts 59%

The Royal College of Psychiatrists describes autistic burnout as "a state of exhaustion, associated with functional and cognitive deterioration and an increase in autism symptomatology, as a consequence of coping with social interaction (including masking) and the sensory environment. It may be a short-lived state (as at the end of a working day), relieved by a relatively brief withdrawal from the stress. However, longer and more severe stress can produce a more sustained state (which entails some form of innate change) which has to wait on its natural remission. It overlaps symptomatically with anxiety and depression, and there may be a heightened risk of suicide”.

The main causes of autistic burnout are:

- Prolonged masking - often fawning, camouflaging, identity management in social situations and environments and a mostly subconscious protective trauma response to feeling unsafe in social environments (masking is not usually a choice an autistic person makes).

- Prolonged periods of time spent in social situations & environments that drain an autistic person of energy - because the environments are not in sync with the different needs of the autistic individual.
- Prolonged sensory overload - autistic people can be hyper and hypo sensitive to all their different senses.
- Too many expectations and demands -this is particularly an issue for those with a PDA profile who need more autonomy.
- Stigma – there is a great deal of stigma (surrounding autism and being autistic) that is essentially why most autistic people mask; they are not safe to be their authentic selves, due to a lack of inclusion, understanding, accommodations and environments not being safe spaces.

There are many crossovers between depression and autistic burnout, but it is important to understand the distinct differences. Treatment for depression does not work for an autistic person experiencing burnout and may actually exacerbate burnout and exhaust them further. "While Autistic Burnout may co-occur with depression, it is distinct from it. Historically, Autistic Burnout may have been understood as depression. You may even have been diagnosed with depression by your GP when your symptoms might be more accurately understood as Autistic Burnout" Dr Alice Nicholls, ND Psychologist.

What helps an individual experiencing autistic burnout?

- Rest: There are 7 types of rest: Physical, Mental, Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Sensory and Creative. Resting is crucial for recovery from autistic burnout and it can take time, for some a very long time (even years). It is very unlikely that an autistic child can experience recovery whilst they are in the environment/s that trigger burnout.
- Time with interests: Because autistic brains and nervous systems are ‘interest based’ (due to being ‘monotropic’) having plenty of time in flow states with their interests and passions is crucial and a way to rest, regulate, reset and heal. Sometimes in burnout the autistic person may have temporarily lost their interests and passions; it can take time for these to be renewed and for them to have the capacity for them again.
- Low/lower demands and expectations: High demands and expectations are often triggers for autistic burnout and so it is important that ordinary everyday demands and expectations, education demands, social and communication demands are all significantly reduced wherever possible.

- Time: You cannot rush recovery from autistic burnout. It is a process and you cannot set timescales either - as it is different for each autistic individual. This can be very challenging for autistic adults who are parent/carers (who may also be caring for children experiencing burnout). If they are working then time off work to rest is difficult, and it can mean many might lose jobs or have to leave. For autistic children and young people it often means attending school, college or university is usually impossible and more often alternative education pathways are required.
- Understanding capacity: Autistic people have differences in their social energy (made up of physical, mental and emotional energy). Their social energy can be affected by numerous things including: masking, sensory overload and too many demands upon them. – these are all exhausting. When burnt out, doing more and being in more social situations will exacerbate their experiences. Often, they naturally will seek out more alone time, as their nervous system seeks to heal.
- Neurokin and co regulation – autistic people can often feel safer with their neurokin (usually other autistic people they feel a connection with). It is easier to be unmasked when there are no neurotypical social expectations. Co regulation is also an important aspect of healing for an autistic person – regulation, connection, synergy and synchronicity with another person they trust.
- Autonomy – this is something autistic people need more of but especially if they have a PDA profile and it is really important in the recovery journey. Autonomy and having a sense of agency is crucial for feeling safe when PDA, or the trauma response is easily triggered.

Viv Dawes Autistic Advocate

www.autisticadvocate.co.uk