

NEWS

# Autistic burnout, explained

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‘Autistic burnout’ is the intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by a loss of skills, that some adults with autism experience. Many autistic people say it results mainly from the cumulative effect of having to navigate a world that is designed for neurotypical people.

Burnout may especially affect autistic adults who have strong cognitive and language abilities and are working or going to school with neurotypical people.

Here we describe the emerging picture of this phenomenon, how autistic adults might be able to recover from burnout and how to prevent it from occurring.

## **What is the experience of autistic burnout like?**

Like many aspects of autism, burnout varies greatly from person to person. Some autistic people experience it as an overwhelming sense of **physical exhaustion**. They may have more difficulty managing their emotions than usual and be prone to outbursts of sadness or anger. Burnout may manifest as intense **anxiety** or contribute to **depression** or **suicidal behavior**. It may involve an increase in autism traits such as **repetitive behaviors**, increased sensitivity to sensory input or difficulty with change.

Burnout can sometimes result in a loss of skills: An autistic woman who usually has strong verbal abilities may, for example, suddenly find herself unable to talk.

## **How did the concept of burnout arise?**

Few studies have formally investigated autistic burnout. Autism researchers have only become aware of burnout as a phenomenon over the past five years or so. They have learned about it directly through discussions with autistic participants in person or online.

The concept reflects the growing self-advocacy movement in the autism community, which has led to an increasing focus among researchers on adults with autism and their inner experiences. But it's not entirely new: Some researchers point out that children with autism can have meltdowns or lose skills when overwhelmed by the demands of a difficult environment.

### **What causes burnout?**

Burnout is often a **consequence of camouflaging**, or masking, a strategy in which autistic people mimic neurotypical behavior by using scripts for small talk, forcing themselves to make eye contact or suppressing repetitive behaviors. These strategies can help autistic people in their jobs and relationships but require immense effort.

It can also result from sensory overstimulation, such as a noisy bus commute; executive function demands such as having to juggle too many tasks at once; or stress associated with change.

### **How do autistic people recover from burnout?**

That depends on the person and on what burnout is like for them. A first step is for autistic people to **remove themselves** from the situation that triggered the burnout. This could be as simple as going back to a hotel room to rest alone after a day of unpredictable social interactions at a conference. Others may need longer to recover. Some autistic people have described burnout that is so severe its effects have persisted for years. Burnout may occur more frequently and be more difficult to recover from as people get older.

### **Is it possible to prevent burnout?**

A key strategy for preventing burnout is self-knowledge. Autistic people can learn over time which situations are most likely to trigger burnout for them. They can also watch for signs that they are getting close to burnout: Some autistic people describe feeling disconnected from their bodies or experiencing tunnel vision in this state.

Armed with this awareness, they can develop strategies to avoid burnout, such as leaving a social event early or planning a recovery day after a trip before returning to work. They can also ask for accommodations that make it easier for them to avoid burnout, such as preboarding an airplane or working from home part of the time.