



Autistic Burnout: A Brief Guide to Recovery and Prevention

e-Book by
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Autistic Burnout: A Brief Guide to Recovery and Prevention

“I took breaks and defended my free time fiercely. I taught myself, slowly, that I deserved to be comfortable, relaxed, and happy.”

— Devon Price, *Laziness Does Not Exist*

You feel chronically exhausted in a way that doesn't get any better no matter how much you sleep or rest. Your skills, including the ability to get even basic tasks done, seem dulled, and being out in the world feels overwhelming. Loud, repetitive noises, bright lights, and being around people are particularly painful. Your body feels slower, and you lose the ability to speak at times. You have headaches, stomach pains, and you've noticed that your chronic illness has flared up again. *You are experiencing autistic burnout.*

Quite different to occupational burnout, autistic burnout is a debilitating experience that happens when you are overwhelmed by sensory, social, emotional, and environmental demands, you need to hide your true self from others, and you are trying to meet unrealistic expectations (Higgins, Arnold, Weise, Pellicano, & Trollor, 2021). Autistic burnout can worsen your health problems, affect your ability to work, lead you to drop out of school or study, and contribute to relationship breakdowns and isolation (Mantzalas, Richdale, Adikari, Lowe, & Dissanayake, 2022).

This e-book will give you a simple, step-by-step guide to recovery from autistic burnout, and a realistic pathway to prevent it happening again – as much as you can. While burnout may not be completely preventable, you can improve the quality of your life immeasurably by changing your world to work better for you.

Recognising the Signs of Autistic Burnout

To understand whether you are in autistic burnout, place a cross against any of the issues listed below that match your experiences now or in the past.

- Feeling chronically overwhelmed
- Daily exhaustion that is not relieved by rest or sleep
- Difficulties sleeping or poor-quality sleep

- Increased sensitivity to sensory experiences including loud noises, bright lights, crowded places, or social situations
- Losing the ability to mask or 'perform' socially as others expect, leading to being more blunt than usual, or blurting things out that you later regret
- Losing skills needed for simple and complex tasks
- Feeling overwhelmed by and resistant to requests other people make of you
- Greater difficulty in prioritising, getting organised and getting things done, as well as poor memory and ability to resist urges
- Feeling like you are moving in slow motion or not at all
- Feeling unable to speak
- Needing to avoid social situations, withdrawing from others
- No longer enjoying the activities you usually find rewarding
- Increased self-criticism
- Feeling like you are failing and unable to meet expectations
- Increased unhelpful habits like skin-picking, hair pulling, or binge eating
- Emotional dysregulation, increased meltdowns, and shutdowns
- Increased self-harm
- Increased thoughts of suicide

Autistic burnout can affect every aspect of your life, with potentially devastating consequences. Having been described by autistic people for years, only recently has there been any research exploring autistic burnout as something different to depression and other mental health disorders (Mantzas, Richdale, Adikari, Lowe, & Dissanayake, 2022; Phung, Penner, Pirlot, & Welch, 2021; Mantzas, Richdale, Adikari, Lowe, & Dissanayake, 2022; Raymaker, et al., 2020). As a result, autistic burnout has been poorly understood by health professionals – but thankfully this is beginning to change.

On the surface, the experience of autistic burnout can look similar to depression, anxiety, trauma, and 'personality disorders', and as a result, you may have been diagnosed with these – possibly incorrectly (Au-Yeung, et al., 2019; Iversen & Kildahl, 2022). When autistic burnout is the underlying problem, a different approach to treatment is required. Standard, evidence-based treatment for depression is called 'behavioural activation' and involves getting you back to your usual activities and socialising more. However, when you are in burnout, attempts to increase your activity levels are difficult to achieve and can leave you feeling worse. You may even end up feeling like you are failing therapy.

Understanding the Causes of Autistic Burnout

There is no one cause of autistic burnout. Instead, there seem to be many factors that can contribute to burnout, that when put together, overwhelm your internal resources and ability to cope. The potential causes of autistic burnout include:

- Exposure to overwhelming environmental stimuli, including noisy, brightly lit, or crowded places
- Unexpected life changes, accidents and life transitions that result in an increase in demands on you
- Unrealistic work or study pressures and expectations of other people
- Experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, bullying, and exclusion
- Interpersonal difficulties, including communication and relationship breakdowns, conflict, family stress, and being around unsupportive and demanding people
- The need to mask, camouflage or hide your autistic self, including suppressing urges to move your body, forcing eye contact, or performing social roles
- Financial and housing stress, including loss of meaningful employment or being under-employed
- Poor physical health and sleep
- Mental health problems including isolation and loneliness
- Prioritising other people's needs above your own, having poor boundaries, not saying "no" to unreasonable demands
- Expecting too much of yourself and pushing yourself too hard

With so many contributing factors, autistic burnout can become a chronic or recurring experience that develops over months or even years. It can also flare up in the days after a demanding event, work or study deadline or difficult social interaction (Mantzas, Richdale, Adikari, Lowe, & Dissanayake, 2022).

Recovering From Autistic Burnout

If you are experiencing autistic burnout, you must take immediate action to care for yourself. This means learning how to slow down, rest, and reduce the

demands placed on you, being *intentional* in doing the things that help you feel better and making your needs a priority without worrying what other people think. Build a repertoire of options to self-soothe, using the following suggestions as a guide.

Calm and Soothe Your Senses

Take active and immediate steps to soothe your sensory system including your senses of vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and movement. Moving your body in soothing ways is called 'stimming' and should be part of your repertoire. Find ways to soothe your senses starting with the following suggestions:

- Avoid environments that are brightly lit or noisy
- Spend time in quiet, dark spaces
- Wear noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs, even at home
- Stick to safe foods
- Wear loose comfortable clothing
- Wrap yourself in blankets or tight clothing
- Stim - move your body, swing, rock, dance, spin, jump about
- Go for a long drive
- Use your favourite fidget toys

Reduce Your Social Load

You may feel obliged to spend time in social situations that make you feel uncomfortable, drain your energy, or leave you feeling bad about yourself. So many of us are taught that it's important to be nice and agreeable, and that other people's needs should come first. It can therefore be difficult to reduce your exposure to unhelpful family, friends, or workplace relationships, but it's an essential part of alleviating your burnout. Try the following:

- Avoid all non-essential social engagements to spend more time alone
- Prioritise your own needs – don't be drawn into toxic situations
- Leave social situations where you feel uncomfortable and *before you reach exhaustion*
- Only see people with whom you can completely relax and be yourself

Reduce the Burden on Your Executive Functioning

Executive functioning is the name for a complex set of skills including planning, prioritising, organising, task initiation, attention-switching, impulse-control, problem-solving, time management, and memory (Goldstein & Naglieri, 2014). Like many neurodivergent people, you may have executive functioning that is relatively under resourced (Kiep & Spek, 2016). This means that whenever the demands on your executive functioning are larger than the resources you have available, you will feel overwhelmed and start to burn out (Raymaker, et al., 2020). To recover from burnout, you'll need to reduce the load on your executive functioning. Start with the following strategies:

- Stick to a simple basic daily routine
- Avoid sudden changes to plans
- Put off any non-essential chores
- Put your needs first, even if you feel guilty
- Seek help for any chores you can't avoid
- Use 'body doubling' to get things done
- Outsource as much as you can – order premade meals, get a cleaner, pay a local teen to mow your lawns
- Outsource your executive functioning – ask a trusted friend or family member to help you remember things, prioritise tasks, make decisions, or get tasks done

Absorb Yourself in Your Interests

The autistic information processing approach is oriented towards building deep understanding and having long-term interests. Often called 'monotropic thinking,' sometimes these interests can be turned into a successful career. Other interests might be more obscure and become passions or hobbies that you enjoy spending time on. No matter what they are, spending time on your 'special interests' (or "spins") is soothing and regulating for autistic people. You might like to:

- Sort, organise, or categorise things
- Spend time doing things you find enjoyable such as reading, drawing, or gaming
- Practice your musical instrument, sing your favourite songs

- Deeply research something you feel curious about
- Re-watch your favourite TV shows or movies, listen to your favourite music

Meet Your Basic Health Needs

The physical impact of autistic burnout can be significant, so make sure that you care for your basic physical needs. Look after your physical body and maintain simple healthy routines as follows:

- Prioritise sleep, and sleep more
- Rest and move slowly
- Drink enough water
- Remember to eat regularly, set a timer if needed
- Buy simple, nutritious, pre-made meals

Preventing Autistic Burnout

It can be difficult to navigate the world as an autistic person because the world is not really designed to meet your needs. This means you may never be able to completely avoid autistic burnout in future, however, you can make choices that will help make burnout less frequent and less severe. The process of redesigning your life to suit you better has three steps:

Step 1: Understand your autistic challenges, needs, and limits

Step 2: Reshape your world to work better for you

Step 3: Build your life on a foundation of self-compassion

Let's explore each of these steps in more detail.

Step 1: Understand Your Autistic Challenges, Needs, and Limits

Being autistic means that the way your brain and body processes information is different to non-autistic/allistic people. Whether you've known that you are autistic from childhood, or have only recently realised this about yourself, understanding your autistic profile will help you navigate your life more effectively from here. Books like 'Unmasking Autism' by Devon Price can help with this.

Start by paying attention to how your unique combination of sensitivities, preferences, and information processing style can influence your vulnerability to burnout. Consider your:

- Sensory sensitivities: Identify the specific sensory experiences that contribute to feeling overwhelmed
- Executive functioning: Notice when your executive functioning becomes overloaded and when this occurs
- Social information processing: Notice what social situations tend to drain your energy most, including who you are with, and when these situations happen
- Masking: Consider how hiding your differences may be contributing to exhaustion and social anxiety, and identify the social situations where this happens most
- Communication style: Notice when differences in communication style may be contributing to social stress and conflict
- Sensitivity to stress: Identify any complex, stressful situations or sudden changes that might provoke or worsen burnout

Step 2: Reshape Your World to Work Better for You

To reduce the frequency and severity of burnout experiences in the future you'll need to make some changes, starting now. This might seem a little daunting but remember that you don't need to make these changes all at once. Think of this as a long-term self-improvement project: set your intention to make your life better, then make small, helpful, daily choices to realign your life in the ways described below. Allow this process to evolve over time, watching as your life becomes more fulfilling and meaningful, and you become much less vulnerable to burnout.

Align Your Life to Your Values

Start by thinking about what is truly important to you. Your values are a description of *how* you want to live your life. They reflect the relationships that mean the most to you, the contributions you want to make, the legacy you'd like to leave behind, and how you will look after yourself as you move through your life. When you know what is important to you, each step you take can move you closer to what matters. This is a pathway towards a fulfilling and meaningful life.

It is easy to lose sight of your values. You get caught up doing what others think you should do, working hard towards other people's objectives. You may have believed the myth that the harder you work the more valuable you are as a person, forgetting to care for yourself along the way.

To explore your values you can talk to your therapist, or work through a book such as *'Finding Your Why and Finding Your Way: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Workbook to Help You Identify What You Care About and Reach Your Goals'* (Moran & Ming, 2023) or *'What Makes You Stronger: How to Thrive in the Face of Change and Uncertainty Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy'* (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2022).

Let Go of Unrealistic, Perfectionistic Expectations of Yourself

It's time to let go of unrealistic, perfectionistic expectations of yourself, and instead start treating yourself with greater kindness. You can create a world for yourself that meets your needs rather than setting yourself up to fail. Consider whether you really need to push yourself so hard and whether this is sustainable. Perhaps you could instead approach life at a slower, gentler pace.

If you have unrealistic, perfectionistic expectations of yourself, consider whether this supports you in living an enjoyable and meaningful life or whether, instead, it makes you more vulnerable to burnout. Setting unachievable standards only sets you up to fail. And, if other people have excessively high expectations of you, let them know that you will no longer be striving to meet these expectations, and instead will be setting more realistic objectives for yourself.

Develop and Maintain Boundaries

Trying to keep other people happy is a natural response to having a history of feeling rejected by others. This kind of 'people-pleasing' seems to be a common habit amongst autistic people. It feels safer to keep everyone else happy and not think about yourself – *but your needs are important*.

To develop and maintain effective boundaries, it helps to remember that defining the boundary is not enough, you need to constantly enforce it too. Other people will not maintain your boundaries – only you can do that. Appropriate boundaries can be difficult to maintain, but if you keep putting your own needs last you won't stop until you reach exhaustion and are completely overwhelmed – by then it's too late. So, practice saying no to unreasonable demands and speak up about your needs. Try to avoid unsupportive or demanding people, and make sure to leave unpleasant situations early.

Boundaries might be needed at work too. Consider whether you are giving much more to your employer than they are paying you for. If so, try to match your effort with the expectations of your role and that of your colleagues, even if this feels uncomfortable at first.

Find Safe Spaces to Unmask

You are ‘masking’ whenever you are trying to hide your natural preferences to look ‘normal’ and fit in socially. Masking takes a lot of effort, and the more you mask, the more exhausted and anxious you will feel. In this way, masking directly contributes to burnout.

However, it’s not always easy to unmask. If you have been masking for a long time, you might feel unsure about who you really are. The key is to find people with whom you can fully be yourself. In *Unmasking Autism* (2022) Devon Price calls this finding your “Strawberry People”. His process is simple. Work out who are the people with whom you feel most at ease – the people that seem to ‘get you’ and that you enjoy being with. (This might be quite a small number of people; maybe even just one or two – and that’s OK.) Attach an emoji or symbol to each person’s name in your phone (Devon used a strawberry emoji). This becomes a visual cue to help you actively prioritise these people in your life. Reply to their texts more quickly than you do for other people. Invest your time and energy in seeing these people because when you are with them, you feel renewed and accepted. Tell these people that you value them and enjoy spending time with them and suggest that you might see each other more.

To gradually unmask in other settings, start sharing just a little more detail about your needs and preferences over time. Look for the people who accept these differences and are happy to accommodate your needs. Experiment with revealing just a little more about yourself with these people too. It might take a while, but over time you will build a group of lovely, supportive people with whom you can completely be yourself.

Advocate For What You Need

Autistic people can thrive in environments that are adjusted to accommodate their needs; however, this happens rarely. Learning to advocate for what you need is essential in managing your autistic burnout in the long term.

Start by asking for small accommodations. For example, if your friends want to go out to dinner and you find noisy environments very draining, ask them to look

for a quieter restaurant, or perhaps somewhere that you can sit outside. Or, if your boss wants to have a meeting in a crowded cafeteria, ask to meet in a quiet office instead. Below is a list of accommodations you can request if you are studying, working or are at home.

Accommodations for Students

If you are currently a student, then it's essential to let your institution know and have an access plan put in place that will make it easy to get additional supports and accommodations. Some examples of accommodations are:

- Learning materials in alternative formats, such as having videos with subtitles, written transcripts of lectures, or audio recordings that you can listen to and rewind if needed
- Additional time to complete assignments if needed
- Additional time in exams, or, more helpfully, the ability to have breaks with the total elapsed time you spend working on the exam counted
- Having exams in small, quiet rooms
- Having access to peer note-takers in lectures or exams
- Being given alternative options for class presentations, such as pre-recording your presentation and giving to the lecturer to watch privately
- Having access to tutors that you feel comfortable with
- The ability to fidget, move your body, stim, wear headphones, or take breaks as needed
- The ability to choose who you work with in group assignments
- Clearly articulated course expectations and the ability to have this clarified as needed

Accommodations at Work

If you work in an environment that frequently overwhelms you, you need to understand how to change it. Unfortunately, revealing your autism in your workplace can result in greater problems even though it should protect you under anti-discrimination laws. You can start by asking for simple, reasonable accommodations, such as:

- Working in quiet, private spaces rather than in open plan workspaces
- Working from home

- Dimming bright lights or having natural rather than fluorescent lights
- Adjusting the brightness of your screen
- Wearing noise-cancelling headphones
- Playing music through headphones
- Adjusted work hours, such as starting and finishing early, or starting and finishing late
- Having fewer, shorter meetings, having them in quiet rooms, and with clearly defined agendas
- Ability to have 'sensory breaks' by going outside, being in a quiet dark room, taking a walk or listening to music

Accommodations at Home

Sometimes the most difficult changes to make are the ones that are needed within your family and home life. It can take a long time for people to accept that you are autistic, and some people may never understand that this means for you. Nevertheless, try to influence this environment to make your life easier. Here are a few things to try:

- Ask for extra help on tasks you find overwhelming or exhausting
- Seek out help with household chores and pay for a cleaner if you can
- Take breaks often – ten minutes in a quiet, uninterrupted space can help restore your calm
- Create a transition period between work and home life where you can slow down and recharge
- Simplify daily routines and let go of unrealistic expectations – your clothes can live in the laundry hamper for a bit longer!

Step 3: Build Your Life on a Foundation of Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is a simple concept but something that can seem difficult to do. Yet any time you pause to notice that you are struggling, ask yourself what you need, and take action to give this to yourself is an act of self-compassion. Making small, daily decisions to look after yourself will allow you to create a world where you can thrive.

While unexpected, stressful events will still happen, most of your burnout will probably come from everyday, mundane activities. Now that you understand the causes of your burnout and the ways in which you are sensitive to stress, you can begin to anticipate situations that might cause burnout and avoid them. For example, if going to your local supermarket drains a lot of your energy, you can start to order groceries online, or go at very quiet times of the day. If going to parties stresses you out, you can go for an hour or choose to see friends another time. If going to large music festivals drains you for days afterwards, you can enjoy live music in small venues or set up a wonderful sound system at home instead. The world you create might look different to what you expected, but it will be more sustainable if it is built upon a foundation of caring for yourself compassionately.

Living your life in a compassionate way might seem difficult at first. After all, you are probably used to being hard on yourself and may believe that this is necessary. Yet being kinder to yourself will ultimately allow you to do more in your life – and enjoy it too. To explore self-compassion further, books such as *How to be Nice to Yourself* by Laura Silberstein-Tirch (2019) offer a simple, helpful guide. Alternatively, ask your therapist about developing these skills in yourself.

In the end, being compassionate simply means choosing to look after yourself and do what works best for you. Over time, these small acts of kindness will add up. Using self-compassion as your guide, you can find a way to effectively navigate the challenges that come with being an autistic person in this world, learn to accept your differences and build pride in your identity. Along the way, you will reduce the frequency and severity of burnout, and live a more comfortable and enjoyable life.

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Jennifer Kemp is a privately practicing Clinical Psychologist based in Adelaide who works with older adolescents and adults experiencing perfectionism, eating disorders, body image problems, burnout, anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and chronic illness. Most of her clients are neurodivergent. Using a neurodiversity-affirming approach, Jennifer weaves together acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), behavioural, and compassion-focused approaches to help her clients improve their mental health, develop skills in self-compassion, and move towards self-acceptance.

Jennifer balances this with time with her family, writing, presenting, and professional consultations. She is the author of “*The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism: Build Your Best (Imperfect) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills*” and a sought-after speaker, trainer, and podcast guest. Jennifer delivers professional workshops and webinars internationally, including for the Australian Psychological Society, Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS), and International OCD Foundation (IOCDF).

