

Neurodivergent burnout

“The brutal truth is that for an autistic [neurodivergent] person simply EXISTING in the world is knackered - never mind trying to hold down a job or have any sort of social life. Many of the standard recommendations for ‘improving mental health’ (such as seeing more people in real life, spending less time on the internet, sitting still and being ‘calm’) simply makes matters worse. We need A LOT of downtime in order to recover from what, for most folk, are the ordinary things of life.”

“Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew”

Lived experience studies have described autistic burnout as:

- Exhaustion
- Loss of skills
- Reduced ability to tolerate stimulus (sensory, emotional, cognitive)
- Health problems including disease
- This can be remembered by the Four S's

Sleepy	Feeling exhausted all of the time no matter how much sleep you have
Skills loss	Struggling to do things you could do previously, such as household tasks, socialising, reading, working, studying etc.
Sensitive	Having big reactions to things that you may not have reacted to before. This includes meltdowns, shutdowns, crying, strong feelings, not being able to let things go etc.
Sick	Feeling run down, under the weather, headaches, stomach aches, pain, dizziness, or any other symptoms






Neurodivergent burnout vs depression

Characteristic	Neurodivergent Burnout	Depression
Usually most concerned with	Not being able to do things, cannot deal with things, can't think, just want to retreat	Mood, lack of interest, feeling down, guilty, negative view of self/others/the world
Cognition	Significant change, strong feature of burnout, feels not like self, difficulties talking, memory problems, problem solving, emotion regulation	Distracted by thoughts and lack of focus
Challenging thoughts (CBT)	Confusing	Helpful
Struggling to do interests	Wants to do them but cannot focus on them, feels overwhelming and demanding	No desire to do interests, flat, anhedonia
Unique characteristics	Cognition and mood improves noticeably in low sensory environment, low pressure when doing interests	Unrelenting low mood/pessimism that gets worse with less activity
Intervention	Reduce pressure, reduce sensory, reduce social, stim, spins	Medication, talk therapy, other therapies
Relapse prevention	Change external environment and meet neurodivergent needs	Change internal environment and improve sense of self

What causes burnout?

Risk factor	Description
M masking (or molding)	Trying to pass as a neurotypical uses up all your spoons
E expectations exceed capacity	You are expected to do things that are unsuitable to do because of the way your brain works
O overload or overstimulation	Processing things or being in situations that are overloading and your nervous system cannot cope with it
W working/demands	Too much pressure to work (in any capacity) including work that is done in relationships, parenting, study, household tasks
S stress, transition, trauma, tough times	Stressful things that would cause anyone to be dysregulated including ND trauma

Burnout recovery - five S's

	Stop/slow down (stop/slow down the things that are causing the MEOWS)
	Seclude (minimise peopling as much as possible)
	Stim (stimming/regulation)
	Spin (spend time doing interests)
	Support - seek out neurodiversity affirmative support if your burnout does not resolve. Give them this worksheet and tell them this is what you think is happening.

More on burnout recovery

- Self validation and acknowledgement - this is burnout. This is real. You are not making this up. This is a serious health concern.
- Know your signs. Know what makes you feel like you are going into burnout. More exhaustion/fatigue than normal, not being able to do things as well as you normally do, and being more prone to outbursts, meltdowns and shutdowns are all common signs. Some people have flare-ups in health problems like pain and migraines.
- It may be easier to compare your situation with the MEOWS and see how much those situations apply to you.
- Follow the five S's
- Get support from a neurodiversity affirming therapist
- Consider seeking financial support or practical support to help with the impact of burnout - you may need to ask around until someone is able to advocate for you
- A neurodivergent person in burnout likely has significant support needs. These needs may be invisible to others, and even yourself due to unconscious masking and internalised ableism. It is crucial that you can connect with the community so you can understand your support needs to prevent serious health implications.
- More resources and information is on the neudle website, www.neudle.com.au