

Could This Be ADHD Burnout?

What is ADHD Burnout?

You may have spent days, weeks, or even years seemingly managing it all — juggling family life, work, friendships, and maybe even picking up ten new hobbies along the way.

Then one morning, even simple tasks like showering, forming a sentence or deciding what to eat can suddenly feel impossible. This can bring up feelings of shame, fear, and frustration, especially when the people around you have only ever known you as capable, reliable, and someone who “gets things done.”

ADHD burnout is more than being tired and a bit stressed - it's a total “brain-body” collapse. Whilst it looks and feels different for everyone, it can feel like pressing a light switch during a power cut. You're doing the right thing, but there's no power available right now.

This doesn't mean you're lazy or failing. It means your system is overloaded and needs rest, support, and time to recharge. Pushing through will only make it worse.

Common Causes

ADHD burnout often builds up slowly over time. For many adults, it can happen after long periods of:

- Masking or hiding ADHD traits to appear more “together.”
- Constantly pushing through overwhelm, stress, or exhaustion.
- Trying to keep up with systems or routines that don't work for your brain.
- Persistent sensory overload, noise, interruptions, or too much mental input.
- The pressure of juggling work, home life, admin, and responsibilities.
- Years of self-criticism, shame, or feeling “not good enough.”
- Big life changes, such as changing jobs, becoming a parent, or relationship stress.
- Lack of rest, poor sleep, emotional stress, or never fully switching off.

Often, there isn't one single cause. It's usually the result of hundreds of small demands, unfinished tasks, pressures, and expectations gradually building up until your brain and body simply can't keep going in the same way anymore.

Common Symptoms

Many of the symptoms or experiences listed below can also be part of everyday life with ADHD. With burnout, the difference is usually the **intensity**, **frequency**, and **impact** on daily life.

In other words, it's not necessarily that something completely new is happening — it's that your brain and body are telling you they're running on empty.

You don't need to relate to every item on this list. ADHD burnout can look different for different people. The key is noticing a significant shift from what feels normal for you.

Physical Signs

- Constant, deep exhaustion
- Headaches or migraines
- Muscle tension and aches
- Jaw clenching or teeth grinding
- Feeling "wired but tired"
- Sensory overload
- Changes in appetite
- Stomach issues
- Getting ill more often
- Feeling physically heavy or weighed down
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping much more than usual

Mental & Thinking Signs

- Brain fog
- Trouble getting started
- Feeling mentally "stuck"
- Increased procrastination
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reduced ability to mask or compensate
- Forgetting things more than usual
- Struggling to make decisions
- Finding simple tasks overwhelming

Emotional Signs

- Low mood
- Hopelessness
- Tearfulness
- Increased anxiety
- Shame or self-criticism
- More rejection sensitivity
- Feeling numb or detached
- Wanting to withdraw from others
- Feeling overwhelmed by small things
- Feeling more irritable or short-tempered

Behavioural Signs

- Cancelling plans
- Falling behind with chores
- Spending more time scrolling
- Avoiding emails or messages
- Difficulty keeping up with work
- Relying more on comfort behaviours

Other Signs You've Noticed

You know yourself best. Jot down any other clues that tell you you're running on empty.

What Can Actually Help with ADHD Burnout?

If you're in ADHD burnout, the usual advice to "push through," "get organised," or "just be more disciplined" often isn't helpful.

Burnout is your brain and body's way of saying that something needs to change.

The goal isn't to become more productive as quickly as possible. It's to reduce the pressure on your nervous system and slowly restore your energy.

Real life doesn't always make that easy. If you still have work, family, and a long to-do list to manage, the ideas below may offer some small, practical ways to take some pressure off.

Small, Practical Things That May Help

- **Lower the bar.** Ask yourself, "What is the minimum I need to do today?"
- **Try just three minutes.** Set a timer for three minutes and give yourself permission to stop when it ends.
- **Let some things slide.** This might mean laundry waits, emails go unanswered, or dinner is beans on toast.
- **Shake it out.** A full-body shake, stretching, or a short walk can help release some of the build-up of stress and tension.
- **Use the easiest option available.** Paper plates, ready meals, grocery delivery, or voice notes all count.
- **Follow your interests.** Spending time on something you genuinely enjoy can be restorative rather than "unproductive."
- **Reduce sensory input.** Lower the lights, wear noise-cancelling headphones, or spend time in a quieter space.
- **Borrow someone else's nervous system.** Sit with a trusted person, even if you don't feel like talking.
- **Ask, "What's draining me right now?"** Look for one small thing you can pause, postpone, or simplify.
- **Notice your self-talk.** Burnout often brings harsh inner criticism. Try speaking to yourself as you would to a friend.

Helpful Ways to Explain ADHD Burnout to Others

You might say:

- “I’m not lazy — my brain and body are exhausted.”
- “The strategies I usually rely on aren’t working right now.”
- “I need to reduce pressure and demands for a while so I can recover.”
- “Everything feels harder than usual, even simple tasks.”
- “I’ve been pushing myself for too long without enough rest.”
- “I don’t need you to completely understand what this feels like — I just need you to trust that it’s real and support me while I recover.”

ADHD burnout is not a sign of weakness, laziness, or failure.

It is often the result of coping with too much for too long without enough support, rest, or recovery.

Helpful Reminders

- Recovery is rarely quick.
- You do not need to earn rest.
- Your needs are valid.
- Burning out does not mean you’ve failed.
- Doing less is sometimes the most productive thing you can do.

What Would You Say to Someone You Care About?

If a friend or loved one were feeling this exhausted and overwhelmed, what would you say to them?

When to Seek Extra Support

If burnout is affecting your ability to work, care for yourself, or cope day to day, it may help to seek support from an autistic-affirming therapist, coach, or healthcare professional.

You don't have to figure it all out on your own.

Need Urgent Support?

If things feel overwhelming or you're worried about keeping yourself safe, there are people you can talk to any time, day or night, for free in the UK.

- **The Samaritans - 116 123**

Free 24/7 support

- **NHS - 111**

Free 24/7 support - select the mental health option

- **SHOUT Text Service - 85258**

Free 24/7 text-based support

If you feel that you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 999.

Recovery is rarely linear, and it's okay if progress feels slow.

Small adjustments, rest, support, and self-understanding can make a real difference over time.

What Helps When I'm Burnt Out

You don't need a perfect plan. Just a few reminders of what helps when your brain feels overloaded.

This plan is completely optional. Use it if it feels helpful, or skip it and come back another time.

Things that help me feel a little better

e.g. cancelling plans, noise-cancelling headphones, a shower, sitting outside, favourite TV show

People I can reach out to

e.g. partner, friend, therapist, colleague

Things I want to remember

e.g. Doing less is not failing • This will pass • Rest is productive too

Things I can let go of for now

e.g. replying to non-urgent messages, housework, cooking from scratch