

# Could This Be Autistic Burnout?

---

## What is Autistic Burnout?

---

You may have spent days, weeks, or even years keeping all the plates spinning — work, family life, friendships, appointments, and trying to look like you're coping on the outside.

Then one day, things that usually take effort but are manageable suddenly feel impossible. Getting dressed, replying to a message, making a decision, or coping with everyday noise might feel like too much.

Autistic burnout is more than feeling tired or stressed. It's a state of deep mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion caused by having to cope in a world that often asks you to work much harder than other people just to get through the day.

It can feel as though your brain has turned to porridge — slow, foggy, and not especially helpful when you're trying to work out what to have for dinner.

None of this means you're lazy, dramatic, weak or "not trying hard enough." It means your system is overloaded and needs rest, support, and time to recover.

## Common Causes

---

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

- Masking or hiding autistic traits.
- Pushing yourself to meet other people's expectations.
- Coping with sensory overload.
- Navigating social situations that feel draining.
- Working in environments that don't suit your needs.
- Major life changes, such as moving house, changing jobs, or becoming a parent.
- Ongoing stress, uncertainty, or poor sleep.

Often, there isn't one single cause. It's more like hundreds of small demands gradually piling up until your system says, "I can't do this anymore."

## Common Symptoms

---

Many of the symptoms or experiences listed below may already be familiar if you're autistic. 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. Autistic 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
- Feeling like you have the flu
- Changes in appetite
- Stomach issues
- Getting ill more often
- Sensory overload
- Feeling physically heavy or “weighed down”
- Sleeping more than usual, or struggling to sleep
- Feeling shaky, dizzy, uncoordinated, or like your body doesn't quite feel like your own

### Mental & Thinking Signs

- Brain fog
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling mentally “stuck”
- Reduced ability to mask
- Struggling to make decisions
- Forgetting things more than usual
- Finding simple tasks overwhelming
- Difficulty switching between tasks
- Losing words or finding it harder to communicate

## Emotional Signs

- Feeling irritable
- Tearfulness
- Increased anxiety
- Low mood
- Hopelessness
- Feeling overwhelmed very quickly
- Finding people - even loved ones - “too much”
- Feeling numb or detached
- More shutdowns or meltdowns
- Harsh self-criticism

## Behavioural Signs

- Cancelling plans
- Avoiding emails or messages
- Withdrawing from others
- Spending more time alone
- Falling behind with everyday tasks
- Relying more on comfort behaviours
- Struggling to work at your usual level
- Needing much longer to recover after activities

## 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 Autistic Burnout?

---

If you're in autistic burnout, the goal is not to "push through" or force yourself back to your old level of functioning.

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

Recovery usually involves reducing demands, protecting your energy, and giving yourself permission to do less for a while.

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?"
- **Reduce sensory input.** Dim the lights, wear headphones, or spend time in a quiet space.
- **Cancel or postpone what you can.** Having a simple template message ready can make it easier when you don't have the energy to explain.
- **Let some things slide.** The laundry, emails, and non-urgent tasks can wait.
- **Use supports.** Written lists, reminders, meal delivery, or asking for help.
- **Spend time in ways that genuinely help you recover.** This might be a special interest, time alone, or repetitive activities that feel calming.
- **Communicate your needs.** Create a bank of simple phrases like "I need some quiet time."
- **Stop masking where it feels safe to do so.** Allow yourself to stim, wear comfortable clothes, or communicate in whatever way feels easiest.
- **Break tasks into tiny steps.** Instead of "clean the kitchen," start with "put one plate in the dishwasher" (or wash one plate for those of us with just a kitchen sink!).
- **Rest before you feel completely exhausted.** Short breaks throughout the day can help prevent you from hitting a wall.

## Helpful Ways to Explain Autistic Burnout to Others

You might say:

- “I’m not being lazy — I’m mentally and physically exhausted.”
- “My usual coping strategies aren’t working right now.”
- “I need to reduce demands for a while so I can recover.”
- “I’m running on empty, even if it doesn’t look like it from the outside.”
- “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.”

Autistic 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