

Practitioner Guide

Autistic Burnout.

Assessing and Adapting
Treatment in low-
intensity therapy

5-10 Minutes Read



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THEMES IDENTIFIED BY AUTISTIC ADULTS

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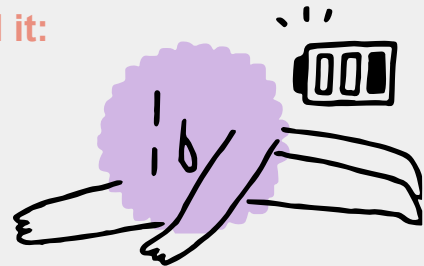
Definition

Autistic burnout is a collection of symptoms resulting from chronic life **stress** and a mismatch of **expectations** and **abilities** without adequate supports. It is characterised by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) **exhaustion**, **loss of function**, and **reduced tolerance** to stimulus.

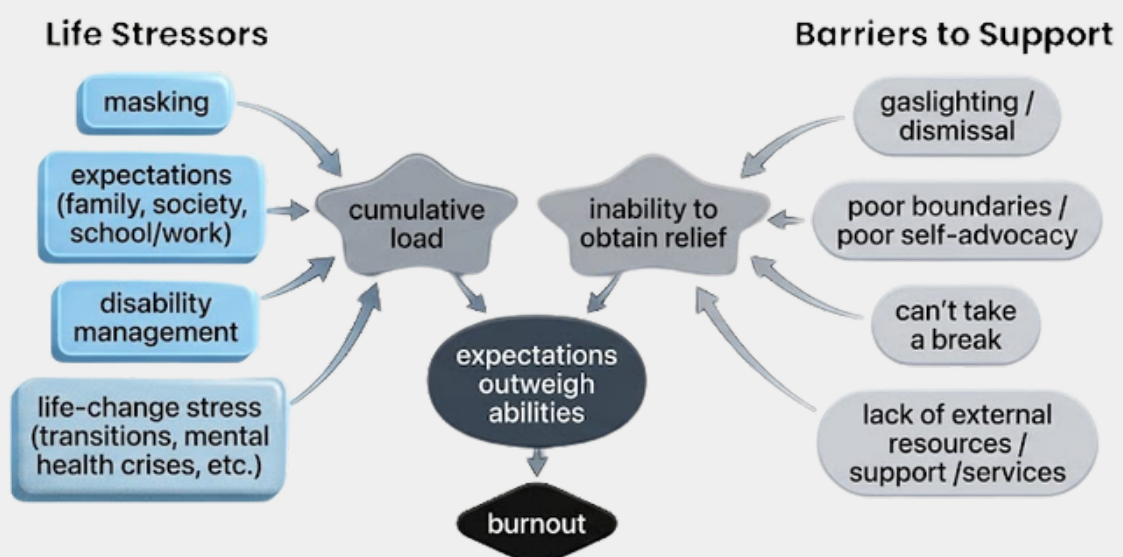
Raymaker et al. (2020) "Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew": Defining Autistic Burnout. *Autism Adulthood*. Jun 1. 2(2):132-143.

In the words of those who have experienced it:

"Having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure - and being left with no clean-up crew."



Autistic Burnout Model

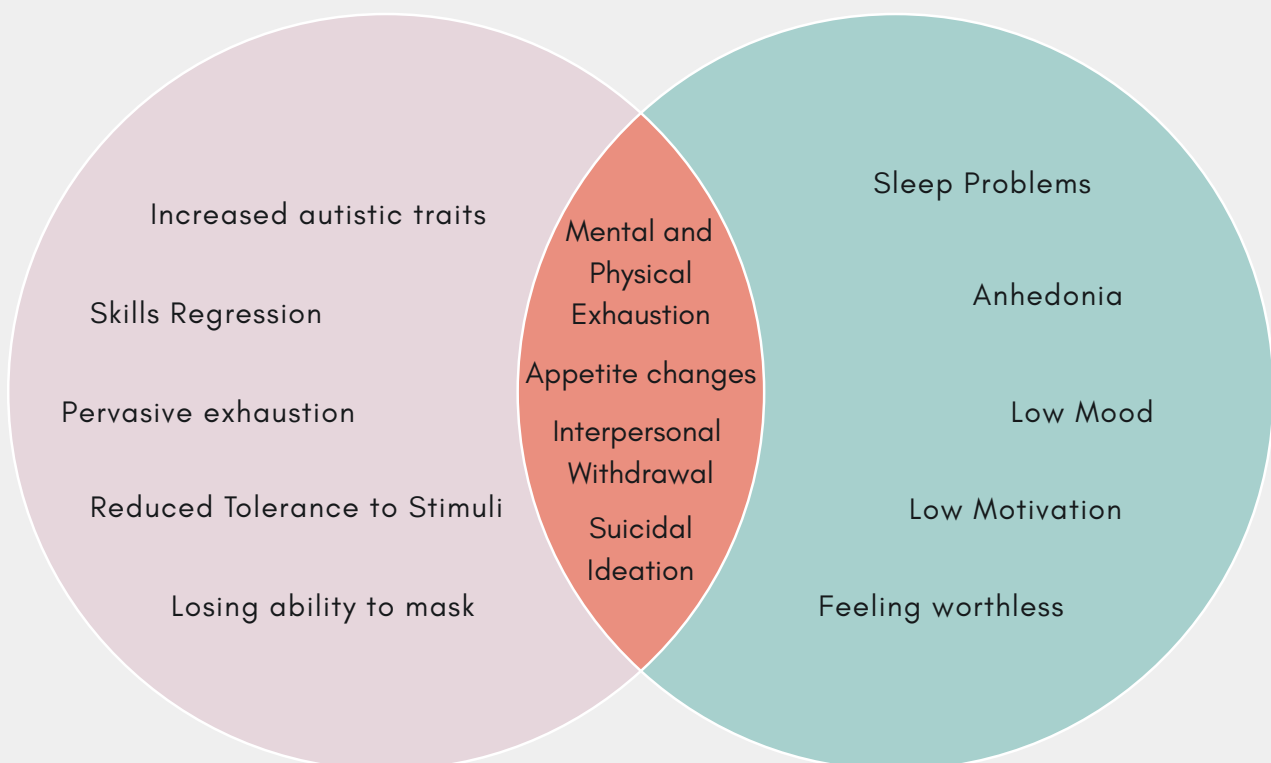


Main Themes

THEMES IDENTIFIED BY AUTISTIC ADULTS

- 1 **Lack of Awareness.** A systemic problem across schools, workplaces and services. Often tangled up with discrimination.
- 2 **Tied to masking.** Damned if you do, damned if you don't. The leading cause of autistic burnout but also required in many settings.
- 3 **Reoccurring.** Occurs in cycles across childhood and adulthood - rarely a single episode.
- 4 **Wide impact.** Functional, social and occupational impairment that outlasts the initial "trigger".

Autistic Burnout vs Depression



Mantzas, J., Richdale, A. L., Adikari, A., Lowe, J., & Dissanayake, C. (2022). What is autistic burnout? A thematic analysis of posts on two online platforms. *Autism in Adulthood*, 4(1), 52–65.

Bougoure, M. et al. (2026). Measuring autistic burnout: A psychometric validation of the AASPIRE Autistic Burnout Measure in autistic adults. *Autism*, 30(1), 20–36. · Raymaker et al. (2020), *Autism in Adulthood*.

Differentiating **Autistic Burnout** and other mental health problems

Autistic burnout

Pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of functioning and reduced tolerance to stimulus resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities.

- Pervasive exhaustion (rest doesn't lift it)
- Skills regression
- Reduced tolerance to stimulus
- Increased autistic traits
- Losing the ability to mask
- Not a clinical diagnosis yet

Depression

At least two weeks of persistent low mood and/or loss of interest or pleasure with cognitive, physical or emotional symptoms causing significant distress.

- Anhedonia
- Low mood
- Low motivation
- Feeling worthless
- Appetite changes
- Suicidal ideation

Adjustment Disorder

Emotional or behavioural symptoms developing (usually within 3 months) in response to an identifiable stressor — disproportionate, or interfering with functioning.

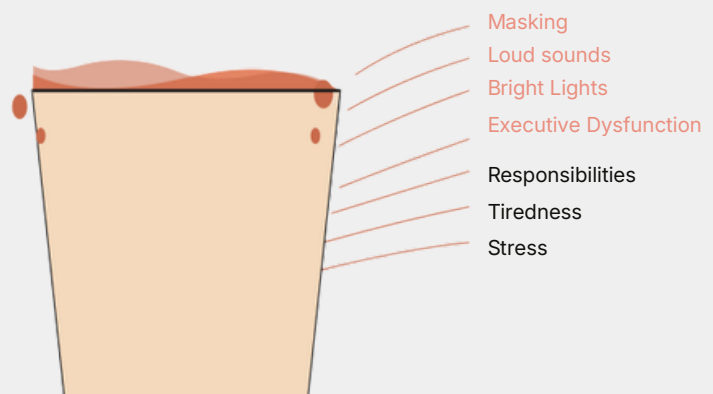
- Identifiable stressor
- Onset within 3 months
- Distress out of proportion
- Functional interference
- Resolves with the stressor

The stress bucket, adapted

A Familiar Metaphor

When treating burnout, the adaptation isn't a new framework of stress and resources to cope, it's noticing that for an autistic client, pressures may look different than the standard bucket.

A formulation should consider autistic traits such as sensory sensitivities, social differences, and intolerance of uncertainty, which all take extra energy.



How to ask

Tip: Funnel!

OPEN	<i>“Can you describe your experience for me — in your own words?”</i>
OPEN	<i>“How long have you felt this way? Are you aware of any triggers?”</i>
CLOSED	<i>“Have you experienced exhaustion, functional difficulties, or any change in your autistic traits?”</i>
SPECIFIC	<i>“Were you able to get your daily tasks done this week — cooking, replying to messages, leaving the house?”</i>

TIPS FOR FORMULATION

01 Funnel

Open then closed.

02 Mirror language

The client is the expert of their own experience. Use their phrasing.

03 Be specific

Real-life examples beat abstract “functioning”.

04 Mind the barriers

Alexithymia, monotropism and cognitive inflexibility can all skew self-report.

05 After disclosure, validate

A pause to acknowledge. Validating difficult experiences helps a person feel listened to, then continue.

06 Context first

Symptoms live in an environment. Explore work, home, sensory load and co-occurring conditions.

Adaptations to Treatment

Most of what helps, we already know how to do.

Autistic burnout requires us to reframe and adapt interventions. Below is a five-step example of a treatment plan suitable for low-intensity - your client will be an individual with their own spiky profile, so adjust accordingly.

STEP 01

Psycho-education

Before working on burnout, the client has to understand burnout and that it isn't a personal failure. Use the adapted bucket or weighing scale as metaphors.

STEP 02

Self-awareness

Noticing burnout in the moment. Mindfulness, grounding, STOP, and attention training can help with formulation. Consider values if a client feels they have to mask.

STEP 03

Adapted BA

Behavioural Activation with adaptations to reduce non-essential demands. Consider energy management systems adjusted for autistic traits like sensory sensitivities.

STEP 04

Adjustments

Use autism trait and sensory profiles to help a client understand their needs. Consider beliefs around autism, masking, and rest for dropping demands.

STEP 05

Burnout plan

A graded, personalised plan - warning signs and what the client finds helpful. Review and follow.

A Word of Caution

Don't use Behavioural Activation without adaptations!

Autistic individuals, like all neurodivergent people, face extra stressors from living in a world not made for them. The evidence supports helping clients to reframe unhelpful beliefs and accommodate for their needs - in our experience, this usually looks like reducing demands, rather than increasing them.



In summary

Autistic burnout is not depression, although at first glance they may look similar.

FIVE THINGS TO TAKE AWAY

- Look for the cluster of exhaustion, withdrawal, functional loss and intensified autistic traits.
- Diagnostic criteria is under research but treat 3+ months as a threshold.
- Use the client's own language and try to understand their experience.
- Sometimes, masking may seem necessary - but it can be a choice informed by values.
- Make sure to adapt BA and consider dropping non-essential demands first.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

- The AASPIRE Autistic Burnout Measure
- Resources below for further reading. A good starting point is the Raymaker et al. (2020) paper.
- NDhelp.co.uk for further resources

REFERENCES

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