

Autistic burnout: Recognising the signs



Masking, people-pleasing, and dealing with sensory overload **can be utterly draining for autistic people**. When burnout hits, it doesn't just knock you back – it can take over your health, your relationships, and your ability to get things done. Recovery isn't quick, but the good news is that it's **easier to prevent burnout than to recover from it**. Let's talk about what to watch out for and what you can do to protect yourself.



What is autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout is a state of physical, mental, and emotional **exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress** and **overexertion in environments that are not autism-friendly**. It's marked by extreme fatigue, skill loss or regression, and heightened sensory sensitivities.

Burnout often occurs when the constant pressure of fitting into a neurotypical world becomes overwhelming. While not officially recognised as a medical condition, it is **widely acknowledged within the autistic community** as a real and challenging experience.

Autistic burnout can affect **anyone on the spectrum**, regardless of age or life stage. Children, teenagers, and adults alike may experience it, although the triggers and signs may vary.

For example, a child may struggle to maintain focus in a noisy classroom, while an adult might feel overwhelmed by workplace demands. In all cases, the underlying cause remains the same: **an imbalance between stressors and the individual's ability to cope**.

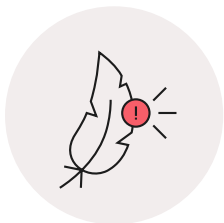
Signs that you may have autistic burnout



Chronic exhaustion

If you're always tired, no matter how much you sleep, and you're struggling to muster up the energy to do things you usually enjoy, burnout could be the culprit. You might find it harder to keep up with relationships, skip self-care, and feel like you're barely managing day-to-day tasks. **This deep exhaustion isn't just tiredness – it's all-consuming.**

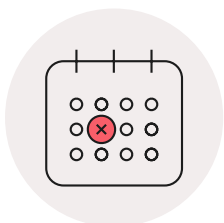
Exhaustion can also extend beyond physical tiredness. Mental fatigue may leave you struggling to concentrate or process information, while emotional fatigue might make you feel **disconnected from others** or **overly sensitive to criticism**. The combination of these factors can make even simple tasks feel insurmountable.



Increased sensitivity to stimuli

Burnout can crank up your **sensitivity to things like noise, light, and touch**. Your brain, which normally filters out background stuff, gets too tired to keep up, so everything feels louder, brighter, or just too much. **Sensory overload** can make you feel even more overwhelmed and might lead to more stimming as you try to cope. Everyday stimuli that were manageable before might now feel completely overwhelming.

This heightened sensitivity can make certain environments unbearable. For instance, bright office lights, bustling shopping centres, or crowded public transport might become sources of significant distress. Recognising these triggers early can help you **plan strategies to avoid or mitigate their impact**.



Decreased executive functioning skills

In burnout mode, it can feel like your brain has hit the brakes. Making decisions, planning your day, or managing your emotions becomes a real struggle. Everyday things like cooking, cleaning, or keeping up with personal hygiene might feel impossible. You might **cling to routines** just to stay afloat, even if they're not working for you anymore. Emotional regulation can also take a hit, leading to heightened impulsivity or feelings of being out of control.

Reduced executive functioning often means that multi-step tasks feel overwhelming. For example, preparing a meal might seem impossible when it involves gathering ingredients, following instructions, and timing everything correctly. **Breaking tasks into smaller, more manageable steps can sometimes help**, but in severe burnout, even this may not be enough.

How to avoid autistic burnout



1. Understand your limits and triggers

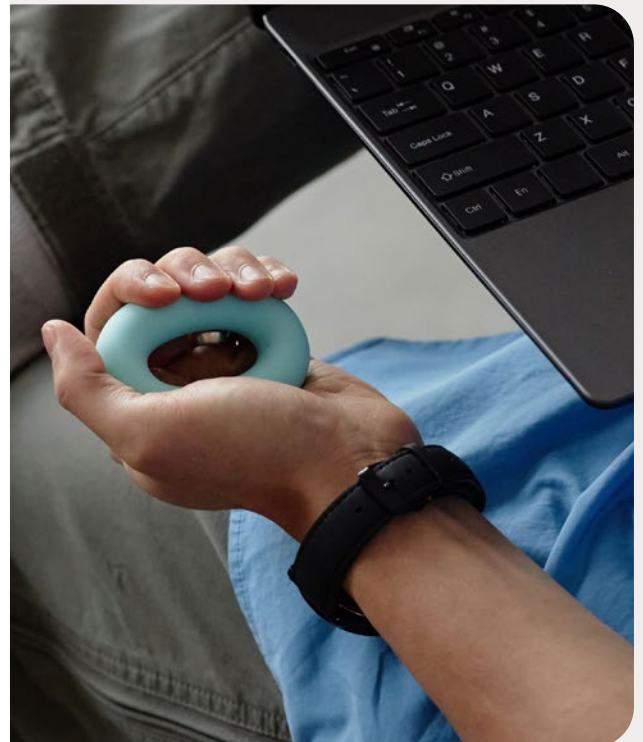
Learn to recognise early signs of stress and identify situations that drain your energy. This self-awareness is crucial for **stepping in before things escalate**. For example, keeping track of social interactions or sensory environments that leave you feeling exhausted can help you **avoid similar situations in the future**. It can be helpful to maintain a journal or use an app to track your energy levels and stressors throughout the day. Over time, patterns may emerge that highlight your biggest drains and the activities or environments that help you recharge.

2. Implement accommodations

Creating a supportive environment that suits your needs can help prevent burnout. Here are some examples:

- **Noise-cancelling headphones:** Reduce auditory overload in busy environments.
- **Recovery spaces:** Set up a quiet area for sensory breaks, whether at home or work.
- **Sensory tools:** Use weighted blankets, blackout curtains, or fidget tools to create comfort.

Accommodations don't have to be expensive or complicated. Simple changes, like **dimming the lights** or **reducing background noise**, can significantly improve your ability to function and reduce the likelihood of burnout.





3. Practice self-advocacy and set boundaries

Speaking up for yourself can be tough, especially if you're used to people-pleasing. But **setting boundaries** and **asking for what you need** is essential. Start small and remember that being clear about your needs isn't selfish. Learning to communicate assertively takes practice, but it's worth it for the peace of mind it brings.

Self-advocacy might involve explaining your needs to a manager at work, asking family members to lower the volume during meals, or requesting flexibility in your schedule. The more you practise these conversations, the easier they become.

4. Challenge internalised ableism

It's easy to get caught up in thoughts like, **"I should be able to handle a full-time job"** or **"I don't need sensory supports."** But these "shoulds" are doing you no favours. Ask yourself: **why shouldn't you have the support you need?** Everyone deserves a fair shot, and accommodations are just part of levelling the playing field. Recognising and questioning these unrealistic societal expectations can free up mental energy and reduce feelings of guilt or shame.

Internalised ableism often stems from societal pressures to appear **"normal"** or **"capable."** By reframing these expectations, you can focus on what works for you, rather than trying to meet someone else's standards.



How employers can support autistic employees to avoid burnout

Workplaces can make a huge difference by being more inclusive. Here are some practical adjustments employers can offer:

- **Noise-cancelling headphones and screen filters:** Minimise sensory overload.
- **Quiet spaces:** Provide areas where staff can take a sensory break.
- **Flexible hours:** Allow employees to work during their most productive times.
- **Skip social activities:** Let staff opt out of team-building exercises or other draining events.
- **Ergonomic equipment:** Ensure desks, chairs, and tools are comfortable and accessible.

Employers should also consider providing **training for managers and staff on autism awareness**. This can help create a more understanding and supportive workplace culture.



Burnout is tough, but it's not inevitable. By recognising the signs early and making small, meaningful changes, you can protect your energy and well-being. Whether it's through setting boundaries, finding the right tools, or connecting with others, **there are plenty of ways to keep burnout at bay.**

Contact **HealthHero** today for more support and advice. We're with you every step of the way.
