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INSIGHTS

Autistic Burnout

Guide to Spotting and
Recovering from Autistic
Burnout

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Autistic Burnout Overview

Few studies have formally studied autistic burnout, and thus it is largely missing from the academic and clinical literature. It has recently become more widely talked about as autistic self-advocates are talking about their lived experiences. Raymaker et al. recently published one of the first studies on autistic burnout, which you can read in full [here](#). Much of the following information comes from their research.

Autistic burnout is distinct from occupational burnout and depression. This speaks to the need to have specific training and education to address autistic burnout. Raymaker et al. suggest that education on autistic burnout be included in clinical training and suicide prevention programs.

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Definition

Autistic burnout is characterized by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus...[It] is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports (Raymaker et al., 2021).



Characteristics

The three primary characteristics include:



Chronic exhaustion (mental, emotional and physical)



Reduced tolerance to stimulus



Loss of skills (e.g., reduced executive functioning such as thinking, remembering, creating and executing plans, performing basic self-care skills and activities in daily living)

Symptoms

Autistic burnout is typically described as involving intense emotional, physical, mental exhaustion. It can result in increased sensitivity to sensory input, difficulty managing emotions which makes a person more prone to outbursts or intense anxiety, and an increase in autistic traits such as repetitive behaviors, and difficulty adapting to change. It can also contribute to depression and suicidality.



Causes

It is more common among autistic people with strong cognitive and language abilities who frequently use camouflaging and masking to move through social space.

Autistic burnout is often considered to be one of the side effects of masking and camouflaging. It can be related to the high demands of navigating the neurotypical world, sensory overstimulation, or executive functioning fatigue following high executive functioning demands, or stress associated with significant changes.



Causes

Raymaker et al. provided a framework for understanding autistic burnout. They suggested that when life stressors + barriers to support added up to a cumulative load that exceeded the person's abilities, this led to burnout.

So When....

Life Stress



Barriers to
support

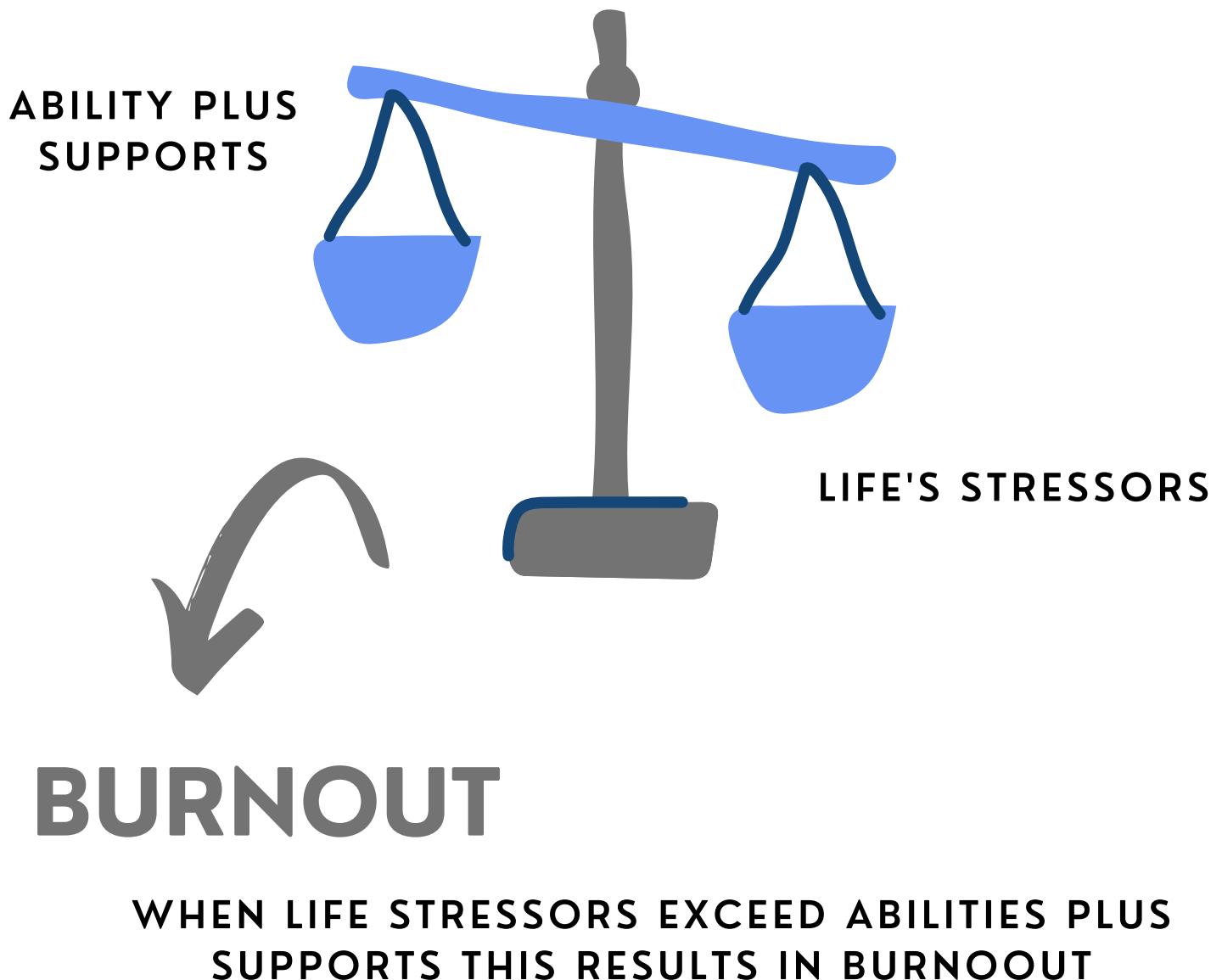


Equals a cumulative
load that exceeds
person's abilities to
cope



Burnout

Conceptualization of Autistic Burn-Out



Essentially when expectations outweigh abilities (+support), this is unsustainable and leads to burnout.

It is hypothesized, that those with higher cognitive and language abilities are more prone to this due to difficulties accessing support, a tendency for people around them to minimize their struggles, and a tendency to hold themselves to neurotypical standards. As one participant in Raymaker's research put it:

"Autistic burnout is a state of physical and mental fatigue, heightened stress, and diminished capacity to manage life skills, sensory input, and/or social interactions, which comes from years of being severely overtaxed by the strain of trying to live up to demands that are out of sync with our needs".

In Raymaker's research, the most common stressors included: masking, suppressing autistic traits, pretending to be allistic and social pressures and expectations. As one participant put it:

"The metaphor I use is that long-term camouflaging and masking leaves behind a kind of psychic plaque in the mental and emotional arteries. Like the buildup of physical plaque over time can result in a heart attack or stroke, the buildup of this psychic plaque over time can result in burnout".

Raymaker et al. research further highlighted the difficulty many of their participants experienced in accessing accommodations and resources (likely associated with high cognitive and verbal skills). They identified that the tendency for people to "gaslight" the struggles of autistics as not real (due to the invisibility of masking), was a significant contributor to the accumulation of stress and overall load.

Recovery depends on the person and the specific causes. In the situation of acute burnout (like the person who gets tunnel vision while at a party), they need to go home and rest for the night and will likely regain vision and skills in the morning. For a more prolonged season of burnout, a person may need to significantly restructure their lifestyle and remove themselves from the causes of their burnout. It may become more difficult to recover the older a person is.



Dr. Neff's Tips for Recovery

Here are a few of my personal tips for how to recover during an Autistic burnout

- Practice boundaries and reduce unnecessary workload
- Find ways to reduce sensory input (use noise-canceling headphones, or noise-reducing devices like LOOPS, sunglasses, etc.). (Bonus get 20% off loops with my personalized code [here](#).)
- Rest. Try to focus on rest that feels **restorative**. Binge-watching T.V may feel restful but likely not restorative. Consider reading or listening to a book related to a special interest, or engaging in activities you experience as soothing to your sensory system.
- Find alternative ways to express yourself. Many Autistics have alternative ways of expressing emotions. Writing, art, making a collage, writing a poem, or finding music that matches your mood are just a few examples of alternative ways of expressing yourself. And, if you feel empty and if there isn't anything to express, that's okay too.
- Don't let the routine go. In burnout, we're tempted to let the routine go altogether. However, routines are soothing to our nervous systems and minds because they tell us what to expect. It doesn't have to be rigorous, but having a few anchor points during the day will be helpful.
- Engage in activities that are soothing to your senses. Finding gentle and soothing ways to move your body through gentle movement is likely helpful.
- Nature is particularly restorative for autistic people. If you have access, take time to go and sit by a lake, the Ocean, a beautiful meadow or simply listen to nature songs.

Raymaker Recovery Tips

In Raymaker et al. research, they identified the following themes as providing potential solutions to autistic burnout.

- **Acceptance and access to Social Support:** Individual and community support, peer support, attending to autistic needs, unmasking.
- **Leaning into Autistic Strengths:** Using autistic strengths, advocating for, and receiving reasonable accommodations, instrumental supports such as respite support.
- **Formal Supports:** Mental health supports, Time Off/Breaks, ability to socially withdraw.
- **Reducing Load:** Reducing activities, setting boundaries, asking for help.
- **Self-Advocacy and Health:** Focusing on healthy lifestyle, early recognition, receiving an ASD diagnosis.
- **Self-Knowledge:** Understanding patterns, triggers, and making strategic decisions to be preventative.
- **Engagement with the Autistic Community:** Engagement with the autistic community can help a person name and validate their experience of burnout.

Prevention is the Best Strategy

Preventing autistic burnout is one of the best strategies. Self-knowledge is critical for this--knowing what your triggers are and being able to identify the early signs of burnout. For some people, early signs will be increased sensitivity to sensory input; for others, it will be depersonalization and detachment; or it may be vision changes such as tunnel vision. Such signals can inform a person that it's time to remove themselves from the situation and arrange some sensory detox and downtime. Knowledge can also help a person plan travel, trips, daily rhythms in such a way that builds in sensory detox/down-time.



How to spot the difference

1

Discerning between the two can be quite difficult, particularly because autistic burnout often results in depression. Thus, **the most beneficial thing a clinician can do is to have ears and eyes for undiagnosed Autism.** Here are some of the things the clinician should be listening for:

- Past diagnosis of social anxiety, anxiety, or depression that may have been particularly severe during adolescence and the transition to adulthood
- Sensory issues
- Intensely focused interests
- Preference for routine
- A distinct cognitive style (i.e. a bottom-up approach to knowledge)
- Social difficulties, discomfort with eye contact and touch
- History of depersonalization/derealization not explained by trauma
- History of addiction, eating disorder, or self-harm
- Self-soothing through repetition
- A non-traditional form of expressing and discussing emotion (e.g., may talk about emotion through using ideas, art, or music)

How to spot the difference

- 2 Raymaker et al. research found that anhedonia (loss of pleasure) and sleep problems were not central to autistic burnout and were specific to depression.
- 3 Try to understand the origin of the episode. Depression can be of unknown origin or can follow a season of grief, loss, relationship change, family stress, or other social-life stressors. Autistic burnout often follows intense periods of masking, socializing, working, and generally “performing” as a neurotypical. So, consider if the depression came on after a long prolonged period of stress and socializing? Did it come after multiple life changes? Perhaps after becoming a Parent for the first time, a move, or transition to college? Autistic burnout typically comes following a significant change or prolonged sensory input/stress and demand on a person’s executive functioning.

How to spot the difference

- 4 **Consider the impact of Behavioral Activation:** Does behavioral activation make it better or worse? Behavioral activation is typically helpful for treating depression. This likely will make an Autistic burnout worse if it is not done with an understanding of Autism. (Note if behavioral activation activities involve socializing and returning to the world, it will make an autistic burnout worse while it often positively impacts depression).
- 5 **Social Withdrawal:** Consider the experience around social withdrawal. in both situations, the person tends to withdraw. In the absence of Autism, this likely causes more distress, while within Autistic burnout, this more likely feels restorative, restful, and desired.

Strategies for working with Autistic Clients Through Burnout

Good autistic burnout support will include interventions aimed to help 1) increase self-knowledge and 2) helps the person gain access to supports. One of the most important things you can do for your client may involve helping them get an accurate diagnosis that enables them to advocate for their needs.

- 1 **First, monitor for suicidality.** High-masking autistics are three times more likely to experience suicidality and die by suicide. Burnout is one pathway to suicide.
- 2 **Help them gain self-knowledge by helping them find language for their experience.** This may first involve helping them understand their neurotype and learning the language of masking and burnout. Provide education around autistic burnout and help them identify triggers and patterns.

Strategies for working with Autistic Clients Through Burnout

3

Help them gain access to supports and accommodations.

In the Raymaker study, the inability to gain access to supports led to the inability to obtain relief. This may involve providing them with an accurate diagnosis (or connecting them to providers who can diagnose). However, before you refer, you should vet whom you are referring to in order to ensure they know how to assess high-masking Autism. Going through the diagnostic process and receiving a false-negative can add to the stress and trauma of living with undiagnosed high-masking Autism.

4

Support their efforts of engaging in self-advocacy: A lot of Autistic teens and young adults struggle with self-advocacy (which is necessary to get needs met/reduce load/improve supports). Many self-advocacy strategies are learned through osmosis which is by nature harder for the autistic person to learn this way. The [Integrated Self-Advocacy ISA Curriculum](#) provides a helpful framework (they also have a [student workbook](#)).

Strategies for working with Autistic Clients Through Burnout

5

Use CBT with Caution: While some Autistics describe positive experiences with CBT many talk openly about the harm caused by traditional CBT methods. From my experience, identifying thinking errors and thinking filters can be helpful for many (and some of the behavioral strategies can be helpful if adapted). However, my sense is that any attempt made to challenge or change unhelpful thinking patterns often makes symptoms worse. The Autistic brain tends to see right through this and will come up with 20 counter thoughts to the counter-thought proposed. Reframing negative thoughts feels artificial and gamey for many of us. CBT also tends to focus on the person's wrong thinking and doesn't place the person's thoughts/core beliefs within a social context. Rather than offering counter thoughts, many of us benefit from understanding the origin of some of these core beliefs (navigating an ableist world). Autistic thoughts often benefit from being put under a social constructionist lens (e.g., how does their experience navigating a neurotypical world influence core beliefs of self).

Strategies for working with Autistic Clients Through Burnout

- 6 **Adapt Behavioral Activation:** Behavioral activation should focus on rest, respite, sensory soothing activities, and special interests. Avoid behavioral activation that involves intense sensory or social experiences.
- 7 **Encourage them to find spaces where they can live unmasked,** such as through finding autistic communities to plug into. Encourage and support their use of stimming and unmasking while in therapy with you and with trusted friends and family.