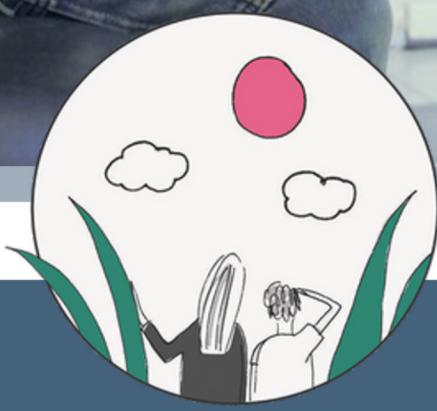


A GUIDE TO SCHOOL BURNOUT AND AUTISM



DR. Naomi
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CAN CHILDREN REALLY BE BURNT OUT BY SCHOOL?

Many parents get in touch with me concerned that their autistic children are burnt out. They seem to be lacking in energy and motivation. They've lost their spark. Nothing seems to bring them joy any more. But can children and teenagers really be burnt out by school?

And if so, why does it happen?

School is challenging for many young people. There are expectations that can be hard to meet, no space to get away or decompress and no space to follow your interests. Some of them find the constant instructions and demands highly stressful, and many young people find the rules confusing and arbitrary.

It can be particularly hard for autistic young people. We know from the research that many of them have difficult experiences at school. They are more likely to be bullied and many of have an additional learning disability which makes school more challenging. A high percentage also meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD.

SO, WHAT'S GOING ON?

School expects children to develop in a particular way. It expects five-year-olds to be able to do certain things, and ten-year-olds to do other things.

Autistic young people may be 'out of sync' with these expectations. They are always struggling to keep up with the system, because they are developing differently.

Schools tend to focus on academic skills, but there are a whole set of other skills which children need in order to do well at school. A child might be academically 'fine' but still find school very demanding. This might be because they have difficulties in managing their emotions, it might be because they find being with their peers all day really hard and need time alone to decompress. It might be because they find transitions hard, and school, particularly secondary school, is full of transitions.

THINGS WHICH ARE HARD AT SCHOOL

No space to get away and decompress

No space to follow your own interests

Lots of instructions, and demands

Lots of transitions

Rules which are confusing

Managing their emotions

Support needs e.g. ADHD, learning

Experiences of bullying

Managing friendships

Something to try

- What are some of the things that your child finds hard at school? They might not be able to tell you themselves.
- Think about the school day, or what teachers have said to you
- Think about the things you know they find challenging at home.
- Do they find large groups difficult? That could make school assembly or the playground challenging.
- Do they find being bored and waiting intolerable? That might make waiting in line for lunch really hard.
- Are everyday transitions at home, like going to bed, or leaving the house, hard?

THINGS WHICH ARE HARD AT SCHOOL

THE ROAD TRIP OF LIFE



All of these things can take a toll, meaning that autistic young people are vulnerable to school stress. And when someone is under chronic stress for a prolonged period, they are at risk of going into burnout. I often use the metaphor of a road trip to help to explain burnout.

We can think of our body and brain as our unique vehicle. Vehicles differ greatly and are adapted for different circumstances. Some are good in town, others are better on long distances.

Vehicles are also all fitted with different ways to protect the people inside them from the road outside – tyres, suspension, shock absorbers, which all help us to drive along roads without being flung out at the first bump and to keep us safe in the event of an accident.

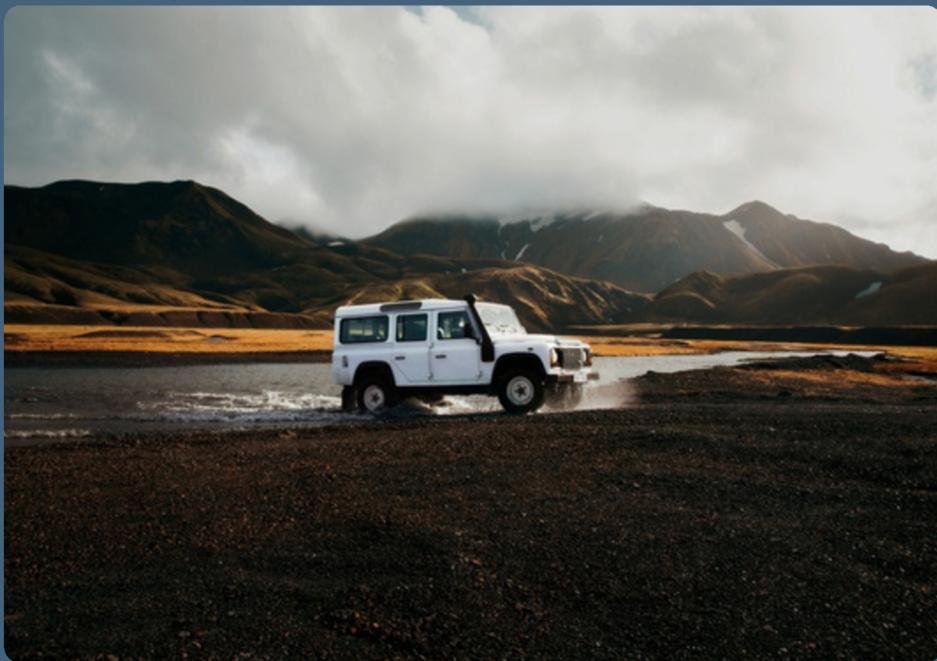
Vehicles need regular maintenance to keep them going. Without this, they start to show the strain. This happens more quickly if we drive the vehicle in conditions which it isn't suited to – if we take a Mini off-road, for example, or if we live by the sea and the sea air starts to rust the metal. The vehicle starts to deteriorate.

WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT

As humans, we are all different. We cope better in different situations. We can manage some stress but we also need regular maintenance or care.

The road is our environment. The world around us. For children, it's their school, their friends and their family. When things are going okay in life, we're moving along that road. Our life is moving forward.

When we're on the road, we can cope with some bumps, as long as the road is basically sound underneath us. Staying on the road requires constant little adjustments to our vehicle, and we vary in how easy we find it to stay on the road. Things like being hungry or tired can affect our ability to stay on the road – just like when we really are driving a car. If a child finds school challenging, then their car is less well adjusted to the road they're on. It is harder going. It's like their road is full of potholes and obstacles. It takes more effort just to live their daily life.



The success of each journey isn't just about the car, nor is it just about the road. It's about how the two things work together.

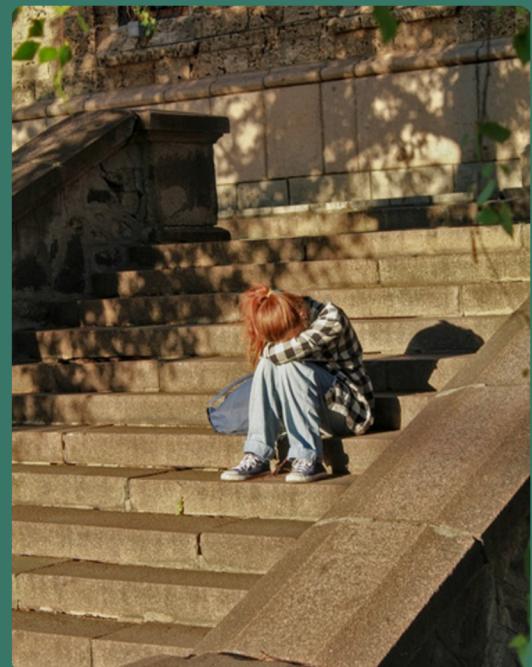
When things are too much to cope with, young people can lose their ability to keep going. They may have meltdowns, or try to run away. They may go into shut down and become very compliant. They're in survival mode. It's like they're driving the car in really difficult conditions – through a storm or through deep mud. It takes everything that they have to keep functioning.

MANAGING STRESS

We are all dealing with stress and intense emotions, every day. Some children find this harder than others and they show us through their behaviour. This is usually accepted for younger children but not for older children. We know that small children have tantrums and they need help to keep them managing emotionally. We expect to spend time soothing our small children, helping them to calm themselves down.

As children get older, however, this help is often withdrawn, particularly at school. After the early years of school, children are expected to be able to manage their emotions at school.

If they don't manage (for example by having a meltdown at school, or shouting and moving around when they are meant to be still and quiet) they will often be punished for it. For some children, particularly autistic children, this happens too soon. They are being expected to manage more than they are capable of.



Children learn to manage their emotions when an adult helps them. Many autistic children still need an available adult to help them to manage their emotions in difficult situations. This is hard to achieve at school unless there is a teaching assistant who really 'gets them' or they have a one-to-one. At secondary school it can be particularly hard for those who still need more adult support. Children move from room to room each day and may see teachers only once or twice a week. It's very hard for them to get to know their teachers (and for their teachers to get to know them).

This means that autistic children are struggling to manage their emotions through the school day. For them, the effort to keep on the road is enormous, and parents see that at the end of the day when the explosion or shut down happens. Some parents describe it as being like a coke bottle which has been shaken up. Others say it's like their children just aren't there. They say that their eyes are 'glazed over'. That's because children are working as hard as they can to keep going during school hours, perhaps because they are scared of the consequences if they don't, and then it all comes out after school.

WHEN DOES BURNOUT HAPPEN?

Burnout happens when we have been in a state of chronic stress for so long that we lose the ability to regulate ourselves.

To go back to my car metaphor, burnout is as if the tyres and the suspension have gone completely on the car. We've come off-road, the car doesn't drive anymore and we don't know how to get back.

For some autistic teenagers, this often seems to happen unexpectedly. They appear to be coping and may even be doing very well at school. Then something small happens – maybe being told to get a haircut, or a friend leaves – and they crack. And once that has happened, there's no going back. It's like something has broken. They stop going to school, they often stop doing anything. They sometimes won't leave their bedrooms. Everything comes to a standstill. What's going on?

The World Health Organisation defines burnout has having three parts.

1

Exhaustion or energy depletion

2

Feelings of negativity or cynicism

3

Feelings that you can't do anything well or be productive

They class it as an 'occupational phenomenon' – meaning that it is a direct result of the chronic stress of a workplace. Or in the case of children, school. What this means is that children feel tired all the time, even when they have had a good night's sleep. It means that they might be negative about everything, even things they usually enjoy. And it means that they feel like there is no point in doing anything – they might say 'I just can't be bothered' or 'I'm no good at anything?'.

THE STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT IS THE PROBLEM, AND IT'S THAT WHICH NEEDS TO CHANGE

Burnout isn't a medical problem, it's an occupational one. That means that people go into burnout because the demands of their environment are too much, and they have been under chronic stress for too long. The solution isn't to treat the person and try to change them so they can keep going under more stress for longer.

Unfortunately what happens when children and teenagers have burnt out is often not helpful. Schools often respond with pressure, fear and threats- all of which make things worse. Parents are told to do that as well. I've heard of young people who have been told their parents will be sent to prison if they don't keep coming to school. Many have been told they'll never amount to anything and school attendance is essential for their future. It makes them feel terrible, and it stops them from getting better. They can't get any space away from the pressure to recover.

Changing the environment isn't enough by itself. Often when children burnout they stop going to school, but they are still burnt out. They still feel exhausted and negative about everything. They still need to recover.

RECOVERY FROM SCHOOL BURNOUT

Psychologists have identified four stages to recovery from burnout. Knowing what stage your child is at can help you work out what to do.

**Stage 1
Breakdown**



Stage 2 Repair



**Stage 3 Learning
from what happened**



**Stage 4 Planning for
the future**



**Stage 1
Breakdown**



Stage 1 Breakdown

Focus on connection and taking off the pressure

In the early stages of burnout recovery, it's a crisis. They stop going to school, and they may stop doing anything else. Everyone panics and it's easy to try to force them to go back.

Take a deep breath and slow down. At this stage it's all about connection and taking off the pressure. It is not going to help to remind your child how important school is, or how much they are missing out on each day.

Parents and schools usually want to jump in at stage 3 or 4. They want to start planning for the future and getting 'back on track'. When the young person is still at stage 1, this is going to backfire and stop them from recovering. This whole recovery can take months or even years. It can't be rushed. You need to spend time looking after yourself and building compassion for yourself as well as your teenager.

Common things people say which don't help

School is really important

You won't be able to go to university if you don't go to school

You're missing out on X today!

It's breaking the law to not go to school

Every minute you miss of school can affect your GCSE results

No one likes school you know, but we all have to go!

You need to let them know that you will help them find a way forward and that this is not the end of the world. This might involve watching YouTube with them, or playing video games. You want to look for opportunities for connection and healing. This is not the time to discuss what went wrong or to tell them off. It can be helpful to find other adults for them to talk to if they don't want to talk to you. These people can be friends, relatives, or even climbing instructors or drumming teachers! Contact with interested adults who are outside the family can be an important step.

Things you can say which might help

- There are other ways to get an education
- We will find a way forward together
- There are lots of people who didn't go to school and are leading happy, successful lives

Stage 2 Repair



Stage 2 Repair Support them in following their interests

As they start to move into recovery, you'll see what I call the 'green shoots'. This is when they start taking an interest in the world again. They start asking questions and wanting to do things. This may not be what you expect. Sometimes the 'green shoots' are when they want to go to the local shop to buy chocolate, or when they ask about playing a new video game. At this stage, you just want to support them in following their interests. Don't judge them or try to push them on.

You'll know that they are moving into the next stage because their energy levels start to improve. They might even start to be bored and irritated with spending so much time at home. They start to want to talk more.



Stage 3 Learning

**Think about what happened, and
what the warning signs were**

Stage 3 is thinking about what happened and what went wrong. Understanding how everything got too much, and what the warning signs were. Thinking about how things could have been different. Maybe talking to other people about what they saw, and what they think.



Stage 4 The Future

**Feeling hopeful and planning a
sustainable future**

The last stage is about thinking about what happens next. How are we all going to move forward? It's unlikely to be going back to exactly how things were before – that wasn't working. Planning for the future in a way which is sustainable and which incorporates the new knowledge you have now about what doesn't work for your child. It might be back into education but with some changes. It might mean a new school. It might be taking a bit more time out. It might mean studying at home for a while. There are lots of ways in which children and teenagers start living their lives again after burnout.

**The important thing is that they - and you - are starting
to feel hopeful about the future again.**

WHAT IF THEY'RE STUCK?

When teenagers aren't recovering from burnout, it's usually because the pressure hasn't been lifted off. They may think that if they recover they have to go back to school. Other people may be talking to them in ways which make them feel bad about themselves, or they may be very self-critical.

They may still have beliefs about how 'school drop outs' will never achieve anything and so they think their life is over. You might need to seek out other teenagers who don't go to school or young adults who were teenagers who didn't go to school. Or they may be hearing toxic messages about themselves from others who are still at school.

You might need to unpick what is going on, and find out what recovery would mean for them. If it would mean going back to school, then they might be in a double bind, unable to move forwards.

A QUICK RECAP

Young people go into burnout because the demands of their environment are too much.

Lots of things about school are harder for autistic young people.

The focus needs to be on changing the environment, not the person.

The off-road model of burn out has 4 stages: Breakdown, Repair, Learning and Planning for the Future.

I hope this has been useful for you and your young person.

**Stage 1
Breakdown**



Stage 2 Repair



**Stage 3 Learning
from what happened**



**Stage 4 Planning for
the future**





MEET NAOMI FISHER

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Naomi is a clinical psychologist, EMDR-Europe Accredited trainer and author. Since she was a small child, she has asked the world why. Why do things have to be this way – and what would it be like if it were different?

She applies this to education, parenting and clinical psychology. She asks whether school is always the best way for children to learn, and whether the things ‘we all know’ to be true about parenting are in fact the case. She pushes for new ways to understand difference and to include voices which go unheard. Her work brings psychological theory and evidence-based practice together with real life clinical experience and open curiosity. The thread that ties her work together is her willingness to take a step outside the conventional and to challenge the status quo, even when others disagree.

Naomi supports parents each month with live-taught webinars, bitesize online courses and a range of free resources.

[EXPLORE OUR SUPPORT](#)



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