

# span.toolkit

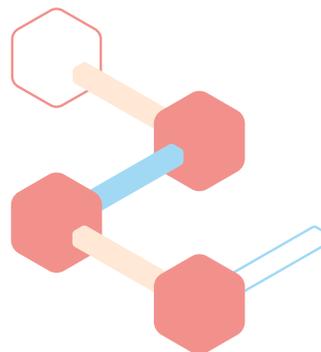
## autistic burnout fact sheet

OTARC | La Trobe University

'Autistic burnout' is a state of extreme **physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion** that happens when the social and sensory demands of everyday life as an autistic person in a non-autistic world become too overwhelming.

It's different to feeling tired and can't be fixed by **just having a rest.**

According to autistic people, autistic burnout feels like **their battery has run out and they can't recharge it.** Autistic burnout can last a long time and people often experience it more than once during their lifetime.



# Functional Impacts

Autistic burnout affects every part of a person's life. During burnout, people struggle to think and process information, and to concentrate, plan, and remember things. They also become more sensitive to sensory stimuli which makes it difficult to go to school or work and to socialise with others. Autistic people can lose their ability to communicate, including speaking and understanding what other people are saying, and can't look after themselves like before (e.g., showering and brushing their teeth). They also lose learned skills (e.g., cooking and driving) and withdraw socially, preferring to spend time alone in low-sensory, low-demand environments.

## Risk Factors

### Camouflaging

Autistic people are a minority group in society and often face stigma and discrimination from poor autism awareness and acceptance. To avoid being bullied and excluded, many people 'camouflage' to fit in - pretending they are not autistic, putting themselves in overwhelming sensory and social environments, and not using coping strategies that might 'out' them as autistic (e.g., stimming or wearing noise-cancelling headphones).

Camouflaging (also referred to as masking) takes a lot of mental, physical and emotional effort which is exhausting over time, and can also make it harder to get support and accommodations that might prevent burnout.

### Emotional Awareness

Many autistic people have alexithymia and/or interoception difficulties which make it difficult for them to identify and name what they are feeling, physically and emotionally. This means they can miss warning signs of autistic burnout in time to use prevention strategies.

### Sensory Processing

Autistic people often have sensory processing challenges that make them sensitive to certain sounds, lights, smells, and/or touch. The stress from being regularly exposed to overwhelming environments becomes exhausting over time and can contribute to autistic burnout.

## Compound Factors

Autistic burnout is the outcome of chronic stress and demands that exceed a person's capacity to cope, so anything that causes stress over a long period of time can contribute to burnout. This includes other physical and/or mental health conditions (e.g., diabetes or anxiety) and autistic characteristics such as difficulty coping with unexpected changes.

## Protective Factors & Recovery

### Rest

Rest is essential, particularly during the early acute phase of autistic burnout.

### Adjustments

It is important to reduce demands as much as possible. This might involve lifestyle changes or advocating for adjustments at school or work (e.g., reduced hours; a dedicated workspace; remote working).

Setting firm boundaries and saying no to unreasonable or excessive demands is vital.

### Social Connection

Having a supportive network of friends who understand and support their needs, allowing autistic people to be themselves without feeling they need to camouflage is also helpful.

# Guidance for Healthcare Professionals

On the surface, some autistic burnout symptoms look like those for depression and anxiety, but there are some key differences. For example:

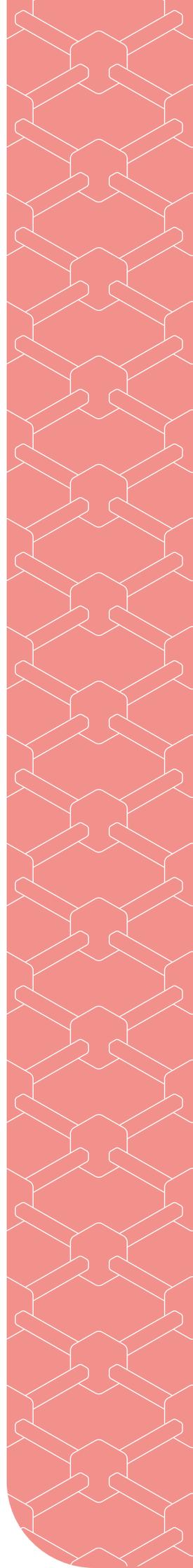
- With depression, people often lose interest in doing things they usually enjoy. With autistic burnout, a person hasn't lost interest in their favourite activities - they just don't have the energy to engage in them.
- With depression, people often feel hopeless, but with autistic burnout, people feel drained.
- Social interaction may be helpful for people who are depressed but is too overwhelming for people during autistic burnout.
- Some therapies that are helpful for depression (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy and medication) are not appropriate for people experiencing autistic burnout.

It is important to know that autistic burnout often occurs **before** a person has been diagnosed with autism. If the person's symptoms don't exactly fit the criteria for depression, consider asking the person to complete a brief autism screening questionnaire.

Retrospectively, many autistic people report experiencing autistic burnout as a child or adolescent. One indication of this when they look back is that they were unable to attend school.

## What do I ask?

Ask whether they try to change important aspects of their personality or put aside their needs at school, work, home, and when socialising with others. This typically indicates masking/camouflaging.



## How do I support someone who may be at risk?

It is important to ask the person what they need! Sometimes well-intentioned help can have the opposite effect.

Don't place unreasonable expectations on people. For example, if a person wants to leave a social gathering early because they're becoming overwhelmed, don't try and convince them to stay. Forcing people to push past their capacity can be harmful and should not be encouraged.

While they are not in burnout, encourage the autistic person to create a 'toolkit' of things that are important for others to know in case of a future burnout episode. This could include instructions about how to communicate with them (e.g., don't ask me to make choices; speak to me in a low voice), sensory preferences (e.g., keep the lights dim); favourite comfort items (e.g., stuffed toy or blanket), manageable foods, medication details, and list of important contacts (e.g., supervisor, psychologist, or support person).

