

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

Autistic Burnout

What is Autistic Burnout?



Burnout is understood as a state of extreme exhaustion as a result of stress, particularly from the workplace, and is becoming more accepted and understood. However autistic burnout differs from this in intensity and long term effects, along with the ways that it can manifest in daily life.

Autistic burnout affects each person differently, impacting abilities and making everyday tasks harder to manage. Common symptoms include extreme fatigue, difficulty with executive functioning, and low mood.

Burnout can be triggered due to factors such as prolonged masking, increase of meltdowns and shutdowns, and the stress of living in an un-adapted neurotypical environment where needs are not being met. Rest, self-care, easy meals, clear boundaries and limiting stressful activities, such as avoiding crowded places, can help relieve burnout symptoms and support recovery.

Causes of Autistic Burnout

A number of factors may be involved in autistic burnout, and while these may vary from individual to individual, there are a number of common reasons, that can add to each other, such as:



Masking

Masking is a constant strain for autistic people, and can cause additional stress along with reducing ability to stim.



Co-occurring Conditions

Co-Occurring conditions such as ADHD, hypermobility, and epilepsy can add additional difficulties and sensitivities that can disturb sleep, or daily routines and tolerances. Consider how these change daily and long-term support needs.



Changes to Routine

Changes to daily routine can be disorienting and stressful to autistic people, leading to feelings of insecurity and overwhelm.

Sensory Overload



Sensory overload, particularly if consistent and combined with other stressors can be a major contributing factor.

Social Expectations



Societal expectations to conform can be distressing and exhausting, which can lead to masking. Failure to meet expectations and lack of understanding by others can cause miscommunication, conflicting needs, as well as in/direct discrimination.

Stress



Autistic people may experience differences in circadian rhythm, our internal clock, which disrupts sleep patterns.

What does Autistic Burnout look like?

Autistic burnout can present in a variety of ways, and while this varies depending on the individual's experience, there are a number of common everyday autistic experiences and expectations of society that lead to burnout.

Symptoms of autistic burnout can overlap with depression, low mood, anxiety and co-occurring conditions as well.



Some common symptoms of burnout include:

- Difficulty to perform daily tasks and executive functioning issues
- Increased susceptibility to meltdowns and shutdowns
- Difficulty making decisions, or making decisions too quickly
- Extreme fatigue
- Low mood
- Skill regression and reduction in coping strategies
- Emotional regulation difficulties
- Increase in autistic, and other co-occurring condition(s) symptoms, for example frequency of chronic pain flares
- Withdrawal from activities, such as socialising, or exercise
- Not able, or not wanting to take part in special interests
- Difficulty with self care, possibly not able to do this at all
- Isolation, or loneliness and a loss of support networks
- Heightened stress and anxiety

Burnout's Effects on Mental Health

Autistic Burnout can have acute and long lasting effects on mental health and wellbeing, with symptoms typically similar to clinical depression and extreme fatigue,

However there are a number of other potential effects varying from person to person, and which can be exacerbated and complicated by co-occurring conditions, particularly ADHD, or chronic illness. As well as key life events, such as loss and grief, exams, moving homes, unemployment etc.



Withdrawal from Support, or MH Therapies

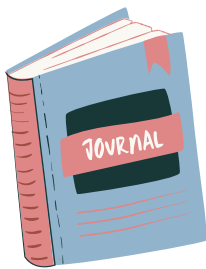


Processing & Emotional Delays:

It may take longer to process information, and emotional needs. This could be experienced as a shutdown, or alexithymia.

Increased Brain Fog:

Autistic burnout can make focus, thinking and forming or recalling memories harder. It can also make processing verbal, or written communication harder.



Small Window of Tolerance



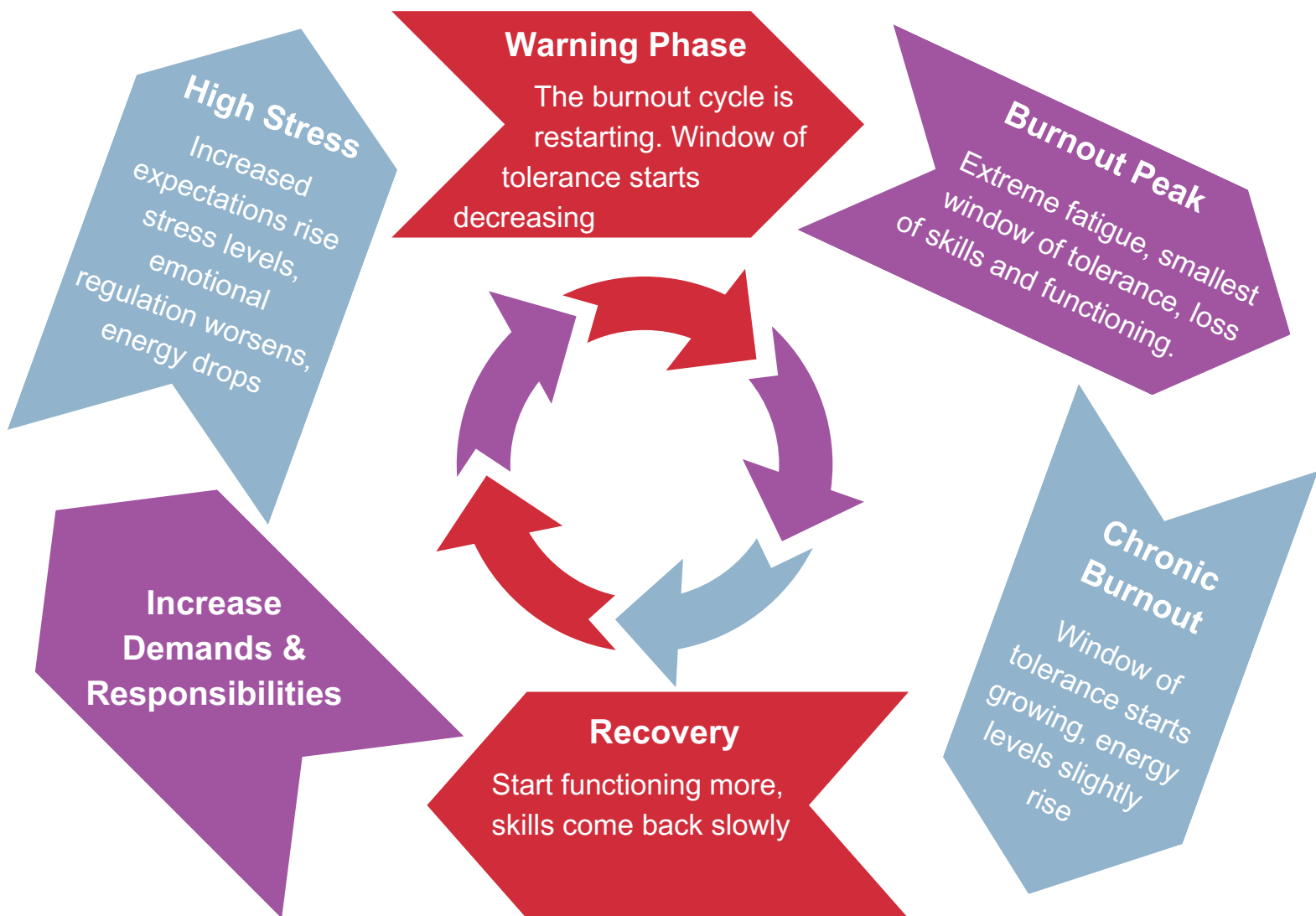
Skill Regression and Loss of Coping Strategies:

Autistic burnout can cause a reduction in skills and coping strategies previously used, such as journaling for emotional regulation, or use of communication tools.

Autistic Burnout & Mental Health Co-occurring Conditions:

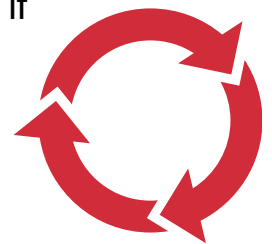
Autistic burnout can be made worse by co-occurring mental health conditions, such as anxiety, or depression. Symptoms can layer over on another causing a compound effect.

Burnout Cycle and the Window of Tolerance

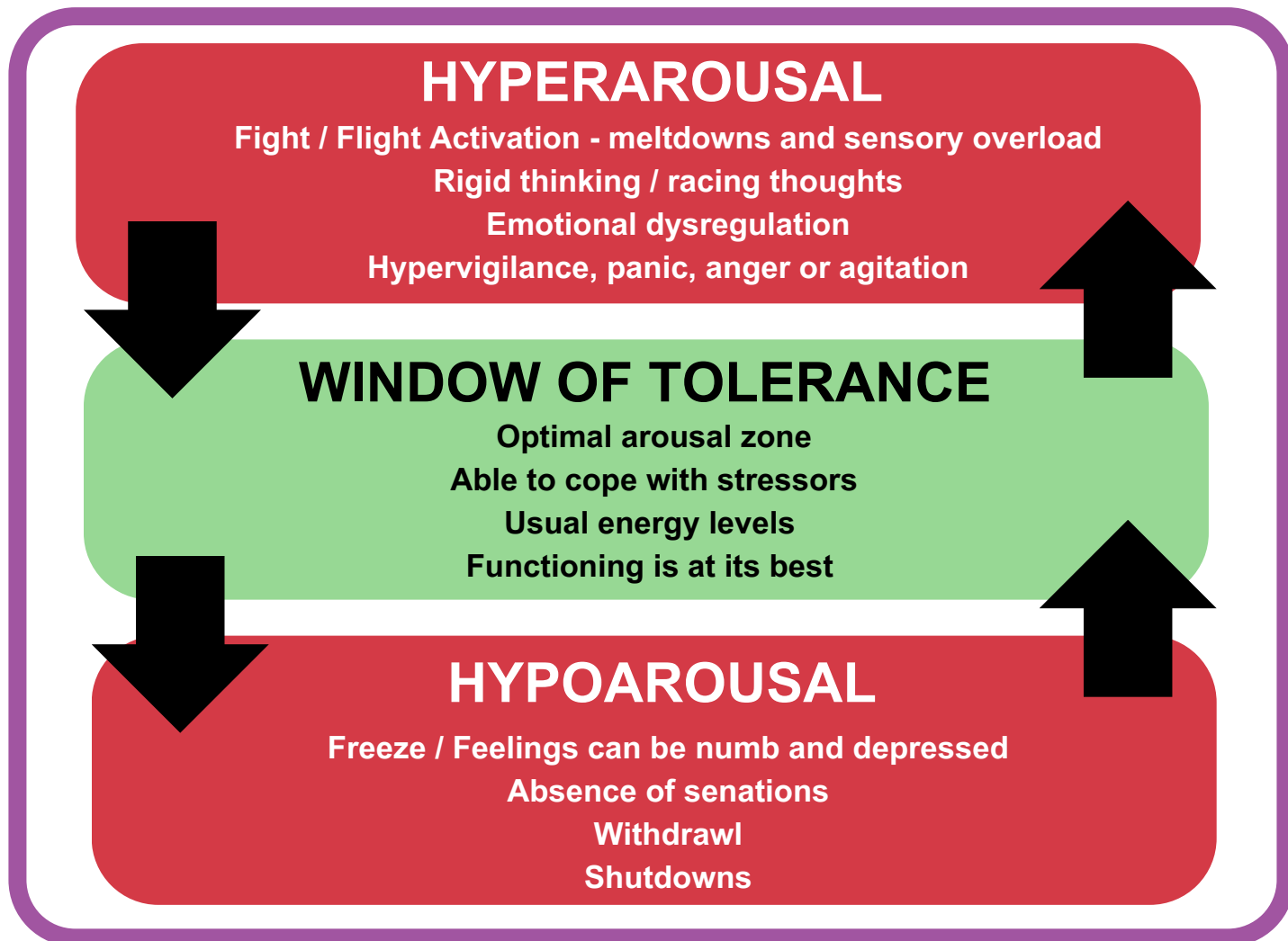


The burnout cycle begins with a loss of skills, tolerance and functioning. During this, it is common that stressors are reduced, for example, less ability to go out and socialise, reduced capacity for work and ticking off items on your to-do list.

As energy levels start returning - though full recovery has not happened yet - these stressors can reappear. This can happen if others add pressure or if there is a personal urge to “quickly recover” and catch up on what was missed. When these demands and stress build up too fast, tolerance drops, and feelings of low energy and mood resurface. This can restart the burnout cycle instead of allowing for recovery.



The Window of Tolerance



The window of tolerance is the range of stress or stimulation you can handle without becoming overwhelmed. Within this window, it is easier to manage daily tasks, emotions and sensory stimuli without significant distress. If demands and stress rises beyond what you can handle, then you may move outside of this window, leading to distress, meltdowns, shutdowns or overload.



For autistic people, this window is often smaller due to our unique sensory and social needs. When stressors build up over time, they can push us outside of the window of tolerance and lead to burnout.



During autistic burnout, your window of tolerance changes with recovery. As your window starts expanding, it is important that stress is not increased too quickly as this can push you outside of this window again, risking a return to burnout.

Coping with Autistic Burnout

Autistic Burnout is typically a long term condition, lasting months, and without taking steps to mitigate the causes can be extended further.

Recovery from burnout may be particularly difficult and take significant time and effort, and may also require significant changes to life circumstances to be made, which may not be immediately possible.

Coping with burnout while on the way to recovery may be possible through:

- Reducing responsibilities or pressure to do certain tasks
- Having support to do self-care tasks such as bathing and feeding
- Setting boundaries and reducing uncertainty around communication, for example, quiet hours on social media, or set times for a call.
- Explaining changes of needs to family, friends and professionals
- Taking part in activities that provide comfort and help to recharge, for example, enjoying nature, arts and crafts and/or watching comfort shows
- Meeting your sensory needs and having them met
- Sleeping and resting, or creating a sleep hygiene routine
- Asking for help from people in your support network, for example, if you have a trusted friend or family member that can help with cooking, or tidying your space
- If you can do so, taking time off education or work may help to reduce pressure and daily responsibilities.
- Explore conflicting needs, if you and support networks are burnt out
 - This may not be possible for people
- You may be able to talk to your manager, or education provider, to get a reduced workload whilst recovering from burnout

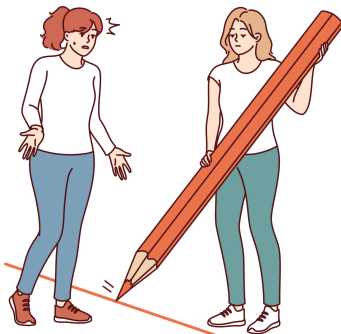
Coping and Recovering from Autistic Burnout Tips



Having a Safe Sensory Space



Recharging Activities



Reducing Expectations & Setting Boundaries



Reminders & Support for Self-care



Resting

Add Your Own Here

Additional Tips for Addressing Autistic Burnout



Internal Needs Met
(e.g. Hunger)



Hydration Needs Met
(e.g. water bottle, or herbal tea)



Peer Support



Support from Work & Education



Support from Primary Care e.g. GP, Counselor or Social Prescriber.

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can heighten symptoms of burnout, so it is important these needs are addressed to help regulate mood, and support your window of tolerance during burnout.

Supporting someone in Burnout

Supporting someone going through autistic burnout can be challenging, as it often impacts not only the individual, but also those around them. Understanding the effects of burnout on the autistic person, along with practicing patience and reducing expectations of the person, can make a real difference. Here are some ways to help a friend, colleague, or loved one through burnout and support their recovery.

- Try to support and give space to socialise, and also offer the person opportunities to socialise in a way that meets their needs e.g. parallel play, or picnics in a local park
- Offer support with daily tasks, or prompt with reminders. For example, cooking, food shopping, bathing, clothes washing)
- Allow for accommodations and adjustments
- Help them advocate their needs to family, education or work (if needed)
- Provide emotional support and reassurance
- Use your own support system and reach out if you need help when supporting someone experiencing burnout
- Decrease demands placed upon the person and ask what the person needs to be able to make decisions during burnout
- Support them to take part in activities and re-engage on their own terms with their interests
- Allow for alternative communication methods



Supporting someone in Burnout



Allow for alternative communication methods



Offer physical support

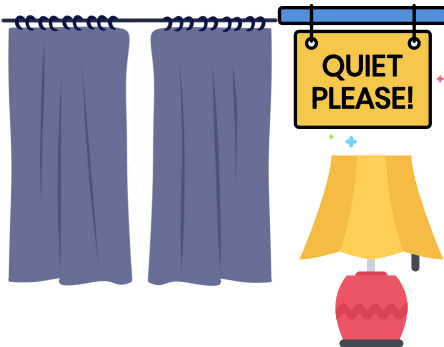


“Try to have some water”

Give them self-care reminders



Offer emotional support



Reduce sensory input



Advocate for access to services and reasonable adjustments

Apps to help with Autistic Burnout



Finch
Self Care App



Spoony
Neurodivergent Friend App



Brain in Hand
Wellbeing & Organising
App



Antistress
Sensory Needs App

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Recovery College – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.

Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

Live Well Leeds – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.