

# Understanding Autistic Burnout

## Context

*In the UK, 22% of autistic people are employed. Only 16% are full-time. (ONS, 2022)*

The Buckland Review (2024) found:

- 3 of 10 autistic adults are in work, compared to 5 of 10 for all disabled people and 8 of 10 non-disabled people.
- Autistic people face the largest pay gap of all disability groups.
- Autistic graduates are twice as likely as non-disabled graduates to be unemployed after 15 months. Only 36% find work in this period.
- They are most likely to be overqualified for the job they have.
- They are most likely to be on zero-hour contracts and least likely to be in a permanent role.

Autistic people have a range of skills to offer workplaces. However, recruitment processes are not empowering for autistic candidates. Management systems created by neurotypical people can cause stress for autistic employees. Many people still do not disclose their diagnoses or specific sensitivities due to stigma. Self-regulatory behaviours, such as stimming, fidget toys, headphones and tinted glasses, are misunderstood and have low acceptance, making it difficult to function. Despite employees legally being able to ask for reasonable accommodations, many workplaces still have problematic conditions, such as open-plan offices, and bright lighting that cannot be adjusted. It can be exhausting to navigate neurotypical communication that requires inference rather than being straightforward. Autistic people will mask and camouflage to hide traits and appear to fit in. The effect of trying to function in these environments on a daily basis is cumulative. It leads to autistic burnout and high attrition rates.

## What is autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout is a severely debilitating condition with onset preceded by fatigue from masking autistic traits, interpersonal interactions, an overload of cognitive input, a sensory environment unaccommodating to autistic sensitivities and/or other additional stressors or changes. Onset and episodes of autistic burnout may interact with co-occurring physical or mental health conditions.

Higgins et al (2022)

Living in a world set up for neurotypicals means that autistic people are trying to function in situations that feel hostile. For them, environments are rarely neutral; either the setting works with them, or against them. In addition, there can be a lack of understanding and empathy from neurotypical people that also impacts autistic people.

When autistic people do not get the support, time and space to self-regulate, and recuperate, it is exhausting. This can lead to overwhelm, shutdown and/or meltdown. These are expressions of inner pain, of feeling out of control or frozen. They are responses akin to fight and freeze.

The cumulative effects of masking, exhaustion, shutdown and meltdown add up to the more severe phenomena of autistic burnout. This is different from occupational burnout. It may last for weeks, months or even years. It is difficult to heal from and can occur with simultaneous depression and anxiety.

It can cause:

- chronic exhaustion

- brain fog and disassociation
- reduced executive functioning
- loss of previously mastered skills
- emotional dysregulation
- an inability to speak or communicate
- increased sensory intolerance
- social interpersonal withdrawal

Even worse, it can lead to:

- self-harm
- thoughts of suicide

The causes and consequences of autistic burnout are becoming clearer.

The outcomes can be fatal.

#### What autistic burnout is not:

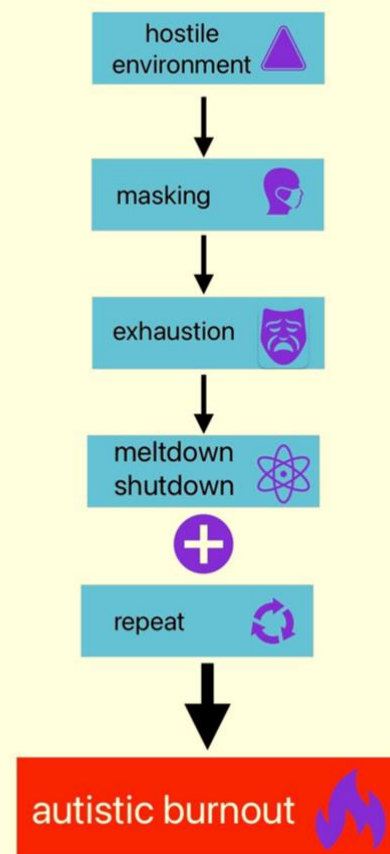
- depression
- occupational burnout
- short-lived
- easy to come back from

#### What causes autistic burnout?

For each autistic person there is a mixture of causes that may tip them into crisis. Some of the main causes include:

- prolonged masking
- long periods of time in social situations and environments that are uncomfortable
- continual sensory overload
- high volume of demands

### The Autistic Burnout Flowchart



@sarahjanenuttall

- unclear or contradictory instructions and expectations
- following rules exactly; fear of non-compliance consequences
- a repeated cycle of masking, exhaustion, meltdown and shutdown
- the stigma that stops people from disclosing their autism and associated needs

## **How can we prevent autistic burnout?**

What is important is that the workplace can and should create welcoming and safe environments for autistic people. To do this:

- provide spaces with low sensory input (quiet, adjustable lighting, not open-plan, designated desks)
- ask the autistic person about their specific needs (not in public and preferably through email)
- make adjustments that would be helpful
- create autism-friendly spaces and protocols as the 'norm'
- ask about preferred forms of communication (assistive technology; written or spoken communication; email, face-to-face, Teams meeting or phone call)
- give SMART instructions for projects in writing (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-constrained)
- discuss changes before they will happen; allow time to think about these and address reactions
- allow flexible working to promote productivity at the times when an employee is most effective
- generate workplace passports or one-page profiles to inform colleagues of specific needs or preferences (ask the autistic person if they want this or not)
- provide questions in advance for presentations, interviews and appraisals, so the autistic person is able to process those questions and give their best response.
- provide an agenda for every meeting. Generate written minutes listing any expected outcomes with deadlines for individuals or teams

Make these part of the usual protocols, to benefit everyone, not just autistic employees.

If a person has disclosed that they are autistic, and you are not sure about a need or preference, ask in a straightforward fashion. If a person has not disclosed an autism identity, but you notice autistic traits, work with that person to identify and adjust for, any needs. Labels are not important or necessary. Meeting every person's needs is.

### **What can we do if a person is presenting with autistic burnout?**

Because many autistic people struggle to identify and process their emotions and physical needs, they may not notice that they are heading for, or experiencing, burnout. Gently let them know if you have noticed any behaviours that may be a red flag for burnout.

- work with the autistic person discreetly to ensure that they take time off and adjust their workload if needed
- review and extend this period when appropriate
- give space by not emailing or demanding immediate meetings or reviews.
- avoid direct confrontation. communicate through an advocate, family member or friend
- recognize that there is no fixed time for recovery
- support the person to access appropriate health and medical assistance

### **What about any co-occurring conditions?**

Being autistic comes with many possible co-occurring conditions that can impact and be exacerbated by burnout. The autistic person may also be dealing with some of these conditions (list is not exhaustive):

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Alexithymia
- Anxiety
- Aphantasia (no or limited visual imagination)

- Chronic fatigue
- Depression
- Different gender, sexual or relationship orientation
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dysgraphia
- Epilepsy
- Fibromyalgia
- Hypermobility / Ehlers Danlos Syndrome
- Immune disorders, allergies
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Prosopagnosia (face blindness)
- Sensory issues, hypersensitivity
- Sleep disorders
- Time agnosia
- Tourette syndrome
- Tinnitus

Without accommodation, the progression down the autistic burnout flow chart may be inevitable. Workplaces need to take responsibility for their part in supporting their employees or failing them. Creating welcoming and safe environments changes the likelihood of autistic burnout.