



Understanding Autistic Burnout in Children and Young People

A Guide for Parents and Carers

Understanding Autistic burnout

What is Autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout is a state of deep, ongoing exhaustion that happens when an Autistic person has been coping with too much for too long. Autistic burnout is most likely to happen in environments that don't match the person's needs. Burnout is not just typical tiredness, and it isn't a lack of effort. Burnout effects their whole system: energy, thinking, emotions, and physical wellbeing. Many Autistic children and young people reach burnout after long periods of masking, managing sensory overload, and trying to keep up with demands that require constant adaptation.

It is important not to blame yourself if your child is experiencing signs of burnout. It is not your fault, and it is not your child's fault. Autistic burnout is caused by all the demands in their life exceeding their capacity to manage. It often takes a combination of school, home, sensory, social and communication overload to reach burnout.

What are the signs of Autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout can show up in different ways. Some changes you might notice in your child include:

Chronic exhaustion that doesn't get better with rest	Loss of skills, particularly with executive functioning	Increased difficulties with communication
Increased sensory sensitivities	Increased meltdowns or shutdowns, either in frequency or in severity	Physical pain, such as headaches or stomach aches
Changes to diet and eating	Changes to sleep patterns	Changes in emotional regulation

It's important to understand that these signs may not look the same in every environment. Your child may appear to be coping at school but be completely overwhelmed at home, or vice versa. For this reason, communication with your child's school is essential. Teachers may see subtle signs of struggle, such as slower work, while you may see the full extent of exhaustion and distress. Children will often mask or hide their Autistic traits at school, which can lead to meltdowns or shutdowns when they get home.

Other key factors to consider are whether your child experiences challenges with interoception (awareness of what is happening inside their body) and/or alexithymia (difficulty identifying and describing their emotions). These can make it harder for them to recognise or communicate the burnout symptoms they may be experiencing. Instead of saying "I'm overwhelmed", they might simply stop engaging or say something like "I can't do it" without being able to explain why. Because of this, adult observation and understanding play a crucial role in identifying burnout early and responding with the right kinds of support.

Burnout can look different for everyone...



The intersection of Autistic burnout and mental health

Autistic burnout can sometimes be confused for depression or anxiety. While your child may be experiencing these, they can often be part of the fallout from Autistic burnout, rather than the cause. If the underlying burnout is not addressed, strategies that only target anxiety or depression may have limited impact. Left unrecognised and unsupported, Autistic burnout can significantly impact a young person's mental health and wellbeing. This is why it is important to look beyond the surface behaviours and consider whether ongoing demands and stressors are exceeding your child's capacity.



Causes of Autistic burnout

A lot of different things can lead to Autistic burnout. Autistic burnout is often caused by a combination of some, or all, of the things listed below.

Masking and suppressing stimming

Many Autistic children and young people feel pressure to fit in by hiding their differences. This might include suppressing stimming, forcing eye contact or closely monitoring how they speak and act. This constant self-monitoring can come at a cost to their wellbeing. When they are doing this day after day, it can lead to deep exhaustion and increased vulnerability to burnout.

It is also worth keeping in mind that some Autistic children and young people will not be aware of their masking behaviours. They may be unconsciously adapting their behaviour to attempt to match others.

Sensory overload

Everyday environments, especially schools, can include constant noise, bright lighting, and crowds. When your child is exposed to this for long periods of time without enough breaks or control over their environment, their nervous system can become overwhelmed. Over time, this can build into chronic stress and exhaustion.

Social overload

Social interactions can take significant effort for Autistic children and young people. They may need to consciously interpret tone, body language, and social rules, while also managing how they respond. Even positive social experiences can be tiring if they require sustained effort. Over time, this level of demand can contribute to burnout, particularly if your child has limited opportunities to recharge from social interactions.

Sense of not meeting expectations

Autistic children and young people are often aware when they are struggling to meet expectations at school, socially, or at home. Even when expectations are unrealistic or not well-matched to their needs, they may internalise a sense of failure. Repeated experiences of feeling behind can lead to stress, reduced self-esteem, and a constant feeling of pressure to try harder.

Monotropism

Monotropism describes a tendency for Autistic people to focus deeply on one thing at a time. While this can be a strength, it can make environments like school particularly challenging, as students are expected to frequently shift attention. Each transition requires them to disengage then refocus, and they are often expected to do this quickly and without support. This repeated switching throughout the day can be mentally exhausting.

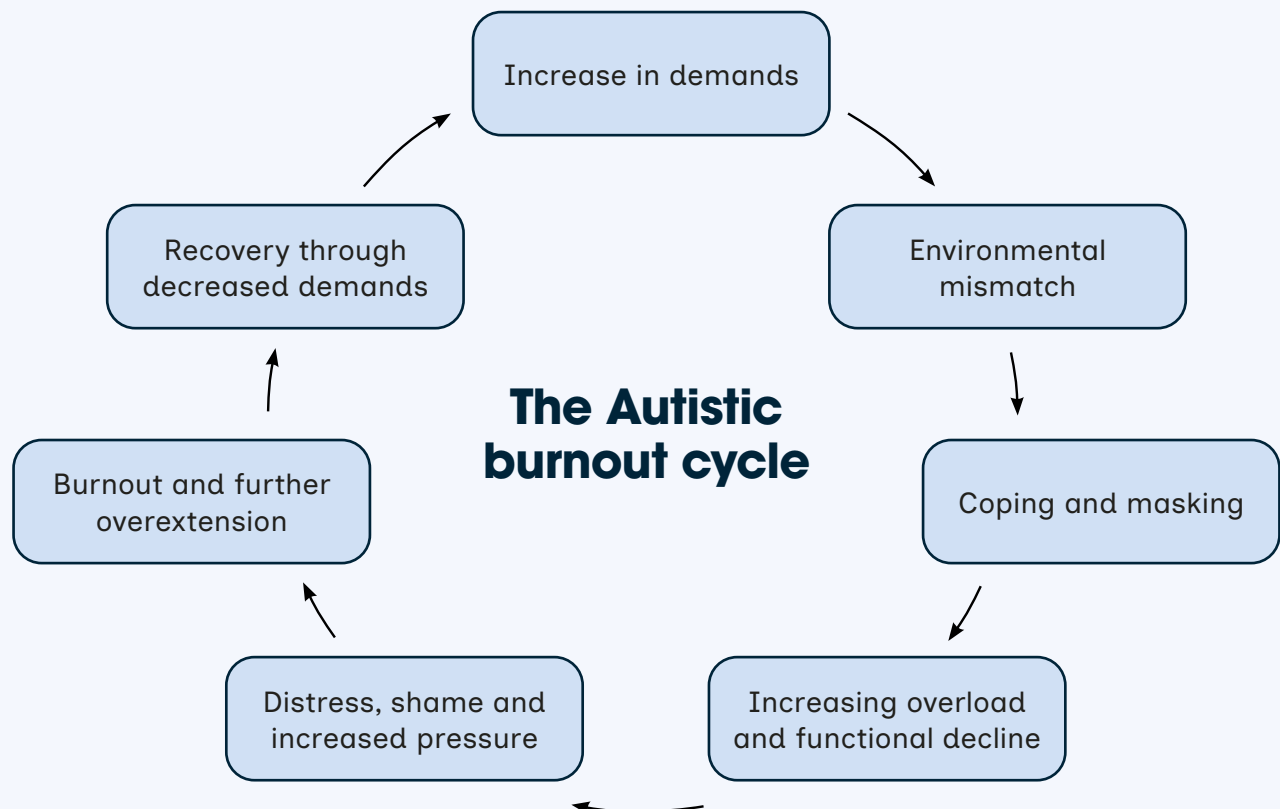
Puberty

Adolescence is already a time of major physical, emotional and social change. For Autistic teenagers, puberty can amplify existing challenges. Hormonal changes can impact mood, energy levels, and sensory sensitivities. Social expectations also become more complex at this age, and there may be increased pressure to conform or fit in. At the same time, academic demands also increase. These combined factors can make teenagers more vulnerable to burnout.

How to support your child through Autistic burnout

The Autistic burnout cycle

Autistic burnout is a cycle. Stress and overwhelm build up over time and lead to chronic exhaustion. In this section we explore the different phases of Autistic burnout and what supports can help break your child out of the burnout cycle.



Environmental mismatch

What they are experiencing:

Burnout begins when your child's environment doesn't match their needs, such as overwhelming sensory settings, high social demands, or unpredictable routines. This mismatch causes them to constantly adapt themselves to the world around them which can be exhausting.



Goal: Make the environment a better fit

- Adjust sensory inputs where possible.
- Provide predictable routines and clear schedules, both at home and at school.
- Collaborate with their school on accommodations for sensory and communication needs.
- Keep an eye out for early signs of discomfort rather than waiting for distress. Adjustments made early on can help prevent your child from reaching burnout.

Coping and masking

What they are experiencing:

To manage the environmental mismatch, your child may put in extra effort to cope. They may mask their Autistic traits, suppress stimming, and push through discomfort in an effort to meet expectations. They may appear okay on the outside but be using a lot of internal energy.



Goal: Reduce the need to mask

- Create safe spaces at home, and ideally at school, where they can be themselves.
- Reassure them they don't need to hide stimming or force things like eye contact.
- Talk to their teacher about this to make sure your child is receiving the same message at school.
- Reduce social demands and build in time after social activities for them to recharge their energy.
- Check in gently after school, without pressure to talk immediately. It can be helpful to talk about things like what drains their energy and what helps refill their energy throughout the school day.

Increasing overload and functional decline

What they are experiencing:

Sensory, social and mental demands build up without enough recovery time. Their nervous system is under constant strain, and energy levels drop significantly. This is where you might see your child starting to struggle with things they could previously manage, like schoolwork and communication.



Goal: Reduce expectations and support basic functioning

- Lower demands (e.g. schoolwork, chores, social expectations) and cut back on afterschool, weekend and school holiday commitments.
- Work with their school to adjust expectations. This might include reducing their workload or making changes to their schedule.
- Prioritise essentials like sleep, food, hygiene and emotional safety.
- Schedule regular rest times and make space for restorative activities that they enjoy. If you would like help in figuring out what activities are draining and restorative for your child, you can find an energy accounting activity at the end of this guide.

Distress, shame and increased pressure

What they are experiencing:

As difficulties become more noticeable, your child may feel frustrated, ashamed or like they are failing. At the same time, there may be increased pressure (either internally or externally) to push through and return to previous expectations.



Goal: Reduce shame and increase a sense of safety

- Validate their experience (e.g. “I can see this is really hard right now”).
- Avoid language that suggests laziness or lack of effort.
- Reframe difficulties as a sign of overload, not failure.
- Reduce pressure to get back to “normal”.

Burnout and further overextension

What they are experiencing:

Their system becomes overwhelmed. This can look like shutdowns, meltdowns, withdrawal, or loss of skills. Despite this many Autistic young people will continue to push themselves due to pressure or expectations, which deepens burnout.



Goal: Recovery and preventing further burnout

- Significantly reduce demands. This may involve working in partnership with your child's school to come up with a plan to manage the demands of school.
- Allow long periods of low-demand, self-directed activity. Let them retreat into familiar things that make them feel safe and in control.
- Work with supports, including their school and other support people like therapists, to prevent the cycle from restarting.
- Focus on maintaining emotional, social and physical safety.

Increase in demands

What they are experiencing:

After your child has had time to reset, you can slowly start increasing demands. However, there is a risk of reintroducing too many demands too soon. Doing so will only restart the burnout cycle. Pacing things right in this phase is crucial to breaking the burnout cycle.



Goal: Finding a new normal

- As their nervous system recovers, their curiosity to reengage will increase. Reintroduce demands gradually with careful pacing, keeping plenty of time for recovery.
- Determining what demands are necessary and which are optional will help you figure out what to reintroduce and what to let go of.

Breaking the cycle

To break the cycle of Autistic burnout, it is important to make long-term changes to prevent the cycle from restarting. Below are some ways you can help protect your child from future burnout.

Help your child develop self-advocacy skills

As your child recovers, one of the most valuable skills you can help them develop is the ability to recognise when they are struggling and communicate what they need. This might include noticing early warning signs of burnout, understanding what drains or recharges their energy, and learning to ask for breaks or adjustments. Self-advocacy is a gradual process, and your child may need your guidance to build confidence in speaking up. Over time this skill can help them protect their wellbeing and prevent burnout from escalating.

Ensure appropriate accommodations are in place

Recovery is much more sustainable when your child's environment is adjusted to meet their needs. Appropriate accommodations might include sensory supports, flexible deadlines, reduced homework, extra processing time, and access to quiet spaces. At school such adjustments can make the difference between coping and feeling overwhelmed. The goal is not to lower expectations unnecessarily, but to remove barriers so your child can function without using all their energy just to get through the day.

Create safe spaces for unmasking

Masking can be exhausting and can leave your child feeling disconnected from their authentic self. Home should be a place where they feel safe to stim, communicate in their preferred way, and express their needs without judgement. Safe spaces for unmasking help restore energy and reinforce the message that they are accepted as they are.



Build rest time into each day

Rest should always be viewed as a necessity, not as a reward for completing everything else. Autistic children and young people often need more recovery time than their peers because so much of their day involves managing sensory, social, and cognitive demands. Rest time can include quiet time after school, reduced extracurricular activities, and protected downtime on weekends and during school holidays. Regular rest helps prevent stress from accumulating and supports ongoing recovery.

Expect good days and bad days

Recovery from burnout is rarely a straightforward process. Your child may have days when they seem much more capable, followed by days when they are overwhelmed again. This does not mean they are going backwards. Capacity naturally fluctuates depending on sleep, stress, sensory inputs, and other factors. Being flexible and adjusting expectations to match their current capacity can help reduce frustration and help them feel understood and supported.

Be cautious of adding “just one more thing”

As your child recovers from burnout, it can be tempting to increase demands too quickly, such as adding homework, social commitments, or responsibilities. However, recovery often remains fragile for some time. Even small additional demands can tip the balance and restart the burnout cycle. It is usually better to increase expectations slowly and monitor how your child is coping before taking on more.

Support them to live in alignment with their identity

At the heart of burnout prevention is helping your child build a life that fits who they are. This means giving them permission to be authentically Autistic, honouring their needs, and valuing their strengths and interests. When young people feel accepted rather than pressured to adapt, they are more likely to develop a positive sense of self and a sustainable way of engaging with the world.



Remember you are not trying to get back to how things were, as that led to burnout. You need to find a new normal that creates a better match between your child and their environment.

Activities to help understand your child's experience

Now that you have a strong understanding of what Autistic burnout is and how it might impact your child, we can explore the specific symptoms your child may be experiencing and the supports that could help them.

The activities below are also featured in our [Autistic burnout workbook for teenagers](#). You can either complete these activities with your child, or you can each fill them out separately. You and your child may have different insights into what is happening and it can be useful to understand each other's perspectives. What you see in your child might be different from what they are experiencing and feeling. These activities can be helpful for starting the conversation with your child about Autistic burnout and what you can do together to help them thrive.



ACTIVITY 1

Autistic burnout checklist

If you think your child might be experiencing Autistic burnout, there are four different areas where you might be noticing changes:



Thinking and remembering



Emotions and sensory sensitivities



Lower energy levels and avoiding things



Talking and interacting with others

Below is a checklist of common Autistic burnout symptoms in these four areas. Read each option and think about how true it feels for your child recently (e.g. in the last few weeks). Try not to overthink it, your initial response is usually most accurate. If you are unsure how to answer, you can leave it blank or come back to it later.

This checklist is not a test or diagnosis. It is a tool to help you understand what your child is currently experiencing. By identifying the areas where they are experiencing challenges, we can work out what supports they might need.

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in thinking and remembering		
My child has had more trouble thinking clearly than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time making decisions than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time solving challenging problems than they usually do		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in thinking and remembering		
My child has had a harder time holding information in their mind for short periods of time (i.e. short-term memory) than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time recalling things they know (i.e. long-term memory) than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time deciding what is and is not important to pay attention to than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time doing basic day-to-day activities than they usually do (e.g. eating, cleaning, showering)		
My child has had a harder time managing schoolwork than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time managing the steps they need to take to complete tasks than they usually do		
Changes in emotions and sensory sensitivities		
My child has had a harder time controlling their impulses than they usually do		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in emotions and sensory sensitivities		
My child has had more mood swings than they usually do		
My child has been more irritable than they usually are		
My child has had a harder time tolerating sensory inputs than they usually do (e.g. bright lights, loud sounds, intense smells)		
My child has had a harder time preventing sensory overstimulation than they usually do		
My child has had more frequent, or more severe, meltdowns than they usually do		
My child has had more frequent, or more severe, shutdowns than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time ignoring unimportant sensory inputs than they usually do (e.g. distracting sounds, sights, smells, or tactile sensations)		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in energy levels and avoiding things		
My child has been avoiding social situations, even if they like them, more often than they usually do		
My child has wanted to isolate themselves from others more often than they usually do		
My child has been avoiding stimulating environments, even if they like them, more often than they usually do		
My child has been avoiding activities that require effort, even if they like them, more than they usually do		
My child has been more mentally exhausted than they usually are		
My child has been more physically exhausted than they usually are		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in talking and interacting with others		
My child has had a harder time getting along with people they know than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time getting along with people at school, or in other community settings, than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time communicating their point to others than they usually do		
My child has had a harder time finding the right words to communicate what they mean than they usually do		

How to interpret your score

Add up how many statements you agreed with to get your score.

0-9

Your child might be facing some challenges and in the **early stages of Autistic burnout**. Now is a good time to invest in self-care strategies to help prevent the development of burnout.

10-18

Your child has some **clear signs of Autistic burnout**. This is a sign that they need more rest, supports and adjustments to thrive.

19-27

Your child is **currently in Autistic burnout**. It is likely their system is overwhelmed and needs significant support and recovery time.

Please remember this checklist is not a diagnosis tool, it is a way to notice patterns and help your child to get the supports they need. Even if you didn't agree with many statements, it is still worth reflecting on how you might support them with the things they are finding challenging. This can help prevent burnout in the future.

If your child has also completed this checklist, compare your score to theirs to see if your perceptions match up or not. This can be a great way to start the conversation about what they are struggling with and how you can help.

ACTIVITY 2

Energy accounting

Energy accounting is a tool that can help identify things that drain your child's energy and things that help refill their energy. This can be really helpful for figuring out what is contributing to their burnout and what can help protect them from burnout. The idea is to reduce the number of things that drain their energy and invest more time into the things that refill their energy.

What drains their energy

Think about the last few days or weeks. Write down things that you think made your child tired, overwhelmed, stressed or irritable. Think about how much energy these things drained from them. Even things that seem small can drain a lot of energy when they are already overloaded.

Remember energy is not just physical energy, but also mental, emotional, and social energy. Think about things at home, school, or anywhere else they go regularly.

 Energy Drain	 Small Drain	 Medium Drain	 Big Drain
Example: Loud classroom			✓
Example: Homework		✓	
Example: Talking to people		✓	

Some ideas to help you think about energy drains:

- ↓ Socialising
- ↓ Changes to routine
- ↓ Following instructions
- ↓ Noisy environments
- ↓ Crowded places
- ↓ School work (think about each subject, some might be more draining than others)
- ↓ Chores
- ↓ Lack of sleep
- ↓ Masking
- ↓ Group work
- ↓ Extracurricular activities (e.g. sport)
- ↓ Part-time job or volunteering
- ↓ Making decisions
- ↓ Changing from one task to another

 Energy Drain	 Small Drain	 Medium Drain	 Big Drain
			

What recharges their energy

Now think about the things that help your child's brain and body recover. These are things that make them feel calmer, happy, safer, less overwhelmed, rested, or regulated.

 Energy Recharge	 Small Recharge	 Medium Recharge	 Big Recharge
Example: listening to their favourite music			✓
Example: going for a walk in the park	✓		
Example: having quiet time in their room when they get home from school		✓	
Example: wearing noise cancelling headphones		✓	

Some ideas to help you think about energy recharges:

- ↑ Time alone
- ↑ Passions or special interests
- ↑ Stimming or movement breaks
- ↑ Quiet spaces (including sensory or reset rooms)
- ↑ Talking to safe people
- ↑ Gaming
- ↑ Sensory tools
- ↑ Spending time with pets
- ↑ Sleeping
- ↑ Watching favourite shows or movies
- ↑ Predictable routines
- ↑ Activities that allow them to express myself (e.g. singing, drawing, journaling)
- ↑ Unmasking

 Energy Recharge	 Small Recharge	 Medium Recharge	 Big Recharge
			

Reflection section

Have a think about what patterns are showing up in their energy levels.

If your child has also done this activity in their workbook, look at the main energy drains and recharges you each came up with and see how they compare. Did you identify the same drains and recharges? Or are they different? You can use this activity to guide a conversation with your child about what changes you can make together to better support their energy.

What drains them the most?

-
-
-

Which energy recharges help the most?

-
-
-

Are there energy drains you can support them with?

-
-
-

Are there energy recharges you can help them make more time for?

-
-
-

Creating an energy support plan

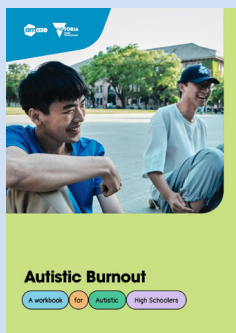
Next let's make a plan for how to make some changes to support your child's energy levels. Remember we don't have to change everything at once. For bigger changes, such as their school schedule, your child will need help from you to advocate for them and implement these changes.

- Pick one or two energy drains you can help with.
- Pick one or two energy recharges they can do more often.

 Their energy drain/s: → →	 Something that could help:
 Their energy refill/s: → →	 How we can make more time for it:

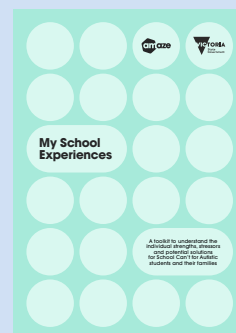
Breaking the cycle of Autistic burnout is ultimately about creating a life where your child does not have to sacrifice their wellbeing in order to meet expectations. With understanding, rest, and acceptance, your child can recover and build a healthier relationship with themselves and the world around them.

If you are looking for more information related to Autistic burnout, you can take a look at some of our other resources:



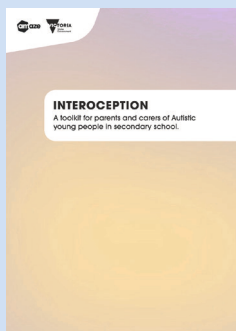
Autistic Burnout

A workbook designed to help Autistic teenagers understand Autistic burnout



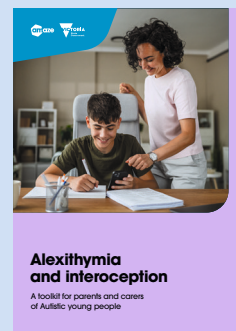
School Can't

A toolkit for parents and carers to understand their child's experiences with school can't



Interoception

A toolkit for parents and carers of Autistic young people in secondary school



Alexithymia

A resource for parents and carers assist their child in understanding and naming their emotions



Further support

Autism Connect

Contact **Autism Connect** if you would like individual advice about helping your child with Autistic burnout.

You can contact Autism Connect via phone, email or live webchat.

1300 308 699



If this resource has raised any troubling thoughts, feelings or concerns, please reach out to one of the following helplines.

Lifeline

13 11 14

Provides Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention.

Carer Gateway

1800 422 737

Support and information for carers in Australia.

Beyond Blue

1300 22 4636

Provides counselling and support by phone, email or webchat.



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