



Autistic Burnout

A workbook

for

Autistic

High Schoolers

This workbook is here to help you understand what Autistic burnout might feel like for you and how to look after yourself to avoid burnout.

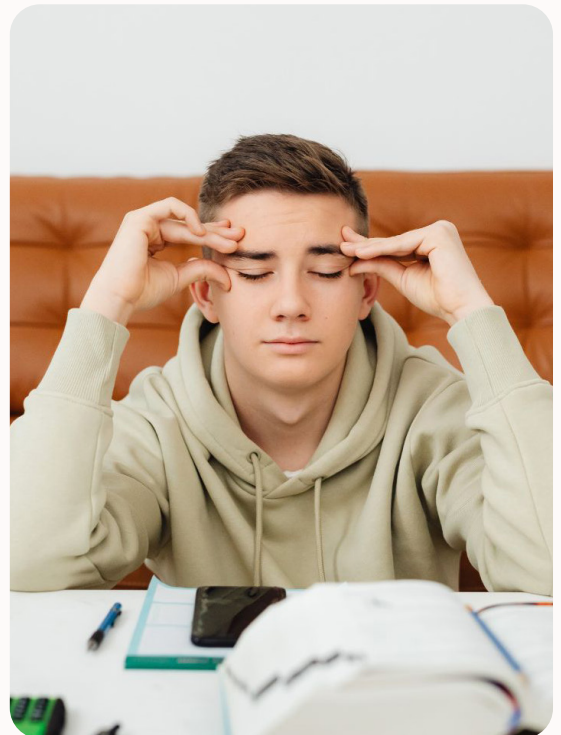
In this workbook, we hope to help you answer these questions:

What is Autistic burnout?

Burnout is more than just feeling tired. It is a state of long-term physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. Autistic people often experience burnout differently from non-Autistic people. Autistic burnout often comes from the effort it takes to navigate a world that is not designed for Autistic people.

Autistic burnout can feel like total exhaustion where everyday things become much harder, like talking, concentrating, or doing schoolwork. You might feel overwhelmed, shut down, or like you've lost skills or energy you usually have.

Burnout isn't a failure. It's your brain and body's way of saying you've been pushing too hard without enough support or recovery time. Understanding it can help you be kinder to yourself and start figuring out what you need to feel safe, rested, and more like yourself again.



What causes 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 or camouflaging

This means hiding or suppressing your Autistic traits and trying to mimic neurotypical ways of talking and behaving. This might include things like forcing eye contact, suppressing stims, pretending to understand jokes or social cues, preparing for conversations in advance, or mimicking neurotypical body language and facial expressions. You may or may not be aware of your own masking behaviours. Masking takes a lot of energy and effort, particularly if you are doing it every day. Over time, this can leave you feeling exhausted and disconnected from yourself.

Sensory overload

When you're in environments that are too loud, bright, or busy for long periods of time, your brain doesn't get a break. This constant overload can build up, making you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or even physically unwell.

Social overload

Most social rules are designed by and for neurotypical people. This means you might have to work extra hard just to keep up or be understood. You might also find that being around other people for long periods of time, following conversations, responding quickly or keeping up socially takes a lot of energy, even when you enjoy being with them. You might feel pressure to behave in a certain way, or you might struggle to navigate confusing social expectations. Constantly trying to survive in a system that isn't built for you can be draining and isolating.

Mental overload

Mental load means how much mental effort your brain is using. A lot of your mental load probably comes from schoolwork, but as an Autistic person you might have extra things adding to your mental load that non-Autistic people don't have to deal with. Autistic people often have to think through things others do automatically, such as reading social cues, switching tasks, or filtering out distractions. This extra thinking adds up quickly and can leave you mentally exhausted.

Repeated invalidation

Invalidation happens when your feelings, needs or experiences are dismissed or not taken seriously. For example, being told you are “too sensitive” or that you “just need to try harder”. Over time, this can be deeply hurtful and stressful and might make you feel like there is something wrong with you. This is not true. Your feelings and experiences are valid. You are trying your best to navigate a world that was not designed for you. You deserve to have your problems be heard and supported properly.

Lack of appropriate supports

Supports are things that help you function more comfortably, like quiet spaces, clear instructions, or extra time. When these things are not available, you are forced to push through challenges on your own. When your needs are not met, this can quickly lead to overwhelm, frustration and burnout.



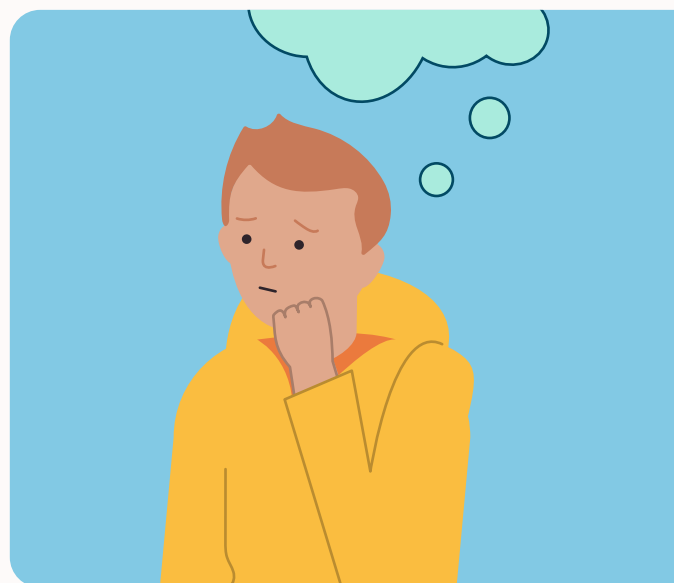
ACTIVITY 1

Am I in Autistic burnout?

It can be hard to know what Autistic burnout might feel like, especially if you don't always notice or have words for your emotions or what's going on in your body. So instead of trying to describe your feelings, it can help to think about changes you might notice in yourself.

Things that used to be easy or manageable might suddenly feel way harder. For example, getting through a school day, doing homework, replying to messages, or even basic things like showering or making food can start to take a lot more effort.

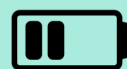
If you think you might be experiencing Autistic burnout, there are four different areas in your life where you might be noticing changes:



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 you recently (e.g. in the last few weeks). Try not to overthink it, your initial response is usually most accurate to how you feel. If you are unsure how to answer, that's okay. Pick the answer that seems the closest to how you feel, or you can skip it or come back later.

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

There is also a version of this workbook for parents and carers to help them better understand how you experience burnout. You can fill it out separately and compare results, or if you would like help filling it out, you can complete it with them.

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in thinking and remembering		
I've had more trouble thinking clearly than I usually do		
I've had a harder time making decisions for myself than I usually do		
I've had a harder time solving challenging problems than I usually do		
I've had a harder time holding information in my mind for short periods of time than I usually do		
I've had a harder time recalling things I know than I usually do		
I've had a harder time deciding what is and is not important to pay attention to than I usually do		
I've had a harder time doing basic day-to-day activities than I usually do (e.g. eating, cleaning, showering)		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in thinking and remembering		
I've had a harder time managing schoolwork than I usually do		
I've had a harder time managing the steps I need to take to complete tasks than I usually do		
Changes in emotions and sensory sensitivities		
I've had a harder time controlling my impulses than I usually do		
I've had more mood swings than I usually do		
I've been feeling more irritable than I usually do		
I've had a harder time tolerating sensory inputs than I usually do (e.g. bright lights, loud sounds, intense smells)		
I've had a harder time preventing sensory overstimulation than I usually do		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in emotions and sensory sensitivities		
I've had more frequent, or more severe, meltdowns than I usually do		
I've had more frequent, or more severe, shutdowns than I usually do		
I've had a harder time ignoring unimportant sensory inputs than I usually do (e.g. distracting sounds, sights, smells, or tactile sensations)		
Changes in energy levels and avoiding things		
I've been avoiding social situations, even if I like them, more often than I usually do		
I've wanted to isolate myself from others more often than I usually do		
I've been avoiding stimulating environments, even if I like them, more often than I usually do		
I've been avoiding activities that require effort, even if I like them, more than I usually do		

Area of change	Yes	No
Changes in energy levels and avoiding things		
I've felt more mentally exhausted than I usually do		
I've felt more physically exhausted than I usually do		
Changes in talking and interacting with others		
I've had a harder time getting along with people I know than I usually do		
I've had a harder time getting along with people at school, or in other community settings, than I usually do		
I've had a harder time communicating my point to others than I usually do		
I've had a harder time finding the right words to communicate what I mean than I usually do		

How to interpret your score

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

0-9

You 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

You have some clear signs of Autistic burnout. This is a sign that you need more rest, supports and adjustments to thrive.

19-27

You are currently in Autistic burnout. It is likely your system is overwhelmed and needs significant support and recovery time.

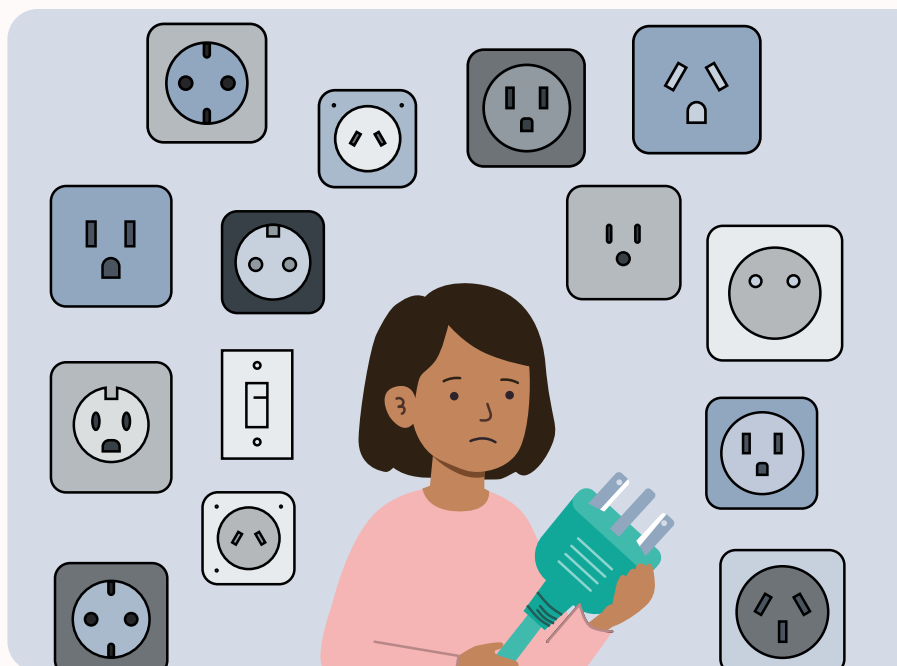
Please remember this checklist is not a diagnosis tool, it is a way to notice patterns and help you to get the supports they need. Even if you didn't agree with many statements, it is still worth reflecting on how you might get support for the things you find challenging. This can help prevent burnout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

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

How can I recover from Autistic burnout and prevent future burnout?

Autistic burnout occurs when there is a mismatch between your authentic self and the environment you are in. Being in an environment that doesn't suit your needs means your nervous system is constantly facing too many demands.

To recover from burnout, changes will need to be made to the demands in your life. You can work with the trusted adults in your life to reduce demands and make more space for the things that make you feel good.



ACTIVITY 2

Energy accounting

Energy accounting is something you can do to identify things that drain your energy and things that help recharge your energy. This can be really helpful for figuring out what is contributing to your burnout and what can help protect you from burnout. The idea is to reduce the number of things that drain your energy and invest more time into the things that recharge your energy.

What drains your energy

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

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

 Energy Recharge	 Small Recharge	 Medium Recharge	 Big Recharge
Example: listening to my favourite music			✓
Example: going for a walk in the park	✓		
Example: having quiet time in my room when I 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 you to express yourself (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 your energy levels.

If a trusted adult has also done this activity in their workbook, look at the main energy drains and refills you each came up with and see how they compare. Did you identify the same things? Or are they different? You can use this activity to talk about the similarities and differences you found.

What drains you the most?

-
-
-

Which energy recharges help the most?

-
-
-

Are there energy drains I can reduce, avoid or get support for?

-
-
-

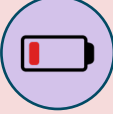
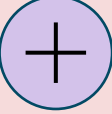
Are there energy recharges I can make more time for?

-
-
-

Creating an energy support plan

Next let's make a plan for how to make some changes to support your energy levels. Remember we don't have to change everything at once. You can also get help from others to make these adjustments.

- Pick one or two energy drains you want help with.
- Pick one or two energy recharges you want to do more often.

My energy drains 	Something that could help 

My energy recharge/s 	How I can make more time for it 

Getting support from trusted adults

Recovery from Autistic burnout can be a tricky process. It is not something you can simply push through on your own. Your parents, teachers and other trusted adults can help you recover. We recognise that as a teenager, you might not have control over things like your schedule or environment. That is why it is important to reach out to the trusted adults in your life for support. They can help reduce demands, adjust expectations and put practical supports in place. They can help advocate with schools to adjust things for you. These types of changes are important because burnout recovery requires more than rest. It requires changing the conditions that caused the burnout in the first place.

Below we have a template and example for a letter you can write to ask your parents, carers, teachers, or other trusted adults in your life, for support. You don't have to fill out every section of the letter, you can pick and choose what feels right for you. You can also choose how to use the letter. You can fill it out and give a written copy to your trusted adults, or you could use it as a guide to start a conversation with them.



Example letter

Dear Mum and Dad,

I want to tell you that I think I might be experiencing Autistic burnout.

Lately, I have been having a hard time with:

- Schoolwork ☒ it feels really hard to concentrate and to start tasks
- Sensory issues ☒ noisy classroom
- Everyday tasks (showering, eating, getting out of bed, etc.) ☐
- Socialising ☒ talking to people is really exhausting
- Communication ☒ I don't talk as much as I used to

Some signs you might have noticed are:

- I seem more tired than usual.
- I have more shutdowns.
- I get overwhelmed more easily.
- I need more time alone.

What Autistic burnout feels like for me:

- I have no energy, even for things I like doing
- I don't want to talk to anyone
- I get a lot of stomach aches and headaches on school days
-

Things that are making it harder:

- Trying to keep up with schoolwork
-
- Feeling like I have to hide how overwhelmed I am
-

Things that would help me right now:

- More time to rest after school
- Quiet time or sensory breaks
- Less pressure about homework for a while
- Help breaking down tasks

What I need you to understand:

I am not being lazy or trying to be difficult. My brain and body are overwhelmed, and I need support to recover.

Thank you for listening and helping me.

From,

Letter template

Dear _____,

I want to tell you that I think I might be experiencing Autistic burnout.

Lately, I have been having a hard time with:

- Schoolwork ☐
- Sensory issues ☐
- Everyday tasks (showering, eating, getting out of bed, etc.) ☐
- Socialising ☐
- Communication ☐

Some signs you might have noticed are:

-
-
-
-

What Autistic burnout feels like for me:

-
-
-
-

Things that are making it harder:

-
-
-
-

Things that would help me right now:

-
-
-
-

What I need you to understand:

I am not being lazy or trying to be difficult. My brain and body are overwhelmed, and I need support to recover.

Thank you for listening and helping me.

From,

Final thoughts

Remember that Autistic burnout is not a personal failure. Burnout happens when the demands placed on you are greater than the energy you have. It is not a sign that you are lazy or not trying hard enough. Many Autistic people experience burnout because they have been trying so hard for so long.

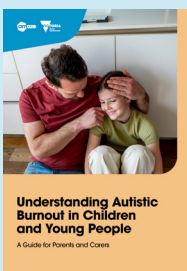
Recovery from burnout takes time. It is not something that can be fixed overnight or by pushing harder. Your brain and body need time to recover from burnout. Some days you might feel like you are making progress and other days it might feel like you are going backwards. That is normal. Recovery is rarely in a straight line.

It is also important to remember that you do not have to face this alone. Trusted adults, family members, teachers, friends, and support workers can all help you recover. Sometimes asking for help can feel difficult but there is no shame in asking for the support you need.

As you move forward, try to pay attention to your own needs, energy levels and warning signs. The more you understand about what drains and recharges your energy, the better you will be able to protect yourself from burnout. Give yourself time to rest and take breaks, and to make whatever adjustments you need to make your environment a better fit for you.

Remember to be patient with yourself. You are learning how your brain works and that takes time. You deserve environments where you can be your authentic self, where your needs are respected, and where you do not have to exhaust yourself to get through the day.

Further resources



Parent/carer guide to understanding Autistic Burnout

You can pass on this resource to help your parents or carers understand what you are going through. You can access the resource [here](#).



Executive functioning tips for Autistic teens

We have a series of resources on executive functioning. The tips in these resources may be useful in helping you better understand yourself and your needs. The resources cover:

Further support

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.

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

Counselling and support for young people aged 5-25 years. Support is available by phone, email or webchat.

Beyond Blue

1300 22 4636

Provides counselling and support by phone, email or webchat.

Amaze Inc.

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