Ambitious about Autism

A guide to understanding autistic burnout in the workplace

What is autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout is a mix of extreme physical and mental exhaustion, heightened stress and reduced capacity to manage daily life. This can be due to a prolonged strain of trying to meet certain demands that may be out of sync with an autistic person's needs.

It is important to recognise that autistic burnout won't be the same for everyone. Each person may be affected in different ways, with varying triggers and responses depending on their personal strengths, challenges, and the demands of their working environment.

The Employ Autism team has put together a guide that will cover: what you might experience during autistic burnout, a few factors that can lead to autistic burnout and some strategies to prevent and reduce burnout.

What you might feel or experience during autistic burnout

The feeling of autistic burnout will be different for everyone. Here are few signs that you might be experiencing burnout at work:

- Increased anxiety
- Excessive fatigue and exhaustion
- Frequently low in energy
- Difficulty maintaining mental health
- Deterioration in your physical health, e.g. feeling more physically weak or sore
- Frequently overstimulated
- Being absent from work more often than usual
- Taking longer to complete tasks
- Difficulty concentrating.

If you are starting to experience any of these symptoms, be sure to speak to your manager, family or a trusted contact to ensure you can put strategies in place to reduce prolonged autistic burnout.

Here are a few factors that can lead to autistic burnout:

- **Exhaustion and fatigue** – it is normal to feel tired after work, but if a person starts to frequently feel tired and exhausted, it can be a sign of burnout.

- **Pressure of social situations** – this is when a person starts experiencing mental and emotional exhaustion due to excessive social interaction. The level of social interaction that causes this can be different for everyone; for example, it may be caused by frequently spending 30 minutes or more each day in social chats, especially if they are not related to work tasks.

- **Masking** – this refers to a person hiding their natural behaviours to fit in with neurotypical social norms, or the fear that they will be judged.

- **Unclear instructions** – this can happen if someone is given a task without much detail on how to complete it.

- **Sensory overload** – this can happen if someone is experiencing an increased amount of sensory input. For example, sensory overload can occur if someone is frequently working in a noisy environment.

- **Suppressing stimming** – this means hiding self-regulating behaviour; this is also a form of masking.

- **Not meeting expectation**s – when someone feels the pressure that they are not meeting someone else's expectations due to a lack of control, resources, adjustments or reassurance.

- **Change of work routine / pace** – sometimes a workplace might not have the same routine or pace each week so it might be difficult to keep up with work.

What strategies are there to prevent or reduce autistic burnout?

Adjustments

Be sure to request any adjustments that will help make your work environment more accessible and comfortable for you. This could include changes to your working hours, a preferred workspace that suits your sensory needs, or access to items such as sensory tools or stimming toys.

Rest and recharge

If you are starting to feel exhausted more regularly, make sure to let your manager know as you might just need some time to rest and re-charge.

Energy counting

This is a system that focuses on your energy levels to prevent burnout. You start by identifying what activities will drain your energy and how intense each activity is for you. Then you identify and list which activities will replenish your energy and how much energy they will restore. This can be helpful to ensure you don't reach complete exhaustion and autistic burnout. These lists can always be amended and adapted to what suits you.

Understanding boundaries

It is important to identify your own work boundaries. For instance, if you are working over-time, not meeting deadlines and find that you have too many tasks, it is useful to let your team or manager know so that you can collectively find a solution.

Work-life balance

Having a work-life balance means being able to manage your work and personal life in a way that supports your wellbeing, prevents burnout, and allows time for both professional and personal priorities. For example, you should take regular breaks away from your desk, especially during your lunch. Short breaks can improve focus and reduce stress.

Quiet and comfortable spaces

It can be good to know if there are any accessible quiet spaces at your workplace. This will allow for sensory regulation and mental rest.

Checking in with yourself

Regularly check in with yourself and take a moment to notice how you are feeling mentally, emotionally and physically. For instance, you can ask yourself ‘am I feeling okay right now?’ or ‘what do I need right now to make me feel better?’. This will help you recognise any early signs of stress and prevent burnout.

Be kind to yourself

Being kind to yourself at work means accepting your needs, celebrating small successes, and not judging yourself harshly for needing rest or adjustments. Remember, every day is a learning experience, so be open to asking questions and accepting guidance that will benefit your well-being.

Examples and advice from the Ambitious Youth Network:

“I usually talk to my close friends about how I'm feeling or play nostalgic video games with hot chocolate. Nostalgic activities are very grounding when it comes to burnout as it helps bring back joy for the simple things.”
Josephine

“I focus on how much energy I have and what I can achieve in the day. Sometimes I have more energy and sometimes I have less. I don’t push myself when I start to feel burnt out and I take each day at a time.”
Nella

We are
Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity standing with autistic children and young people.

We believe every autistic child and young person has the right to be themselves and realise their ambitions.

We started as one school and have become a movement for change. We champion rights, campaign for change and create opportunities.

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