

Burnout

Burnout is frequently experienced by autistic individuals, having significant ramifications on quality of life. An autistic adult, Boren (2018) describes how when suffering burnout, he experienced complete exhaustion, a loss of executive functioning, a reduction in personal care, as well as a diminished ability to cope with sensory stimuli and social interaction. Furthermore, Rose (2018) likens the experience to a computer shutting down. Burnout is normally associated with work in the human service sector. Yet, in the case of autistic individuals, it is frequently sadly part of their life experience. McGuinness (2021) cites Boren (2018), an autistic adult who describes burnout as a:

“Price that is paid, to keep up with the pretence of neurotypicality”
(McGuinness, 2021, p. 60).

As burnout has significant negative outcomes on quality of life, it is important to consider the factors that can contribute to this phenomenon. Accounts from autistic individuals highlight sensory overstimulation as a factor. Indeed, Haze (2017) describes the world as leading to an overwhelming assault on her senses. As a result, it is important to seek out less stimulating environments on campus and in the community. Safe spaces that you can retreat to can create vital opportunities to decompress at the end of a busy day filled with lectures!

A significant factor regarding burnout is masking or modifying behaviour, to appear as if not autistic. This was identified by Raymaker et al (2020), as the most stressful life experience for autistic individuals. Masking increases the *“cumulative load”* (Raymaker et al., p. 1), as it decreases the *“emotional energy”* (Tierney et al. (2016), p. 82) of individuals. As stated by Boren (2018):

“Being something that I neurologically am not, is exhausting”. (Boren, 2018)

The onus should not be placed on the individual to reduce the incidence of masking or camouflaging. McGuinness (2021) highlights the importance of

increasing autism understanding in the non-autistic population, “*improving the fit*” (Mandy, 2019, p. 1880) between the autistic individual and the world. Many autistic individuals are not aware when they are masking, as it is a strategy that they have incorporated into their lives from an early age. They also feel unable to let their guard down, due to the pressure in society to present in a neuro-typical manner. Autistic individuals frequently provide accounts of battling through a world that is “*governed by neuro-typical expectations and norms*” (McGuinness, 2021, p. 60). Supportive environments where individuals feel comfortable and accepted to be themselves, where diversity is celebrated and embraced are imperative. Seek out individuals who value you! The West Cheshire Autism offers a community environment that embraces and values diversity, as well as the opportunity to talk through difficulties such as burnout. The Hub 1:1 support, training, and social sessions. Link to website [here](#).

A key factor in avoiding autistic burnout is to balance the demands placed on you, with your internal capacity or personal resources. This has been summed up perfectly in ‘spoon theory’. Engaging in activities that you enjoy is essential in order to replenish your personal resources. Loyd-Williams (2020) provides a moving narrative of autistic joy and how, when an autistic person engages in their passions, their whole-body lights up with happiness, energizing them in the process. Engaging in activities that bring you joy are a priority to balance the demands on you and avoid burnout. See the link to the blog below.

Our bodies have a level at which they work best. This was put forward by the Yerkes-Dodson Law back in 1908! This law proposes that neither physiological arousal that is too low, or too high, is optimal for us to operate at our best. Karen McGuinness the Strategic Autism Manager at the West Cheshire Autism Hub likened this Ideal Zone to phone optimization. She says:

“Each of us has an ideal at which our bodies work their best. Staying in this ideal zone is like phone optimization. Actions like turning down the brightness on our phones or uninstalling apps that drain the battery help the battery last longer. Practicing self-care and self-regulation helps to keep you in that ideal zone, optimizing your capacity to cope day to day”.

If you would like a 1:1 appointment, to explore ways in which you can promote self-care and self-regulation please contact the West Cheshire Autism Hub.

[Autistic Burnout: The Cost of Masking and Passing – Ryan Boren](#)

[Autistic Joy – Autism and Expectations \(autistrhi.com\)](http://autistrhi.com)

McGuinness, K., 2021. An evaluation of a tool, based on spoon theory, to promote self-regulation and avoidance of burnout in autistic children and young people. *Good Autism Practice (GAP)*, 22(1), pp.59-72.

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