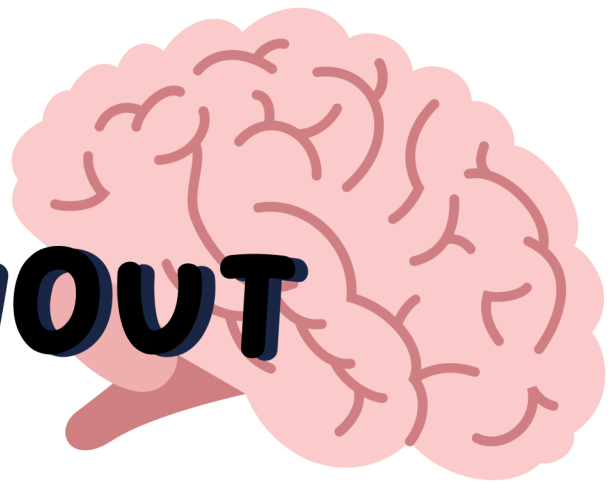


ENERGY

AND BURNOUT



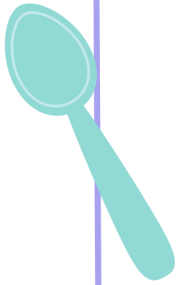
Energy accounting and spoon theory

Spoon theory is a metaphor used to explain the limited amount of energy for tasks and activities that many people with a disability or mental health condition often have.

Typically, a non-disabled person may wake up with large amounts of energy for the day. The idea is that these people have an unlimited, or large amount of spoons.

In comparison, a disabled person wakes up with a limited amount of spoons. Each spoon represents the amount of energy needed for a task. The amount of spoons we wake up with, and are required for a task, varies day to day.

On a good day, we may wake up with more spoons and have to spend less per task. On other days, we may wake up with very few spoons and need to spend a lot on simple tasks.



Because of our limited spoons, we must strategically plan our time and prioritise what's most important to ensure we do not run out of spoons.

Additionally, coping with something we are unprepared for, such as the bus being late, an unexpected social interaction or a noisy classroom can use up spoons unexpectedly.

Once all our spoons are used, we are exhausted and have no spoons left for any other tasks we might need to do. We can also be more prone to meltdowns, burnout, fatigue or pain and our tolerance for things will be lower.



Conserving our energy

In order to replenish our spoons, or make our limited spoons go further, it helps us to engage in calming, self-regulating activities and making sure our sensory needs are met such as engaging with our special interests, wearing noise cancelling headphones or spending time alone.



Burnout

Frequently using up all our spoons without replenishing them adequately can lead to burnout. This is akin to a computer with too many tabs open crashing and struggling to function. Our brain is overloaded and shutting down. This can look like:

- Fatigue
- increased irritability
- increased anxiety
- increased or decreased sensitivity to sensory stimuli (internal and external including pain, hunger, touch, sound, lights & smell)
- loss of communication skills
- reduced memory capacity (forgetfulness, memory loss, brain fog)
- decrease in motivation
- increase in frequency and intensity of meltdowns and shutdowns
- loss of executive functioning abilities
- loss of social skills
- difficulty with self-care (showering, eating, brushing teeth etc.)
- seeming 'more autistic' as we're less able to cope & mask



How to avoid burnout

- Recognise the signs of burnout
- Recognise the type of day we are having and adjust the demands accordingly
- Schedule breaks
- Ensure there are means and opportunities to recognise and regulate our emotions at regular intervals throughout the day
- Reduce expectations
- Reduce unexpected changes and sensory stimuli
- Ensure there is time and opportunity for regulation throughout the day; this includes access to a quiet environment when needed, time to engage in special interests, and time to meet our sensory needs.
- Do not push us to participate if we're struggling. Reduce demands and verbal instructions and help make it easier for us to understand and express ourselves through reduced language and increased visual aids/gestures. Give us some time and space to recuperate then ask us to try again.



How to cope with burnout

- Reduce demands to meeting basic needs
- Allow time to rest and recuperate
- Allow time to engage in calming activities & special interests
- Recognise and provide opportunity to meet sensory needs
- Reduce verbal language down to simple words and gestures
- Provide structure, predictability and routine

Autistic burnout can last weeks, months or years.

It is much easier to be pro-active and avoid burnout than it is to recover from burnout.