



Why am I so tired?

Neurodivergence Burnout: Why it happens and how to regain your energy

Neurodivergence refers to natural variations in the human brain and cognition, such as differences associated with **ADHD, autism, dyslexia**, and other **neurological conditions**. Individuals who are neurodivergent may experience the world in unique ways, which can influence how they respond to stress and daily demands.

With these distinct experiences and challenges, neurodivergent people may be more susceptible to **burnout**, especially when trying to navigate environments that are not designed with their needs in mind. However, without the right support and understanding, neurodivergent people can experience **poor mental health and wellbeing** due to ongoing **anxiety, depression, mental fatigue**, and **cognitive overload** which can lead to **chronic stress** and eventually **burnout**.



What is Burnout?

Burnout results from ongoing stress and can show up as physical, emotional, and/or mental exhaustion. Burnout can be caused by a combination of factors from work, study, parenting, and/or everyday responsibilities.

What Does Burnout Look Like?

Burnout can show up differently for everyone and can be caused by different situations, including:

- Extreme tiredness even after rest
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- Feeling overwhelmed, disconnected, or numb
- Increased anxiety or low mood
- Irritability and/or emotional outbursts
- Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach pain
- Inability to start tasks, and/or complete tasks
- Feeling out of control
- Challenges in attending work, events, and social activities
- Becoming overwhelmed quickly
- Needing to sleep a lot
- Struggling to manage day-to-day tasks

Why Are Neurodivergent People at More Risk?

There are many reasons why a person may experience burnout. If you have autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other learning differences, research shows you may be at greater risk of feeling burned out.

One major reason is that workplaces, educational settings, and everyday environments often don't fully understand neurodivergence. This lack of understanding means you may have to work harder to navigate systems that aren't designed to meet your needs. For example, a workplace without necessary adjustments can create ongoing stress, which over time can lead to burnout.

As a neurodivergent person, you might also feel pressure to "mask," "pass," or hide your differences so you can fit in at work, while studying, socialising, or managing day-to-day tasks. This can mean hiding your challenges, overcompensating, or not telling anyone what you need or how you're feeling.

This type of burnout is common among neurodivergent people, but it's often misdiagnosed or misunderstood because it can look like depression or anxiety. It can be missed as a risk factor, especially within the dyslexia and learning difficulties community, where very little research has explored burnout until now.

Work factors contributing to burnout

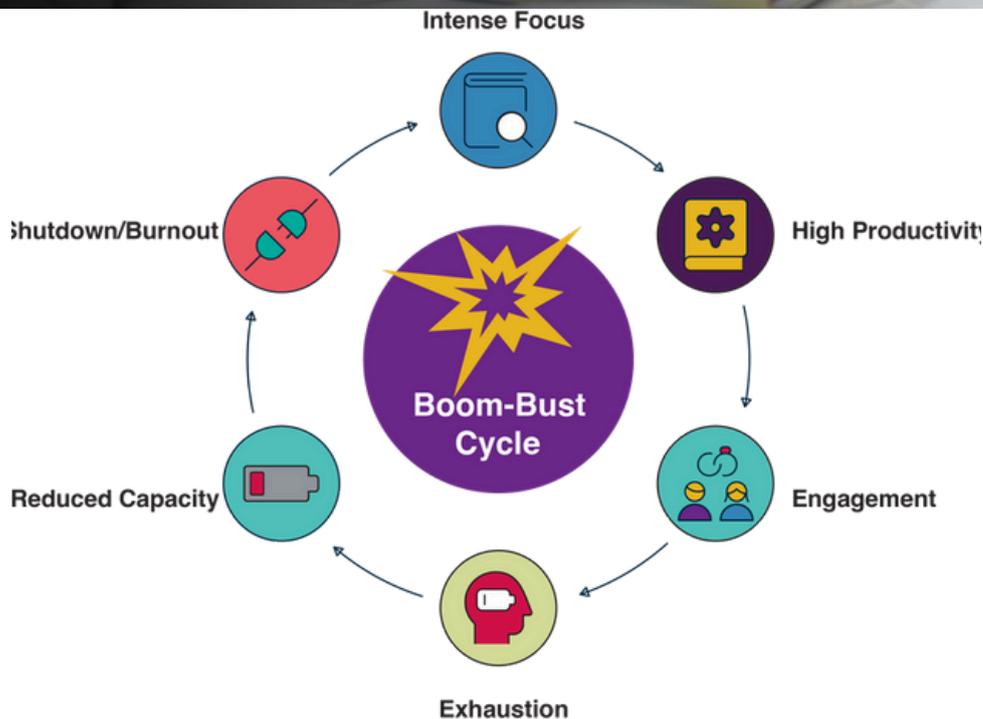
- Feeling unsafe to share neurodivergence or request support
- Pressure to hide or mask needs, increasing stress
- Sensory overload (noise, lights, crowded spaces)
- Inflexible or high-pressure work environments
- Excessive workload and unrealistic expectations
- Lack of control over tasks or schedule
- Difficulty attending work, events, or social activities

Personal factors contributing to burnout

- Trying to fit in or hiding your true self
- Major life changes (e.g., COVID-19, pregnancy, perimenopause)
- Relationship challenges or becoming a parent
- Starting a new job or adjusting to new roles
- Feeling overwhelmed easily or needing extra sleep
- Illness, grief, or loss

Without the right support or understanding of your neurodivergent needs, stress can build into a cycle of too many demands and too little energy or confidence making burnout much more likely.

The “Boom-and-Bust” Cycle: How it Can Lead to Burnout



Another contributing factor to neurodivergent burnout is a pattern called the “Boom-and-Bust” cycle. This is a theory often linked to those with autism, ADHD and /or AuDHD. Although this could be happening for those who have dyslexia and other learning difficulties, there is no research to date. It is a pattern that can worsen the burnout cycle for neurodivergent people.

Boom-and-bust is a cycle of intense periods of focus, productivity, and/or engagement (“boom”), followed by severe exhaustion, reduced capacity, shutdown or burnout (“bust”). The “boom” part of the cycle often begins to cope with environmental demands or is driven by the passion and motivation of neurodivergent people.

Neurodivergent people may be more vulnerable to the “Boom-and-Bust” cycle because of difficulties regulating energy, challenges with planning and organising, difficulty completing tasks, ignoring body cues, external pressures, and ‘hiding’ your true self or “people pleasing”.

Getting Out of the “Boom-and-Bust” Cycle

Going through this cycle repeatedly can lead to deeper burnout and longer recovery times. Research has found that for neurodivergent people, awareness of the “Boom-and-Bust” pattern can help to manage it and prevent burnout in the future. One of these ways is by pacing and self-managing energy output, or “Spoon Theory”.



Preventing Burnout: What can Help me?

Spoon Theory: The Other Side of the “Boom-and-Bust” Cycle

Spoon Theory is a metaphor used to describe limited daily energy and how people must carefully decide where to spend each “spoon” of energy. For neurodivergent people, such as those with autism or ADHD, energy is often used unevenly across different areas, such as requiring more “spoons” for social or work activities.

Understanding this helps neurodivergent people to self-manage their “spoons” (energy) by recognising which tasks they feel take more energy and need more recovery time.

Spoon Theory sees burnout as a severe decrease in “spoons” (energy) and encourages people to carefully manage their “spoons” (energy) to avoid burnout. It helps neurodivergent people to assess available “spoons” to prioritise tasks, set boundaries, and plan rest, helping to break patterns such as the “boom-and-bust” cycle and reduce burnout.



Building Environments Where Neurodivergent People Thrive

How Can My Workplace Help?

Your workplaces can better support you by recognising burnout early, addressing sources of stress, and building an understanding of neurodiversity throughout the organisation. Support works best when solutions are created together, policies are flexible and inclusive, and help is offered early before challenges become serious.

Supportive strategies in the workplace include:

- Flexible working hours and reasonable deadlines
- Clear, consistent, and direct communication
- Working from home or quiet workspaces at your place of employment
- Access to assistive technologies
- Regular supportive check-ins with supervisors or mentors
- Access to professional coaching, counselling, or peer support
- Workplace-wide training on supporting neurodivergence

You can also

- Access your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for confidential support
- Speak with your manager, Human Resources, People and Culture and or Work Health and Safety team for support



Outside of The Workplace

Managing energy means balancing your activities and rest, as the “Spoon-Theory” describes. A realistic self-assessment of your energy can help you avoid burnout.

Here are some further daily strategies that can help:

- Add breaks throughout the day to prevent fatigue from building up
- Doing things you love, such as hobbies and things you're good at
- Adjust the sensory environment to reduce overstimulation:
 - Wearing noise-cancelling headphones when going out and about
 - Turning the TV or radio down when speaking with others
- Use AI tools to assist with daily tasks:
 - Stay organised by setting reminders with apps like Alexa or track time with Toogl
 - Get help with writing tasks with tools like Grammarly, Goblin Tools, and speech-to-text for note-taking, texting and dictating emails
- Mindfulness activities, such as mindful breathing and self-compassion to decrease stress, increase emotional responses, and take guilt-free rest, such as Smiling Minds or Insight Timer
- Set boundaries by clearly communicating your energy limits to friends, family, and coworkers, so you get the rest you need
- Get enough sleep, stay active, and eat well
- Please feel free to reach out for mental health support when you need it, such as visiting your GP to get a Mental Health Care Plan, to see a counsellor or psychologist



Recovering from Burnout

Recovery from burnout requires rest, validation, access to supportive environments, and accepting help. For neurodivergent people, this might include taking breaks from high-stress tasks, asking for changes that make work more manageable, and being in environments where you feel you can be yourself.

More research is needed to clearly establish guidelines for neurodivergent recovery from burnout, but so far, we know that overall workplace support, such as increased awareness and neurodiversity-informed organisational practices, are the most effective support. These supports may be accommodations such as regular breaks, reducing environmental and sensory stressors, and creating supportive social and workplace networks.

Towards Inclusion

Burnout in neurodivergent people can be prevented. With supportive environments, understanding and inclusive practices, neurodivergent people can thrive. It's time to shift the focus from asking neurodivergent people to change; rather, we can create environments and systems that work for everyone.



Seek Support

Contact us on our free Confidential Helpline: 1800 13 NEAP (6327) and speak with one of our Mental Health Clinicians, or email us at hello@rethinkdyslexia.com.au

re:think dyslexia resources:

- [Neurodivergence Mental Health Factsheet](#)
- Inclusive Workplaces: An Employee Guide to Neurodivergent Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Workplace
- Inclusive Workplaces: An Employer's Guide: Neurodivergent Psychosocial Wellbeing in the workplace

External Supports

- Speak with a mental health professional (your GP can provide a referral).
- [JobAccess Australia](#)

Urgent Support

- Lifeline
- Beyond Blue: [Mental Health and Burnout](#)
- [13YARN - Call 13 92 76 | 24 /7 Crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders](#)

Recommended Resources

- Self-Care for Autistic People — Dr Megan Anna Neff
- The Neurodivergent Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD — Jennifer Kemp, Monique Mitchelson & Sonny Jane Wise
- The Dyslexia Workbook for Adults — Gavin Reid
- Executive Functioning Workbook for Adults – Dr Blythe Grossberg



This Factsheet has been developed by the **re:think dyslexia** science communicators and reviewed by our Lived Experience and Subject Matter Advisory committee, including:

Neurodivergent Advisors

Jacqueline Middleton

Danielle Harvey

Subject Matter Advisor

Dr Bec Marland, Victoria University

For a full list of references for this guide, go to www.rethinkdyslexia.com.au