

Investigating autistic burnout #AutBurnout



Background

Although commonly described by autistic people, and discussed on social media, autistic burnout has only recently been mentioned in academic literature.



Aim

This project sought to define autistic burnout and explore risk factors that would make it more likely autistic adults would experience burnout.



Who took part

159

autistic adults who had experienced autistic burnout

23

in study 1

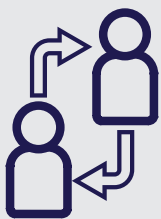
136

in study 2



How we did the research

We conducted two studies.



In the first study we used a technique called Grounded Delphi Method (GDM). This enabled autistic voice, those with experience of autistic burnout, to frame the research and the definition. The autistic experts related their experiences from which we drafted a definition. They helped to refine the definition over three rounds of online surveys.



At the time we were designing the second study, a definition of autistic burnout was developed by Raymaker et al. (2020). We developed a large survey to explore the content of the new definitions.



We also wanted to check the frequency and duration of autistic burnout episodes.



Finally, we wanted to test the new AASPIRE Autistic Burnout Measure (AABM) developed by Raymaker and colleagues.

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What we found

We found that autistic burnout was a debilitating condition linked to fatigue from masking autism, social interactions, overload of cognitive or sensory input, or other stressors.

Participants in the second study strongly agreed to items suggesting exhaustion and interpersonal withdrawal were key characteristics of autistic burnout. We didn't find a clear pattern of the duration or frequency of autistic burnout. However, they told us that it can occur as both chronic and/or acute episodes.

We found that both masking and depression were the most strongly associated concepts to our Higgins et al (2021) definition, though only depression was associated with the AABM measure. We also found the AABM measure was poor at telling who was currently experiencing autistic burnout.



What this means

- Both studies verified the existence of an autistic burnout syndrome.
- The studies highlighted that autistic adults had often been misdiagnosed with other conditions, such as depression, anxiety or borderline personality disorder, when their experience would have been better described as autistic burnout.
- Increased awareness of the autistic burnout syndrome in clinicians, autistics and the autism community is needed.



Who did the research



UNSW
AUSTRALIA



DEPARTMENT OF
DEVELOPMENTAL
DISABILITY
NEUROPSYCHIATRY



MACQUARIE
University
SYDNEY · AUSTRALIA



Defining autistic burnout

Autistic burnout involves:

1. Significant mental and physical exhaustion
2. Interpersonal withdrawal.

With one or more of these characteristics:

- a. Reduced functioning (i.e. performance) in work, education, social or other areas of life
- b. Confusion, having problems thinking or losing touch with reality (i.e. dissociation)
- c. Increased intensity of autistic traits or reduced ability to mask autistic traits.

Acknowledgments

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Find out more

Download the final report and executive summary on the Autism CRC website:
autismcrc.com.au/reports/AutBurnout



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