

Spring 2022 Horizons Newsletter



Autism Society of Michigan

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What is Autistic Burnout?

Maureen Bennie

Maybe you've heard the term autistic burnout and wondered what it is and how this term come about. We usually hear the term "burnout" used in professional life, which is characterized by exhaustion. The autistic community began applying the burnout term to all areas of life. Autistic adults have reported times when they could no longer cope, lost skills, had loss of function, started acting or feeling "more autistic" (increased repetitive behaviors or increased sensitivity to sensory input), lost employment, did poorly in school, experienced relationship problems, or had mental and/or physical health issues. Sometimes these experiences lead to permanent disability or suicidal behavior.

Autism researchers have only become aware of the burnout phenomenon in the past 5 years. It has been brought to researchers' attention through discussions online and in person with autistic people.

Sarah Deweerdt, author of the article *Autism Burnout Explained*, describes autistic burnout as:

"The intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion, often accompanied by a loss of skills, that some adults with autism experience. Many autistic people say it results mainly from the cumulative effect of having to navigate a world that is designed for neurotypical people. Burnout may especially affect autistic adults who have strong cognitive and language abilities and are working or going to school with neurotypical people."

In a 2020 AASPIRE research study, it was defined as *"a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports. It is characterized by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus."*

What causes autistic burnout?

Autistic burnout occurs when the challenges of life exceeds a person's resources. Some examples are:

- **A life transition** – a move, entering high school, starting college, aging.
- **Masking or camouflaging** – this is when autistic people mimic neurotypical behavior by using scripts for small talk, force themselves to make eye contact or suppress repetitive behaviors.
- **Sensory overstimulation** – an example of this would be constantly coping with excessive noise.
- **Executive function demands** – having to juggle too many demands at once. I often see this with university students.
- **Stress** – ex. changes or upheaval in a person's life, job loss, relationship break-up
- **Sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, dehydration**
- **Aging** – feeling less energetic, needing more downtime

What are the signs of autistic burnout?

- Lack of motivation
- Loss of executive function skills (disorganized, trouble making decisions)
- Difficulty with self-care (showering, personal hygiene)
- Easier to reach overload or meltdown
- Loss of speech/selective mutism
- Feeling exhausted or lethargic
- Physical illness, digestive issues
- Memory loss
- Can't mask anymore or loss of social skills
- May experience high energy before collapse
- Seeming more autistic such as an increase in repetitive behaviors

What can an autistic person do to help themselves if they are experiencing autistic burnout?

- Take time off and rest/relax in order to recover.
- Set aside time to engage in activities or interests that re-energize you.
- Allow time for not having to mask and suppress stims.
- Reduce expectations and demands. Let people know what they are asking for is too overwhelming right now.
- Limit social interactions.
- Exercise – a little bit of movement can help reduce anxiety and contribute to an overall sense of well-being.

What can family and friends do?

- Reduce expectations; however, this does not mean reducing expectations about a person's ability to achieve their goals in life.
- Accept a person for who they are, autistic traits and all, and don't ask them to change or mask.
- Give emotional support. Listen to what is bothering them.
- Provide direct support for daily living activities. Help with laundry, cooking, grocery shopping etc.
- Allow for accommodations at work, school and in the community.
- Focus on autistic strengths and preservations to reduce the risk of burnout. In other words, find employment in an area of interest, take courses on interesting topics.
- Understand that decreases in function may be a sign of autistic burnout, not laziness or lack of motivation.

Note – many adults report their first autistic burnout around transition age which is a time of great change. Moving into adulthood is a vulnerable time due to an increase in expectations, number and scope of life-changes, and the general stress of this developmental period. A young person may not understand what is happening to them if this is their first time experiencing autistic burnout.

Daylight Saving Time Social Narrative

Social narratives are simple stories that focus the individual's attention on only the key details of a situation and can support understanding and performance. Please keep in mind, it is important to adjust the number and complexity of details to meet the needs of the individual.

Tonight, the clocks will change while I am sleeping.

This will only happen on this one night.

But it means that when I have to wake up in the morning, it might be darker than usual.

At 2 a.m. when I am sleeping, the clock will change to 3 a.m. This is called daylight savings, and it only happens once in the springtime.

When I wake up, it might feel very early to me, but it will be time to get up. When I wake up, I might be more tired because I will miss one hour of sleep.

In the afternoon, it will not get dark as early as it does in the wintertime. It might still be light outside when I am eating dinner, watching my shows, or getting ready for bed.

It will be a change, but I will be OK. After a few days or so, my body will get used to the change.

Reprinted from: www.autismsociety-nc.org



Easy DIY Seed Bombs Recipe

Reprinted from: www.naturalbeachliving.com

What's Needed:

6 pieces Construction Paper, assort. colors
3-5 pkg. Flower Seeds
Food Processor
Scissors
Water

Directions:

1. Cut each piece of paper into about 1-inch squares and put them into a small dish. Keep each paper color in its own dish.
2. Fill each dish with water just until the paper is covered. Soak the paper for about 20 minutes.
3. Take one of the bowls of paper and wring it out about halfway. Put it in the food processor and pulse the paper into a pulp. Repeat this with all the paper colors and put the pulp back into each of their bowls.
4. Sprinkle some seeds into each bowl of paper, mix them in a little, and press the pulp and seeds into balls. If the pulp is a little dry, put a few sprinkles of water on the pulp. It will help it to hold its shape better.
5. Set the seed balls on a sheet pan to dry overnight.

Plant in your garden or anywhere you want flowers to grow.



PANTRY POPCORN MIX

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 cups popped popcorn (stovetop or a 3-ounce microwave bag)
- 1 cup mini pretzels
- 1 cup fish-shaped cheese crackers (such as Goldfish)
- 1 cup animal crackers
- 1 cup honey flavored toasted oat cereal
- 1/2 cup dried cranberries
- 1/2 cup roasted peanuts
- 3/4 cup peanut M&M's

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Pop popcorn on the stovetop or according to microwave package directions. Add slightly cooled popcorn and remaining ingredients to a large bowl and toss together. You can substitute any other pantry favorites into the mix.



HOW TO BE HUMAN

AN AUTISTIC MAN'S GUIDE TO LIFE

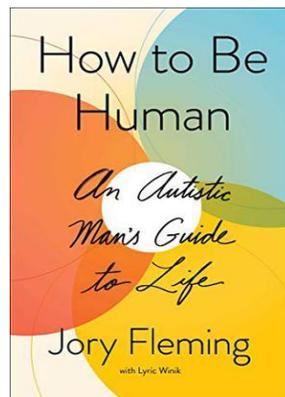
BY JORY FLEMING_WITH LYRIC WINIK · RELEASE DATE: APRIL 20, 2021

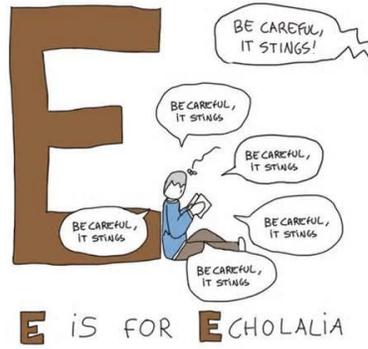
A deeply moving memoir from the first autistic student to attend Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

Diagnosed with autism at age 5, Fleming has little memory of his life before age 11 or 12. As a child, he screamed for hours each day and never wanted to be more than a few feet from his mother. Eventually, with the aid of family, friends, and educators, the author, who “wasn’t expected to graduate from high school,” received a college degree and was named a Rhodes Scholar. At Oxford, he recently completed his master’s degree in philosophy. In his debut book, Fleming tells his story to Winik, and the result is a fascinating deep dive into the murky waters of consciousness and identity. Because the author doesn’t think about language like most people, he must translate information into his own code to understand it. He says he has “no idea” how other people process emotion, but he learned how to listen with empathy from a college leadership training manual. Whereas most people just “have” a personality, Fleming had to construct one: “serious and friendly and intellectual” but also “bubbly and dorky and witty.” Fleming’s rules for living spring from his Christian faith, and he believes that when it comes to solving the world’s abiding problems, it’s vital that we practice both “ruthless optimism” and “practical idealism.” Winik interviewed Fleming multiple times and went through hundreds of pages of transcripts to help him shape the narrative, organizing the material in a Q&A fashion around chapters covering topics such as energy and memory, language barriers, and “things that matter.” Never intrusive, she elegantly provides context for Fleming’s brilliantly unique outlook. This tremendous work should be savored; every clearly written chapter offers fresh insight into how to shape a life from the inchoate matter of consciousness.

Fleming’s extraordinary journey will inspire any reader weighing what it means to be human in a troubled world.

Reprinted from: www.kirkusreviews.com





L was nonverbal up until he was three. Prior to using verbal speech to communicate, L used a combination of sounds and key word signing to communicate.

L was able to say a few words that he knew and used on a daily basis. There were also others that he used but it was communication through Echolalia. Echolalia is best described as repeating phrases and words after an individual has heard them.

L also used, and still does, Scripted Speech, which is repeating parts of speech that he hears in movies, TV shows and even in general conversation. Often scripted speech is used to express an individual's emotions. They may a particular phrase when they are experiencing an emotion and then on future occasions, will say the phrase as it reminds them of that emotion.

For autistic individuals, that may also use scripted speech in play - they may act out particular scenes from movies or television shows that we watch, verbatim.

I've recently realized that I too will repeat phrases that I've heard. I will these phrases when it is appropriate and in particular situations. I don't consciously say these phrases, I just find myself saying them.

Like "You're welcome!" from Moana, when someone says thank you to me!

"We're going to need a bigger boat." (Jaws)

"To be fair!" (Letter Kenny!)

"Tell him he's dreaming." (The Castle)

"That'll do pig, that'll do." (Babe)

"Round up the usual suspects!" (Casablanca) - when we're organizing the little superheroes to go somewhere!

"Houston, we have a problem." (Apollo 13)

"Just keep swimming." (Finding Nemo)

"Ogres are like onions!" (Shrek)

"Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads." (Back to the Future.)

No matter how an individual communicates, please listen to them and respect them ♡♡

With Special Thanks To:

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Tracy Lowrance

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