

Module 29: Burnout

Flourish: ADHD and Burnout: The Basics+

🔥 What Is Burnout?

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. It manifests differently in neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals, especially for those with ADHD.

Key Differences:

- **Neurodivergent burnout** arises from chronic stress caused by navigating a world designed for neurotypicals.
- It deeply impacts the **autonomic nervous system**, leading to mental and emotional fatigue.

As Dora M. Raymaker explains, burnout in neurodivergent individuals is:

Dora M. Raymaker, expert and researcher on autistic burnout, defines it as "... a state of physical and mental fatigue, heightened stress, and diminished capacity to manage life skills, sensory input, and/or social interactions, which comes from years of being severely overtaxed by the strain of trying to live up to demands that are out of sync with our needs".

ADHD and Burnout: Understanding the Root Causes

Early Roots: The Treatment of ADHD Children

Burnout often begins in how we train neurodivergent girls to relate to themselves and the world in childhood.

Girls with ADHD are:

- **Taught to suppress emotions**, disconnecting them from their physical and emotional selves.
- **Encouraged to mask** through perfectionism and adherence to neurotypical norms, avoiding shame at the cost of authenticity.

These patterns become ingrained, laying the foundation for burnout in adulthood.

① Were you taught to suppress your emotions?

Were you taught to mask?



What Counts as Masking?

Masking is when you **hide or change parts of yourself** to fit in, avoid judgment, or meet expectations that don't align with how your brain works.

- People-Pleasing**
Saying yes when you mean no, avoiding conflict, making yourself small to keep others comfortable.
- Trying to Be Perfect**
Over-preparing, overworking, or holding yourself to unrealistic standards.
- Forcing Eye Contact**
Looking at people when it feels uncomfortable just to seem "normal."
- Pretending to Understand**
Nodding along when your brain needs more time to process.
- Hiding Your Voice**
Not sharing opinions, suppressing excitement, adjusting how you speak to avoid standing out.
- Suppressing Stimming**
Stopping fidgeting, not using movement to focus, forcing stillness.
- Mimicking Others**
Copying social behaviors or masking emotions to avoid being misunderstood.
- Pushing Through Exhaustion**
Acting "fine" when you're completely drained inside.

Masking

Impact of Masking:

When Adhd people are forced to mask they eventually experience:

Emotional and physical exhaustion

Loss of identity

Cognitive fatigue and Dysfunction

Contrast:

When adhd people are **accepted as they are**, they experience:

Empowerment

Self-determination

Reduced stress

📌 ✨ **Unmasking isn't about being reckless—it's about finding and creating spaces where you can be your real self without fear.**

Masking Is Sometimes Necessary

It's okay to **mask when you need to**—for safety, work, or social situations.

- The goal isn't to **force yourself to stop masking** but to **keep trying to find and build spaces where you don't have to**.



- Every time you safely unmask, you reclaim **a little more energy, authenticity, and self-trust**.

Ask yourself:

 "Where in my life do I feel safe being fully myself?"

How can I grow those spaces?

 **Unmasking is a journey.** You are allowed to take it at your own pace.

Signs of Burnout

Neurodivergent burnout isn't the same as neurotypical burnout at work. Understanding these unique signs is crucial for early intervention and support.



Meltdowns & RSD

Intense emotional reactions that may seem disproportionate to triggers, including crying, shutdown, or feeling overwhelmed by minor changes.



Sensory Overload

Heightened sensitivity to changes, sounds, lights, textures, or social interactions that were once manageable.



Regression

Difficulty managing previously familiar tasks, like hygiene, work, or daily routines.



Fight-or-Flight

Sympathetic state activation leading to anxiety, rapid heartbeat, or the need to escape situations.



Executive Dysfunction

Increased difficulty with planning, organizing, and completing usually manageable tasks.



Social Withdrawal

Pulling away from friends, family, or social activities that previously brought joy.



Physical Symptoms

Headaches, digestive issues, muscle tension, or changes in sleep patterns.



Masking Fatigue

Complete exhaustion from trying to maintain neurotypical appearances. Inability to mask can result in burnout phases.

Remember that burnout signs can vary significantly between individuals, and they often appear gradually rather than all at once. If you notice several of these signs persisting for more than a few days, it's important to take them seriously and begin implementing recovery strategies.

What Causes Burnout

Understanding the key risk factors that contribute to Autistic/ADHD burnout can help identify early warning signs and develop prevention strategies.

1

Internal Pressures

- Masking - Constantly hiding neurodivergent traits
- Perfectionism & Internalized Ableism - Feeling pressure to "prove" your worth
- Alexithymia - Difficulty identifying or expressing emotions

2

Environmental Stressors

- Sensory Overload - Too much noise, light, or stimulation
- Stressful Life Events - Major transitions and changes
- Lack of Accommodations - Pushing through without needed support

3

Social Challenges

- Social Exhaustion - Navigating neurotypical expectations
- Emotional Labor & People-Pleasing - Over-accommodating others
- Stigma & Discrimination - Facing judgment and ableism

4

Executive & Emotional Impacts

- Executive Dysfunction Pressure - Struggling with organization and tasks
- Rejection Sensitivity (RSD) - Pain from real or perceived rejection
- Chronic Stress - Constantly adapting to a neurotypical world

Hyperfocus and Burnout

Hyperfocus, the intense concentration common in ADHD, can be both a strength and a pathway to burnout when not properly managed.

1

Initial Hyperfocus

Entering intense concentration state, often ignoring essential self-care needs like eating and drinking

2

Time Awareness Fades

Working without breaks as time perception diminishes, steadily depleting energy reserves

3

Perfectionist Loop

Hyperfocus intensifies perfectionist tendencies, making it increasingly difficult to stop or transition away

4

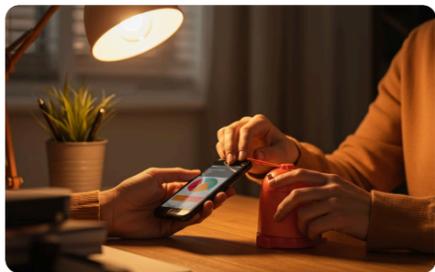
Warning Signs Masked

Hyperfocus-induced adrenaline conceals exhaustion signals until complete burnout occurs



Breaking the Hyperfocus-Burnout Cycle

Don't try to eliminate hyperfocus—instead, learn to manage it effectively.



✓ Use Timer Check-Ins

- Set 30-60 minute timers
- Check basic needs (food, water)
- Monitor energy levels

✓ Plan Recovery Time

Schedule dedicated downtime after intense focus periods to recharge and reset

✓ Create Stop Signals

Use alarms and reminders to help transition out of deep focus states

✓ Make Self-Care Easy

Keep essentials nearby during focus sessions for quick access

💡 Key Takeaway: Hyperfocus is valuable, but requires active management to prevent burnout. Balance deep work with self-care.

Alexithymia and Burnout

Alexithymia is the difficulty in identifying, understanding, or expressing emotions. Many **neurodivergent women**, especially those with **ADHD and autism**, experience **alexithymia without realizing it**—making it harder to track stress, recognize emotions, and identify burnout before it becomes severe.

1

Understanding Alexithymia's Impact

For many ADHD women, **burnout doesn't feel like an emotional crash**. Instead, it presents as:

- Feeling **drained but not knowing why**
- Ignoring stress until it **manifests physically**
- Having **no words for emotions**, just vague discomfort
- **Pushing through exhaustion** without recognition

2

The Hidden Progression

Since alexithymia makes it hard to **identify emotions in the moment**, burnout often goes unnoticed until complete shutdown. Common misinterpretations include:

- **"I'm just tired."** → (But rest doesn't fix it.)
- **"I'm lazy."** → (But motivation isn't the issue.)
- **"I need to try harder."** → (But pushing through makes burnout worse.)

3

Why It Matters

The combination of alexithymia and ADHD creates a unique risk pattern:

- **Burnout sneaks up unnoticed**—you don't see it coming
- **Rest and recovery don't happen soon enough**—needs go unrecognized
- **Stress and exhaustion keep building**—until complete **meltdown or shutdown**

Breaking the Burnout Cycle When You Have Alexithymia

Because recognizing burnout early is harder with alexithymia, external tools and structured check-ins can help bridge the gap. Here are key strategies to help:



Body-Based Check-Ins

Instead of relying on emotional awareness, tune into physical signals:

- Notice body sensations (tension, heaviness)
- Track physical stress signals (headaches, fatigue)



Timer Check-Ins

Set structured reminders to pause and assess:

- What do I feel? (Use a Feelings Wheel)
- What do I need right now?
- What action can I take?



Pattern Tracking

Notice behavioral changes that signal overwhelm:

- Increased procrastination
- Social withdrawal
- Hyperfixation patterns



Environmental Cues

Track external signals of burnout:

- Frequent zoning out
- Tasks feeling unusually difficult
- Changes in daily function



Reduce Masking

Create safe spaces where you can:

- Stop hiding exhaustion
- Release the pressure to appear "fine"
- Manage energy more effectively

Preventing Burnout: A Continuous Journey

Recognize Early Signs

- Monitor your personal burnout signs (exhaustion, dysregulation, shutdowns)
- Distinguish between acute and chronic burnout
- Track your energy drains and triggers

1

2

Create Protected Spaces

- Find safe spaces to reduce masking
- Set clear boundaries to protect energy
- Create an ADHD-friendly environment

Manage Energy Wisely

- Build in rest before reaching exhaustion
- Use movement and stimming for regulation
- Engage in interest-based activities

3

4

Adjust Expectations

- Work with your ADHD brain, not against it
- Let go of perfectionism
- Rest without guilt

Build Support Systems

- Connect with people who understand
- Advocate for needed accommodations
- Manage RSD with self-compassion

5

6

Maintain Prevention

- Make micro-adjustments before burnout hits
- Find ADHD-friendly rest activities
- Prioritize dopamine-friendly activities

 **Final Thought:** Burnout prevention isn't just about stopping when you're tired—it's about structuring life in a way that supports **your ADHD brain's needs for energy, stimulation, and recovery.**

Short and Long Term Burnout

There are two kinds of burnout, you can experience burnout at the end of a long day or touch week or month, or as a build up over years. The longer the build up the longer the period of rest required.

Acute vs. Chronic Burnout in Neurodivergent People

Key Differences Between Acute and Chronic Burnout

Factor	Acute Burnout	Chronic Burnout
Duration	Days to weeks	Months to years
Cause	Short-term stressor	Long-term masking, lack of support
Cognitive Impact	Brain fog, forgetfulness	Persistent dysfunction
Emotional Impact	Mood swings	Emotional numbness, detachment
Recovery	Improves with rest	Requires systemic change

Burnout vs. Depression

Although they share overlapping symptoms, burnout and depression differ:

- **Burnout:** Caused by environmental stressors exceeding capacity.
- **Depression:** A mood disorder marked by pervasive sadness and hopelessness.

⚠️ Strategies for ADHD burnout differ from those for depression. For instance, **socializing** may help with depression but worsen burnout.

⚠️ Watch out that if you are in therapy you aren't treated for depression when you actually have neurodivergent burnout because it will make you worse!



Healing from Burnout

Recovery is a journey that requires patience and self-compassion. Here are the key steps to guide you:

1

Embrace Stimming

Make stimming a regular part of your daily routine to soothe your nervous system and regulate emotions. This natural coping mechanism is essential for recovery.

2

Rest Extensively

Give yourself permission to scale back demands and focus only on the essentials. Your body and mind need time to recuperate.

3

Build a Support Network

Connect with neurodivergent peers who understand your experiences and can offer genuine empathy and understanding.

4

Engage in Joyful Activities

Lean into your special interests as a source of joy and healing. These activities can help restore your energy and motivation.

5

Reflect on Triggers

Take time to identify your burnout patterns and triggers, creating awareness that can help prevent future episodes.

6

Advocate for Accommodations

Work with schools and workplaces to implement tailored support systems that can reduce stress and prevent burnout.

WORKSHEETS:

ADHD Burnout Awareness, Prevention, and Recovery

Worksheet 1:

Quick Burnout Check-In

How do you know when you're burned out? This sheet helps you check in with yourself **without** overthinking.

Instructions:

- **Circle** how you're feeling today.
- If you circle mostly  or , it's time to **slow down and rest**.

 I'm Doing Okay	 I'm Struggling	 I'm Burned Out
I have energy	I feel drained	I feel exhausted
I can focus	I'm zoning out	I can't think clearly
My emotions feel balanced	I'm overwhelmed	Everything feels too much
I feel okay socially	I don't want to talk	I want to disappear
My ADHD is manageable	My ADHD feels worse	My ADHD feels out of control

Next Step:

- If you circled  → Keep going! But check in **every few days**.
- If you circled  → **Slow down**. Try reducing tasks or taking breaks.
- If you circled  → **You need real rest**. Prioritize recovery and say no to extra demands.

Worksheet 2: What Drains & Restores My Energy?

Burnout happens when **too much energy drains out and not enough goes back in.**

Instructions:

- **Write down** what drains and restores your energy.
- **Circle** one small thing you can do today to restore energy.

What Drains Me?	What Restores Me?
Too much noise	Silence, headphones
Overworking	Taking breaks
Too many social plans	Alone time
Messy space	Cleaning one small area
Trying to be perfect	Giving myself grace
Not eating enough	Eating a snack
No movement	Stretching or a walk
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Worksheet 3: Tiny Accommodations That Help Me Function

ADHD brains work best with **small adjustments**. Check the accommodations that could help you!

Focus Helpers

- Using noise-canceling headphones
- Working in a quiet space
- Using a timer for focus

Energy Management

- Taking movement breaks
- Doing tasks in short bursts
- Keeping snacks nearby
- Wearing comfortable clothes

Planning & Organization

- Using reminders and alarms
- Asking for deadline extensions
- Keeping a **done list** instead of a to-do list
- Scheduling **nothing** after socializing

 **Next Step:** Pick **one** accommodation to try today. If you have other strategies that work for you, add them to the appropriate category!

Worksheet 4: Self-Talk Makeover

Burnout often brings **self-criticism**. Let's reframe it.

Instructions:

- Read the **self-critical thoughts** in the left column.
- **Circle** one that feels familiar.
- Rewrite it in a **kinder, more realistic** way.

Self-Critical Thought	Self-Compassionate Reframe
"I'm so lazy."	"I'm exhausted and need rest."
"I should be able to handle this."	"ADHD makes some things harder, and that's okay."
"I never finish anything."	"I work in bursts, and that's how my brain functions."
"I need to push through."	"Rest is productive too."

 **Next Step: Say your reframe out loud.** Even if it feels weird, practicing self-compassion **helps break the burnout cycle.**

Worksheet 5: My Burnout Recovery Plan

Burnout recovery **isn't all or nothing**—it happens in **stages**.

Instructions:

- **Check** what you need **right now**.
 - It's okay if you're not ready for everything yet!
 - ♦ **Step 1: Immediate Recovery (I Need a Break)**
 - Reduce stimulation (quiet, dim lights, alone time)
 - Sleep or rest without guilt
 - Do **nothing** (your brain needs to reset)
 - Watch a comfort show/listen to music
 - ♦ **Step 2: Slowly Adding Energy Back**
 - Eat something nourishing
 - Move in a way that feels good (stretch, walk)
 - Text or check in with one safe person
 - Do one **tiny** productive thing (shower, email, easy task)
 - ♦ **Step 3: Long-Term Burnout Prevention**
 - Set better boundaries (say no when needed)
 - Adjust workload/schedule
 - Keep sensory-friendly spaces
 - Make time for **fun & joy** (hobbies, interests)
- ✔ **Next Step:** Pick **one step** to start with. Small changes **add up**.



Final Thoughts: Your Needs Matter

- ♦ **Burnout isn't failure**—it's your brain telling you something needs to change.
- ♦ **Accommodations are valid**, even if no one else needs them.
- ♦ You **deserve rest, support, and a life that works for you.**

♥ What's one thing you can do today to care for yourself?

Conclusion

These worksheets are **simple, practical, and neurodivergent-affirming**. They focus on providing tools for self-awareness, burnout prevention, and recovery strategies tailored to individuals with ADHD. By using these worksheets, you can develop a better understanding of your personal burnout triggers and create a personalized plan for managing and preventing burnout.

Remember, taking care of yourself is not selfish—it's necessary. Your well-being matters, and by prioritizing self-care and implementing these strategies, you can build resilience and thrive with ADHD.