

Masking, camouflaging and managing autistic burnout and fatigue with 'energy accounting' as a strategy

Some autistic people can appear at ease in social situations, so much so that it may be difficult to 'see' that they are autistic. This is sometimes referred to as 'high-masking'.

At work, people may feel they need to mask during the day. Once they get home, they may have a meltdown, or be fatigued to the point that they are unable to perform basic self-care.

It is important to understand autistic burnout and fatigue.

'Autistic fatigue' and 'autistic burnout' are terms that came from autistic people.

Fatigue, and then later burnout, can happen to anybody.

Autistic people can be more susceptible to fatigue and burnout due to the pressures of everyday life, finding it difficult to refuse help or demands, having to navigate social situations and sensory overload.

Trying to cope with these pressures can lead to exhaustion (autistic fatigue). Over time this can lead to extreme exhaustion or autistic burnout.

If you are supporting an autistic person who is vulnerable to experiencing fatigue or burnout, understanding how to support them to manage their energy levels is essential. Some supportive strategies include:

- including wellbeing checks in all manager meetings and catch-up agendas;
- supporting the person to set manageable energy limits and build in time to relax and recover;
- keeping track of the person's workload and identifying signs that it is becoming unmanageable;
- supporting the person to take regular work breaks and annual leave;
- supporting the person to work in an environment that is suitable for their sensory and communication needs;
- reducing interaction or social expectations, and/or providing amended duties
- planning a phased re-entry to work after time off and scheduling more frequent supportive catch-up sessions

To support an autistic person, you can encourage them to be themselves as much as is comfortable for them. They may not realise that their masking or camouflaging is tiring for them. You can reduce someone's 'need' to mask by creating a welcoming environment where stimming, different communication styles and sensory needs are accepted.

By reducing the perceived consequences of being visibly autistic and allowing for difference, you are encouraging people not to mask or to mask less often. This is beneficial for all involved.

Some autistic people, and other neurodivergent professionals find the strategy of 'energy accounting' helpful to avoid exhaustion and better predict and conserve energy levels over time. An example of an 'energy accounting' visual timetable follows.

Energy accounting timetable - Example

	Monday 1 st July	Tuesday 2 nd July	Wednesday 3 rd July	Thursday 4 th July	Friday 5 th July	Saturday 6 th July	Sunday 7 th July	
5am								
6am				Train to London				
7am		Travel to site						
8am								
9am	Email tasks and work planning	Plymouth workshops and meetings	TOIL		TOIL			
10am				Colleague meetings	Online LM catch-up	DIY	Housework	
11am								
12pm	Drive to Plymouth and stop for lunch		Email tasks					
1pm				Tube back to Paddington	Email tasks			
2pm			Project work		work planning			
3pm		Drive back from Plymouth		Train back			Band rehearsal	
4pm						Finish report		
5pm				Start report				
6pm	Check-in to hotel and email tasks					Dinner with aunty	Research and films	
7pm								
8pm								
9pm								
10pm								

	Energising
	Not tiring
	Slightly tiring
	Tiring

Figure 1 Example of an energy accounting timetable