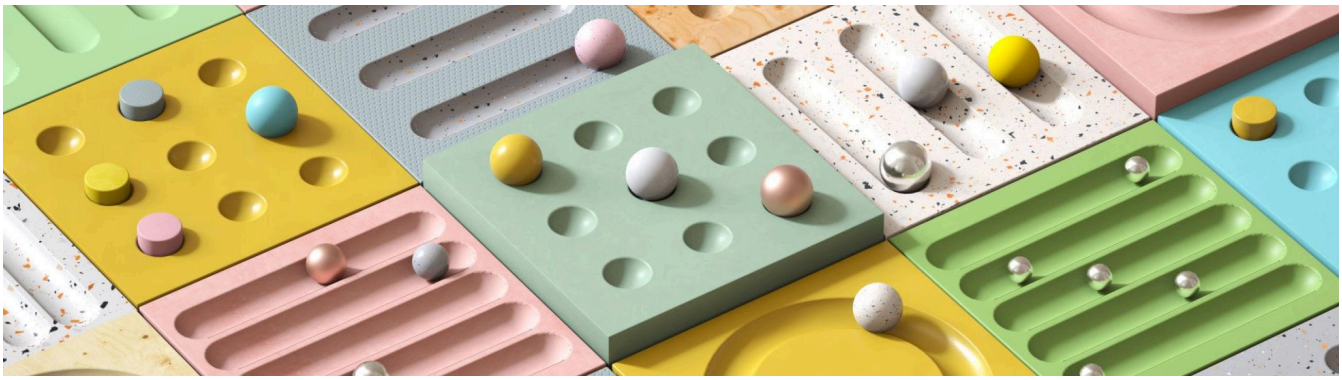
Overview



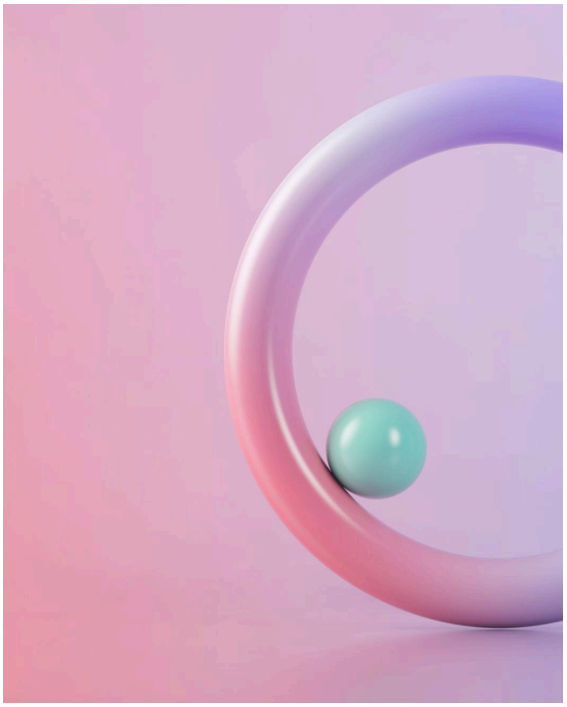
Quick guide to overcoming neurodivergent burnout

by Victor Wang

updated August 2025

What is this guide about?

This guide provides a quick way to grasp all the key elements of recovery from neurodivergent burnout, including examples of what these concepts might look like and how you might implement them.



Who is this for?

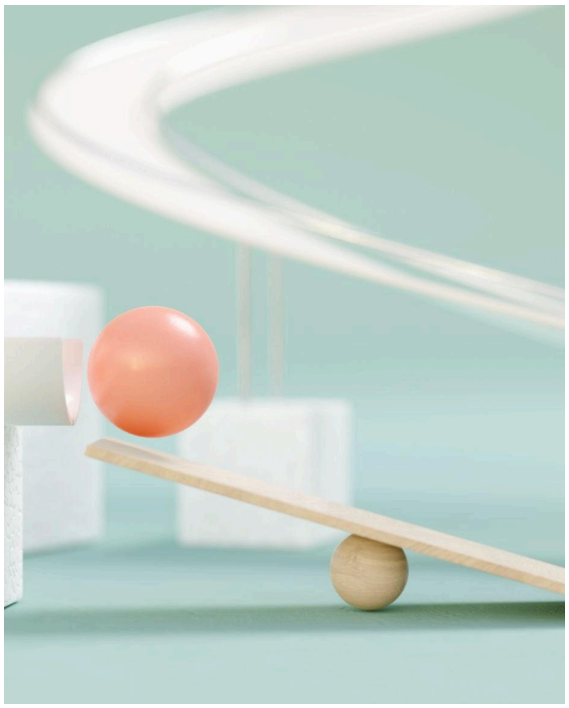
This guide is especially suited for:

- Individuals experiencing autistic, ADHD, or AuDHD burnout—whether currently or intermittently.
- Those supporting someone going through burnout.
- Anyone looking for strategies to prevent burnout from occurring or recurring.

If you frequently experience neurodivergent overwhelm, you'll find that many of the same concepts apply not just to recovery, but also to prevention and managing overwhelm as it arises.

What will I take away from this?

This guide provides a clear, systematic approach to understanding and targeting neurodivergent burnout and overwhelm, including a sense of which key areas to prioritize, and a bunch of ideas to get you started.



To navigate between the sections of this guide, use document tabs on the left or upper-left.

Physiology

Overview of recovery

What is neurodivergent burnout?

Neurodivergent burnout is a deep, persistent exhaustion that goes beyond typical stress or fatigue. It often results from prolonged masking, sensory overload, or the constant effort of navigating a world not designed for your brain. Signs include extreme mental and physical fatigue, increased sensitivity to stimuli, difficulty with basic tasks, emotional shutdown, and a heightened sense of overwhelm. Many people also experience skill regression, where tasks or routines that were once manageable become increasingly difficult or even impossible. If rest doesn't seem to help, small tasks feel overwhelming, or you're withdrawing from things you normally enjoy, you may be experiencing neurodivergent burnout.

While autistic and ADHD burnout can have distinct symptoms, the overarching challenges and considerations are largely the same, with differences mainly in the specific strategies and implementation for these overlapping themes.

How does the recovery process work?

While more scientific research is needed to fully understand neurodivergent burnout, it appears that nervous system dysregulation is a primary physiological root. When the nervous system becomes overloaded, it struggles to manage the demands placed on it, leading to symptoms like pain, fatigue, brain fog, and even digestive issues. Allostatic load refers to the cumulative "wear and tear" on the body caused by repeated or chronic stress. For neurodivergent individuals, prolonged exposure to overwhelm without adequate rest and processing can gradually increase allostatic load—over months, years, or even decades—thereby

reducing the sustainable capacity for their lifestyle. This process can be so gradual that it's often hard to notice, especially for late-diagnosed or high-masking neurodivergent adults who haven't experienced severe burnout before.

Recovery, therefore, is not just about adjusting to reduced capacity during burnout. It involves finding a holistic balance and engaging in practices that allow the nervous system to heal, ultimately restoring things to a long-term healthy baseline along with its sustainable post-burnout capacity. Burnout prevention, viewed through this lens, is about staying within sustainable limits where possible and maintaining nervous system regulation to prevent allostatic load from becoming unmanageable in the first place.

How long does recovery take?

Autistic burnout typically lasts at least three months, with severe cases sometimes extending beyond a year, while ADHD burnout tends to occur in shorter cycles, ranging anywhere from days to months. Individuals with both autism and ADHD may experience one type of burnout, a unique combination of both, or a layering of the two across different time scales. Recovery time can be reduced by actively engaging in the recovery process, rather than continuing to push through without making lifestyle changes.

Although this guide presents 12 key areas to consider for recovery, there's no need to exhaustively try every step or strive for perfection. Focusing on just a few areas at a time can still lead to meaningful benefits. Neurodivergent burnout is often multi-faceted and non-linear, meaning some actions may primarily ease discomfort, while others can help shorten recovery time. Some aspects may even temporarily worsen before showing signs of improvement—and for some things (such as developing somatic awareness) this is actually known to be a positive sign of progress! Moreover, many of the adaptations and skills you develop here will become a core part of your neurodivergent self-care long after recovery.

How does life look after recovery?

Life during burnout often involves decreased executive function, skill regression, and reduced tolerance to stimuli. While these symptoms can significantly improve with recovery, it's important to recognize that some changes may be more permanent. This is particularly common for individuals whose pre-burnout lifestyle involved heavy masking, significant internalized ableism, and work habits that didn't align with their brain's natural wiring.

For example, a late-diagnosed adult who relied on high masking and a rigid routine driven by discipline and willpower for several years may find that after burnout, they can no longer return to the same routines or systems that previously worked. Instead, they may need to relearn how to work in alignment with their brain's natural interest-based wiring. They might struggle to form new habits and instead need to explore alternative strategies for getting things done, without relying on habits or sheer discipline. They may also have different needs in terms of support structures, requiring adjustments and accommodations in their environment and external resources compared to their previous way of life.

Hopefully, after a successful recovery, the self-awareness, life adjustments, and strategies developed during the healing process will make future burnout episodes easier to manage. With this knowledge, you'll be better equipped to reduce their impact and recover more effectively.

12 key areas

Core areas for recovery

Overview

Here are the 12 key areas to consider when recovering from burnout. They are roughly ranked by time sensitivity and impact on recovery, but this is just a general guide; your specific situation is what matters most.

Strategic area	Time sensitivity	Impact on recovery	Notes
1. Reduce workload & responsibilities	Highest priority	High	Critical for preventing ongoing causes of burnout.
2. Increase rest	High priority	High	Sleep and other restorative activities.

3. Unmasking from ableism	High priority	High	Reduces habits, behaviors, expectations that consistently lead to burnout.
4. Leave any toxic environments	High priority	High	Avoid scenarios that constantly re-trigger the nervous system by default.
5. Reduce sensory overwhelm	High priority	High	Reduces everyday sources of nervous system dysregulation and overstimulation.
6. Energy pacing	High priority	High	Develop an understanding of your body's signals and energy levels, allowing you to set realistic expectations and avoid boom-or-bust cycles that exacerbate burnout.
7. Assess medical needs	High priority	Moderate	Consider short-term support options that provide extra leeway while dealing with the practical challenges of recovery.
8. Avoid overstimulation & understimulation	High priority	Moderate	Engaging in genuine interests is important for recovery, as both overstimulation and understimulation have negative impacts on recovery.

9. Expand support network	Medium priority	Moderate	Seek support from family, friends, mental health practitioners, educational resources, support groups, social media, etc.
10. Nervous system regulation	Ongoing	Moderate	Regulating and healing the nervous system is crucial, but takes time.
11. Overcome executive dysfunction	Ongoing	Moderate	Discover easier ways to meet your needs, without relying on discipline or willpower.
12. Seek public support services	Medium priority	Mild	Highly dependent on locality. Can be difficult to access support in a timely manner relative to the potential benefits.

You might notice that preventative measures rank at the top of this list, largely due to the fact that it's more effective to prevent sources of ongoing stress and overload than to deal with the consequences.

Deeper explanation

This section delves deeper into each area. While this guide offers a starting point, you may want to explore further by researching these terms for more in-depth articles or seeking personalized insights through neurodivergent communities, social media, educational content, or a mental health professional.

1. Reduce workload & responsibilities

Being in employment can be extremely taxing on neurodivergent brains and nervous systems. Some of us have never been able to work full time

or stay at the same job for years, and trying to do so can lead directly to burnout. That said, there are specific systematic characteristics of those jobs that result in burnout. Hypothetically, doing a job that is perfectly neurodivergent-friendly for your neurotype and consistent with your physical capacity might not lead to burnout, though it is extremely difficult to find such jobs, and it may be the case that the closest yet still crude resemblance is not working at all, or being self-employed and creating a role that's specific to your needs.

Other external demands can also contribute significantly to burnout, and these mainly include domestic responsibilities (chores, cooking, life admin, etc), and meeting social expectations. It can be highly beneficial to ask for help with these responsibilities, to set new expectations according to your sustainable capacity, explore different ways to have these needs met (e.g., swapping chores with someone based on individual preferences, hiring cleaners), and free yourself from social obligations that are particularly taxing to maintain (more about this under **unmasking**).

2. Increase rest

At the most basic level, people experiencing neurodivergent burnout often notice needing significantly more sleep in order to function without severe discomfort or brain fog. This can be a few hours of extra sleep over the week or even twice as much sleep as usual, depending on severity and stage of recovery.

However, sleep is a complicated topic, with many things to consider in terms of sleep quality and degree of restfulness. For example, it's possible to experience sensory overstimulation during sleep, due to temperature preferences, sensitivity to clothing fabrics or noise, digestion, interactions with blood sugar, and so on. Even sleep itself can be overstimulating in excess or depending on timing of sleep cycles.

Rest is not always passive; in fact, there are at least 7 different types of rest, including physical, mental, emotional, sensory, creative, social and spiritual. If sleep does not seem to be staving off exhaustion, it might be beneficial to explore other forms of rest and integrate a balance of different activities into your "toolkit".

Rest vs recovery

Rest helps you recharge after everyday exertion—even the invisible kind, like masking, decision-making, or sensory overwhelm. Recovery, on the

other hand, is needed after extreme strain or long-term depletion, when you've been pushing past your limits for too long. When we neglect rest and self-care, our baseline wears down. And once we reach that point, returning to baseline through recovery takes much longer than it would through regular rest cycles.

3. Unmasking from ableism

Unmasking and **ableism** are two essential topics when it comes to navigating life sustainably as a neurodivergent adult.

Unmasking refers to the process of shedding or reducing the social camouflage that neurodivergent people often use to conform to neurotypical expectations. Many autistic, ADHD, and otherwise neurodistinct individuals develop masking behaviors—consciously or unconsciously—throughout their lives to avoid judgment, rejection, or negative consequences. This can include suppressing stims, mimicking social norms, downplaying struggles, or overcompensating for executive dysfunction.

While masking can offer short-term safety in a world that often punishes neurodivergence, it tends to come at a significant cost. Long-term masking is linked to chronic stress, burnout, dissociation from one's authentic self, and mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Unmasking, then, is the process of reclaiming your natural way of thinking, behaving, and interacting with the world. While unmasking often refers to how you present yourself socially, it also encompasses a broader concept: embracing your authentic self, not the version you think you should be. This includes allowing your brain and body the space to express their neurological needs, responding to them with compassion, and intentionally designing a life that supports your true way of being.

In relation to burnout, masking can involve suppressing your body's signals (and thus preventing you from recognizing and meeting its needs), holding impossible expectations of yourself and the recovery process, remaining in toxic environments that you think you should be able to cope with, trying to stick to neuronormative expectations that you were previously able to endure, and having difficulty asking for help and support. All of these can contribute to the severity and duration of burnout.

Masking is deeply tied to **ableism**, which is the systemic discrimination and societal bias against disabled and neurodivergent people. It manifests in both overt ways (such as exclusion, stigma, and lack of accessibility) and covert ways (such as societal expectations that everyone should function in a specific, neurotypical way). In the context of neurodivergence, ableism enforces the idea that being visibly autistic, ADHD, or otherwise neurodistinct is something to "fix" or hide rather than accommodate.

Ableism fuels the pressure to mask. It teaches neurodivergent people that their natural ways of existing are wrong, disruptive, or unprofessional. It rewards compliance with neurotypical norms while punishing behaviors like **stimming**, needing extra processing time, or using alternative communication styles. Recognition of ableism can also be especially beneficial for neurodivergent individuals to be able to navigate support options such as healthcare, since ableist expectations are fairly common among health and mental health practices, sometimes leading to significant harm for those caught unaware.

Masking in the broader sense is also deeply tied to **internalized ableism**. When neurodivergent people grow up in an ableist society, they often internalize these messages, leading to self-policing, guilt, shame, and trauma around their natural tendencies. Unmasking can feel risky due to internalized ableism, which can be associated with fears of rejection, criticism, bullying, loss of opportunities, failure, imperfection, isolation, and uncertain self-discovery. Unmasked autistic people in particular can often have extreme degrees of internalized ableism which manifest as resistance to neuroaffirming self-care, as well as behaviors being deeply rooted in an intense yet subconscious fear that constantly drains energy and contributes to challenges with executive dysfunction.

The process of unmasking is neither easy nor quick. It is often complex, multi-layered, non-linear, and plays out on multiple different time scales (anywhere from weeks to decades). Unmasking is not inherently good or bad, but situational, as unmasking can certainly come with risks and is not safe in every context. For example, people tend to begin with social unmasking with their closest friends who they know will love and accept them regardless, whereas the skill and willingness to unmasking with strangers may not be practical or necessary, depending on one's unique journey and preferences. "Intentional masking" can also be a practical and informed option in some settings. However, *learning to unmask with yourself* is a fairly crucial skill, which can be simple (such as allowing

yourself to stim) or complex (learning to run your own business in a way that fully affirms your neurotype) depending on context.

While unmasking is a long-term journey, it's important to be able to recognize signs of ableism as a barrier that will come up during your journey of burnout. Connecting with other neurodivergent or disabled people—through friendships, online communities, or by following advocates we relate to—can be a powerful way to unlearn internalized ableism and feel less alone in our experiences.

4. Leave any toxic environments

A toxic environment is one where harmful behaviors, interactions, boundaries, or cultural norms are pervasive. A relationship can also be toxic if it involves consistently dysregulated emotional states. Importantly, "toxic" in this context isn't about right or wrong or assigning blame—just as land is a toxic environment for fish, that doesn't mean land itself is bad. Toxic environments contribute to burnout by triggering emotional and nervous system dysregulation, often undermining recovery efforts in other areas. Work, living environments, romantic relationships, friendships, social groups, and social media can all become toxic under certain conditions.

Sometimes, an environment that once felt okay can become unsafe due to changes in the health of our nervous system. Likewise, after recovering from burnout, the environments we can sustainably engage with may shift or expand. However, many neurodivergent individuals find themselves permanently more sensitive to toxic environments after significant progress in unmasking—even post-burnout. This increased sensitivity often comes from a deeper awareness of personal needs, self-care, and self-advocacy. While this is a positive form of growth, it can also introduce new challenges, as previously tolerable situations may now feel overwhelming or draining.

5. Reduce sensory overwhelm

Sensory sensitivities are a relatively common feature of neurodivergence, often linked to autism, ADHD, **sensory processing disorder**, and **giftedness**. Sensitivities can also develop due to **acquired neurodivergence**, such as from trauma or chronic mental health conditions. While all brains undergo synaptic pruning during development, autistic and ADHD brains experience less pruning, resulting in more neurons and greater sensory input than neurotypical

brains. This may explain the heightened ability to notice both relevant and irrelevant information, with the downside of struggling to filter out non-essential data in certain contexts. Examples of this include sensory sensitivities, increased distractibility, a low pain threshold, and a higher risk of tinnitus.

When the brain takes in more sensory information than it can process, it leads to **sensory overload**. For some autistic individuals, this overload can result in **meltdowns** or **shutdowns**. For others—including autistic people who don't experience meltdowns—sensory overload can cause symptoms like irritability, physical discomfort, difficulty focusing, restlessness, or overexcitement. **Sensory overwhelm** refers to the broader state that arises from sensory overload, combined with the body's overall response over time. Sensory overwhelm can have significant downstream effects, even when it feels mild or is hard to notice during the relevant activities (sometimes delayed awareness is compounded by factors like "masked **interoception**" and **delayed processing**). Even "low-level" sensory overwhelm can drain a person's energy and contribute to fatigue through various pathways that lead to dysregulation. For example, sensory drain can result in mental exhaustion, increased stress, muscle tension, chronic pain, executive dysfunction, and physical signs of tiredness.

Addressing sensory sensitivities is a key step for reducing neurodivergent burnout, as even an accumulation of “barely noticeable” sensory irritants through the day can result in a significant level of fatigue. Sensory issues can even reduce sleep quality and restfulness during sleep, when we’re not conscious!

It's important to note that sensory sensitivities are not always constant and can change over time in several ways:

1. Sensitivities that are relatively consistent can "flare up" during periods of overexposure, taking longer to settle back to baseline sensitivity once triggered.
2. Some forms of neurodivergence can present differently in adulthood compared to childhood, including shifts in sensory sensitivities and executive dysfunction.
3. Sensory sensitivities may intensify leading up to or during burnout, and new sensitivities can sometimes emerge.
4. Sensory issues can interact in complex and unpredictable ways with conditions involving chronic fatigue, such as fibromyalgia, POTS, ME/CFS, and others.

5. Removing sources of sensory overload can sometimes lead to a reduction in sensitivity over time.

You can read more about different types of sensory sensitivities and relevant examples here.

6. Energy pacing

Energy pacing (or **pacing systems**) is a strategy for managing fatigue by balancing activity and rest. On a broader scale, energy management involves building awareness of your energy levels, understanding the energy demands of different activities, and developing ways to engage in tasks with greater ease and lower energy costs. Effective energy management also includes flexible strategies for dealing with low energy states, knowing how to restore or conserve energy, and designing boundaries that align with your brain-body's natural dynamics rather than working against them.

There is no "correct" way to do energy management; what matters is finding what works for you. Many neurodivergent people (especially those with alexithymia, delayed processing, or high masking) struggle with sensing their own energy levels, leading to poor or non-existent boundaries around rest, pacing, and saying no. Without a way to track or predict energy fluctuations (either somatically and/or cognitively), it's easy to fall into boom-or-bust cycles of overexertion and recovery (which strain the nervous system) rather than maintaining sustainable cycles of exertion and rest.

While **spoon theory** is a common concept for pacing, some neurodivergent people may experience multiple forms of energy, such as emotional, intellectual, physical, and creative energy. Because everyone's energy patterns are unique, structured frameworks don't always fit perfectly. Some people benefit from concrete frameworks, while others simply need to understand key energy management principles.

Here are the three approaches to consider:

1. Try out energy pacing systems designed by neurodivergent people, with the option of making tweaks to suit your needs.
2. Create your own system by developing an understanding of your own energy ecosystem from the ground up, in combination with first principles of neurodivergent neurophysiology.

3. Get support from a neurodivergent therapist or coach with the same neurotype as you, who can help you figure out a flexible solution that best aligns with your needs.

You can learn more about specific pacing systems here.

7. Assess medical needs

It is fairly common for neurodivergent individuals to have multiple co-occurring chronic medical conditions. Some conditions can greatly worsen burnout or otherwise interfere with the steps you may want to take towards recovery. Engaging in the recovery process can itself be incredibly draining, due to the "emotional tax" involved with high uncertainty, high stakes, high novelty/unfamiliarity, and potential experiences of shame/grief involved in this journey. Unfortunately, some medical issues may take several months to address, due to delays in diagnosis, risks of misdiagnosis, or the potential need for trial and error to find the right medication.

One potential strategy is to prioritize short-term interventions that have a moderate chance of aiding in burnout recovery, either directly or by easing symptoms that otherwise prevent taking action. For example, some readily-available prescriptions can reduce depression-like symptoms or help decrease sensory overwhelm during autistic burnout. However, it is best to explore available options by discussing your needs with either a doctor, neuroaffirming therapist, or psychiatrist. Each of these practitioners may suggest different solutions.

8. Avoid overstimulation & understimulation

Overstimulation is an informal term used to describe a general state of overwhelm that can arise not only from sensory overload but also from the stimulation from activities in general. For example, engaging in social activities, intellectual hobbies, chores, exercise, and processing of emotions can all lead to overstimulation, which then requires time doing lower-stimulation activities in order to return to baseline. Pushing through overstimulation doesn't eliminate the need for rest—it usually just delays it, often increasing the total rest required than if breaks had been taken earlier.

An additional context to sensory sensitivities is whether an individual is sensory seeking or sensory avoiding, or both, as these can apply differently to different types of sensory inputs. For example, someone

may be soothed by the feeling of a weighted blanket (sensory seeking) while feeling icky when touched by strangers (sensory avoiding). The important point is that avoiding exposure to sensory information altogether is not necessarily a good idea, because our brain-body may have a **window of tolerance** that requires the right levels of the right types of stimulation—often in combination with each other.

This sense of balance (or how easy it is to fall out of balance) may be especially noticeable for people with ADHD and/or giftedness, where being **understimulated** can lead to boredom, frustration, and low motivation, which can in turn provoke behaviors that lead to further dysregulation, especially activities that cause overstimulation, provide quick dopamine, are addictive, or create chaos. It is possible to be both overstimulated and understimulated at the same time, and confusingly, being understimulated itself can in fact be overstimulating. For ADHDers, challenges with maintaining appropriate stimulation can be linked to dopamine and executive function, whereas for gifted people, it can be linked to a need to channel one's **overexcitabilities**.

Which sensory inputs or activities are overstimulating or understimulating varies greatly from person to person, and can also be context dependent (e.g. who is involved, what one's energy levels are to begin with, and what the topic/focus of the activity is). Engaging in genuine interests and playful activities can be a good starting point to explore positive levels of stimulation. Finding activities that provide the right levels of stimulation at given energy levels can be explored in conjunction with energy management. Note that overstimulation isn't inherently bad—engaging in healthy, sustainable, and satisfying activities can be overstimulating. For example, overstimulation is somewhat unavoided for autistic people. The key is recognizing that activity and rest go hand in hand, and learning to plan or adjust accordingly can help prevent periods of increased depletion from snowballing into a need for recovery, or at least not unexpectedly.

In conclusion, paying attention to stimulation levels is essential for avoiding general overwhelm. Too much overstimulation or understimulation can lead to the same issues as sensory overwhelm, as well as potentially triggering coping mechanisms that further disrupt regulation and rest.

9. Expand support network

Having a strong support network is crucial—not just during burnout or crisis, but for maintaining good mental health overall. Human beings are inherently social, and while some of us need more connection than others, none of us are meant to navigate life completely alone. Support networks provide emotional reassurance, practical help, validation, perspective shifts, accountability, and resilience, all of which can make a huge difference in both recovery and long-term well-being.

Our needs for support naturally fluctuate throughout life. During burnout, we may need extra help, whether that's from close friends, online communities, or educational material, or professionals. At other times, we might be more independent but still benefit from having a strong foundation of relationships as well as options that we may call upon less frequently.

There is no right way to build a support network, but there are several forms of support worth considering:

1. Personal connections: this includes trusted friends/colleagues, family and loved ones, community groups, and body doubling buddies.
2. Neurodivergent-affirming spaces: there are many online groups for neurodivergent people, including support groups, forums, social media platforms, apps, and mentorship networks. Simply being in these spaces can provide validation, encouragement, improve self-understanding, help processing of grief, identifying ableism, and finding pertinent suggestions. Seeking out neurodivergent influencers you relate to can be especially powerful for those who are late-diagnosed and seeking representation of your own experience within the diverse neurodivergent community. For many, this can provide a profound sense of validation—the reassurance that you weren't misdiagnosed and that there are others out there like you.
3. Professional support: neuroaffirming therapists, counsellors, psychiatrists, coaches, occupational therapists, nutritionists, doctors, and employment advocates can help with specific areas of challenge. It is very highly recommended to engage with professionals who specialize in neurodivergence clients, due to a high prevalence of professionals who lack relevant expertise in helping neurodivergent people, sometimes having a risk of unknowingly causing harm or otherwise being ineffective.

4. Practical and logistical support: There are many apps and tools that can serve as external support structures, as well as some options for getting help with household tasks, admin work, or meal prep via paid services or community organizations.
5. Crisis support: Emergency services, helplines, and crisis text services can offer immediate emotional support when needed. For more tailored support, it can also be helpful to have specific people you know that you can call for certain types of support. Sometimes this is not necessarily a familiar friend, but a community contact or someone in a peer support network.

Professional support

Expanding your support network takes time. It can be valuable to consider which types of support have lower risk while having a greater contribution to your burnout recovery. For example, having close friends is highly valuable, yet making new friends can be a highly uncertain ordeal. In comparison, finding a therapist or coach is an option with much greater reliability and availability, but is expensive as a longer-term support. In cases of severe burnout, having specialized support can potentially make a difference of months or years in recovery time.

In terms of therapy and coaching, here are some practical suggestions for navigating available options:

- The vast majority of therapists and coaches around the world are not trauma-aware and neuroaffirming, meaning that their approaches do not directly support the nervous system, and they may make recommendations that make things worse due to ableist expectations. Cognitive restructuring in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and traditional productivity systems (based on discipline, habits, and willpower) are popular approaches that are known to be harmful for some neurodivergent people.
- In terms of talk therapy, ACT and DBT are mainstream modalities that are considered safer for neurodivergent people, although it's very highly recommended to pick therapists with lived experience of neurodivergence, as there is a higher potential for mutual understanding, similar communication styles, and therapeutic connection.
- Somatic therapies such as EMDR and brainspotting tend to involve far less talking (sometimes none at all) and therefore the

risks of engaging with neurotypical therapists are much lower. Somatic therapies are designed to release trauma stored in the body, and are anecdotally considered more effective than talk therapies (which generally do not have a proposed physiological mechanism for releasing trauma from the body).

- Coaching is largely an unregulated profession, and there are many different styles of coaching. While general life coaching is widely available, you're more likely to benefit from providers who specialize in niche areas and audiences, catering to topics such as burnout recovery, learning about your specific neurotype(s), executive dysfunction, somatic practices, neurodivergent health/nutrition, and employment support. Many coaches do not have formal coaching qualifications, and this often does not negatively impact the quality of support when lived experience, self-study, and experience with the target audience can provide strengths that qualifications do not.
- Neurodivergent mental health practitioners form only a small fraction of all practitioners worldwide. Despite difficulties accessing therapists in general (especially through funded services), finding online therapists greatly reduces this problem, especially if self-funding is possible. Online therapy is generally as effective as in-person therapy, and is often preferred by neurodivergent people due to convenience and being able to unmask more in the safety of their familiar home environment.
- Therapy tends to be focused on understanding and processing the past, whereas coaching tends to be focused on taking action in the present. Coaching may be more suitable in the short-term for people needing to overcome specific practical challenges such as work-related goals or developing active self-care.
- Therapists and coaches often offer free 10-15 minute "discovery calls" to help the client gauge whether working together could be a good fit. Some practitioners even offer the first session free, with no obligation to continue.
- Sometimes it takes a few sessions for both parties to get a feel for the working relationship, but as a general of thumb, the client should ideally receive clear value and a sense of good fit within the first 1-3 sessions. There's an anecdotal stereotype of doing therapy for years and finally having a breakthrough after a slow and drawn-out process. While this is a fairly common trajectory for therapists to offer, it is generally a case of ineffective approaches and poor fit.

- It is often recommended to try 3-5 different practitioners before committing to one, as it's important to "know what's out there" and gain a relative sense of what a good fit feels like. The working relationship and connection can make a big difference in terms of effectiveness, in some cases mattering more than the specific type of approaches themselves.
- Your needs can change at any time, and you are entitled to end a therapeutic or coaching relationship at any time. Good practitioners can help you build up skills and awareness for yourself so that you need them less and less over time. If you have concerns about your progress or not having your needs met, it's important to be up front, so that you can recognize whether the relationship is working well and the practitioner may have a chance to adjust to your needs.
- Unfortunately, it can be necessary to keep an eye out for red flags among therapists and coaches, especially neurotypical providers, due to the fact that neurodivergent individuals can be more vulnerable as victims to manipulation, grooming, and inappropriate boundaries.
- It is usually in your best interests to "shop around" among different providers, not only to explore different approaches and practitioners, but for financial and logistical reasons too. It is not unusual at all for session fees to vary wildly, not only locally but also internationally due to relative currency power and cost of living. For example, fully booked providers in the US, Netherlands, and Canada may be charging as much as 5x the hourly rate of lower-end providers in the UK and New Zealand. Cost is often a reflection of locality, demand and experience rather than competence, so privately funded individuals may wish to consider providers from other regions.

There are also some cheaper alternatives to 1:1 therapy or coaching such as joining coaching groups or support groups. These groups cost less than individual sessions and often follow an educational program, thus laying theoretical foundations for self-care while also having avenues for sharing about challenges and receiving tailored feedback. Some therapists run small groups for adults that are designed as a container both for learning and for making friends who are going on similar stages of their journey of neurodivergent self-discovery.

Lastly, the most inexpensive but still potentially impactful options include self-therapy books, online seminars/workshops, and courses. Many of

these are relatively inexpensive (similar to the cost of a book) or even free to join and can still be very high quality. These options may be great for those with tighter budget constraints, a passion for learning, and enough bandwidth or motivation to stay focused with less external accountability. Depending on the individual, self-therapy is not necessarily less effective than traditional therapy, and can offer significantly accelerated learning. That said, self-learning isn't a realistic option for everyone, as neurodivergent brains during burnout can come with more severe executive dysfunction and a higher need for external accountability than under normal circumstances.

10. Nervous system regulation

When you're in burnout, rest alone often isn't enough to feel better. You might sleep for hours but still wake up exhausted. You might take a break from work, yet small tasks still feel overwhelming. This isn't just about being tired—it's a sign that your **nervous system** is dysregulated.

Your nervous system controls your energy, stress response, and ability to recover. When it's out of balance, you may feel stuck in **fight-or-flight mode** (anxious, restless, wired but tired) or **shutdown mode** (exhausted, numb, unmotivated). To truly heal from burnout, you need more than just rest—you need to *actively guide your nervous system back to a regulated state* where you can recover, recharge, and rebuild your capacity to function.

Under the other key areas of this guide, we have already explored the need to make adjustments to reduce sensory overload and other things that end up triggering the nervous system. Reducing the demands (especially extreme ones!) we place on the nervous system is the more obvious part of the equation. However, we also need to have ways to soothe and heal the nervous system. While this in itself is a multifaceted topic, let's consider two main targeted approaches:

1. Try out various techniques that help you connect with your body, feel more grounded, and regulate the nervous system. For example, you may explore **somatic exercises** (e.g. shaking, stretching, self touch, and **breathwork** type exercises designed to release stress and tension, sometimes in combination with mindfulness), **vagus nerve stimulation** exercises (deep breathing, singing or humming, eye movement, self-massage), various forms of movement (dancing, yoga, stimming, etc), and relaxing forms of sensory activities (deep pressure, massage,

baths, aromatherapy, meditation, laughter, **havening**). There are literally hundreds of activities and techniques you can choose from to try out. You may only need to find a few that work well for you and that feel like an activity you can look forward to, rather than a responsible chore to perform. For example, meditation is quite popular, and you might find that doing meditation sessions is enjoyable, while simultaneously finding it difficult to remember and initiate sessions regularly due to internal resistance or **demand avoidance**. Executive function may be particularly limited during burnout, such that it may be impossible to form new habits. If this is the case, meditation may simply not be accessible and sustainable for you. It's still valid to keep it as an occasional option, but you might have better results trying a bunch of different things until you find something that just clicks intuitively without resistance. For example, if you love dancing and music, you may be able to develop a natural association between specific feelings of anxiety, stress, or restlessness and the option of doing a **somatic shaking** dance to a song.

2. It is often the case that a component of nervous system dysregulation stems from **unprocessed trauma**. It may be beneficial to engage in **somatic therapies**, which aim to release stored trauma and stress, and thus releasing the nervous system from past experiences that would otherwise continue to trigger the five F trauma responses. **EMDR** and **Brainspotting** are two highly recommended modalities of somatic therapy for neurodivergent people. Although no modality is guaranteed to work for any given individual, somatic therapies have two important advantages over more common therapies: they are **trauma-aware** (most **talk therapies** are not, and inherently cannot heal the nervous system) and do not tend to require expertise with neurodivergent clients in order to be effective (whereas talk therapies can be actively harmful when the practitioner lacks knowledge or experience with neurodiversity). That said, somatic therapy sessions can be draining, and the benefits are longer term, so this might not always be a priority during burnout recovery.

An accessible entry point to consider is the *7 strategies for completing the stress cycle*, which offers familiar ideas for regulating stress: physical activity, breathing, positive social interaction, laughter, affection, creative self-expression, and crying.

Lastly, it's also worth exploring the role of nutrition and medication, as both can significantly impact nervous system regulation for some individuals.

11. Overcome executive dysfunction

Executive function refers to a set of skills including planning, prioritizing, problem solving, initiating tasks, switching between tasks, staying focused, emotional regulation, impulse control, working memory, organization, flexible thinking, multitasking, and self-monitoring. In totality, these skills are basically used to manage every aspect of our lives. **Executive dysfunction** refers to a range of cognitive and behavioral difficulties associated with these executive functioning skills, which can look like:

- struggling to get things done
- poor time management
- **neurodivergent inertia** (difficulty initiating, stopping, or switching between tasks)
- time blindness or being chronically late
- forgetting tasks, details, deadlines
- decision paralysis and overthinking
- procrastination

Although many neurodivergent people experience executive dysfunction as a default, executive dysfunction can also manifest as a more frequent or more intense symptom during burnout, especially alongside fatigue or overwhelm.

There is limited evidence to suggest that executive functioning skills themselves can be systematically trained and improved with any reliability for adults. However, it is certainly possible to explore strategies, build scaffolding around one's executive functioning, find good support systems, and discover easier ways to get things done. This topic is often called **executive function coaching** and can often be found as a service offered by therapists and coaches, especially targeted towards ADHD folks. Executive function coaching could be considered a subset of productivity but mainly for neurodivergent people and a bit more fundamental in terms of the skills being developed.

There are many potential ways to support your executive functioning. Some popular examples include using planners, visual aids, to-do lists,

productivity apps, **distraction blockers**, calendar reminders, **pomodoro technique**, **body doubling**, **accountability buddies**, and so on.

However, there's another important angle to explore beyond systems and strategies. The reason that neurotypical brains tend to perform well at executive function is because neurotypicals have importance-based nervous systems, where dopamine is released in anticipation of doing important (but potentially boring) tasks, which helps with task initiation. Contrast this with **interest-based nervous systems** (usually associated with ADHD, but also to the autistic brain with **monotropism**). Having interest-based wiring also overlaps with the concept of being a multipotentialite, which describes people who engage in a variety of creative interests, often hopping between them in a seemingly chaotic and novelty-seeking way, sometimes struggling to stick with one career or to finish projects that have been started. The ableist "solution" to being a multipotentialite is to force oneself along linear trajectories and to try to finish one project at a time via discipline. However, this tends to fall short in the sense that the disciplined approach isn't sustainable, and can lead to burnout. Interest-based brains do not naturally operate at a linear pace, but rather in cyclical patterns involving flow and sprints, followed by recharging and even boredom. While there is some inherent unpredictability to these patterns of activity, it can be further obscured by trying to impose neuronormative expectations on them.

Fully accommodating an interest-based nervous system is not always practical due to the practicalities of existing in capitalist economies. However, partial accommodation can still help ease stress, increase enjoyment, improve creative productivity, maintain regulation, and even provide energy in a way that facilitates recovery from burnout. Ideas for self-accommodation:

- Recalibrating expectations based on actual energy levels and costs, rather than neuronormative standards of life
- Outsourcing tasks that are particularly costly in terms of energy, attention, or executive function (e.g. asking others to manage organizational tasks, paying for regular cleaning services, asking for help or swapping chores, buying a robot vacuum, getting things delivered to reduce errands)
- Adapting deadlines and project structures in a way that appeals to your brain, as opposed to triggering demand avoidance
- Understanding that **procrastination** is usually a symptom of emotional or nervous system dysregulation, and being able to

distinguish this from times when we simply need to recharge between activities due to low energy, processing needs, overwhelm, or fatigue
- When interest suddenly wanes in a topic of perceived importance, trusting that interest will “cycle back” to this topic or project at a later time if it continues to be relevant or suddenly becomes urgent
- Understanding that an interest-based nervous system needs novelty as a part of regulation, such that switching of interests is sometimes just the body’s way of trying to get what it needs, as opposed to a problematic behavior to be stamped out.

In conclusion, while neurodivergent executive functioning can certainly come with its share of challenges, it can be useful to distinguish between executive dysfunction arising due to nervous system dysregulation, as opposed to the natural functioning of an interest-based nervous system. As abstract as this may sound, our nervous systems are a core part of ourselves, and just as our thoughts sometimes conflict with our feelings, the way we think things “should” be or that “make the most sense” (due to ableism) can contradict what our body actually needs. Embracing our natural cognitive and processing styles can also yield natural productivity benefits such as creative flow states, hyperfixations, and the ability to become an expert in something within two weeks, this being the flip side of not being able to complete uninteresting tasks. Lastly, learning to work with your brain can not only be integral to preventing burnout but can also aid recovery through its interaction with energy and stimulation levels.

12. Seek public support services

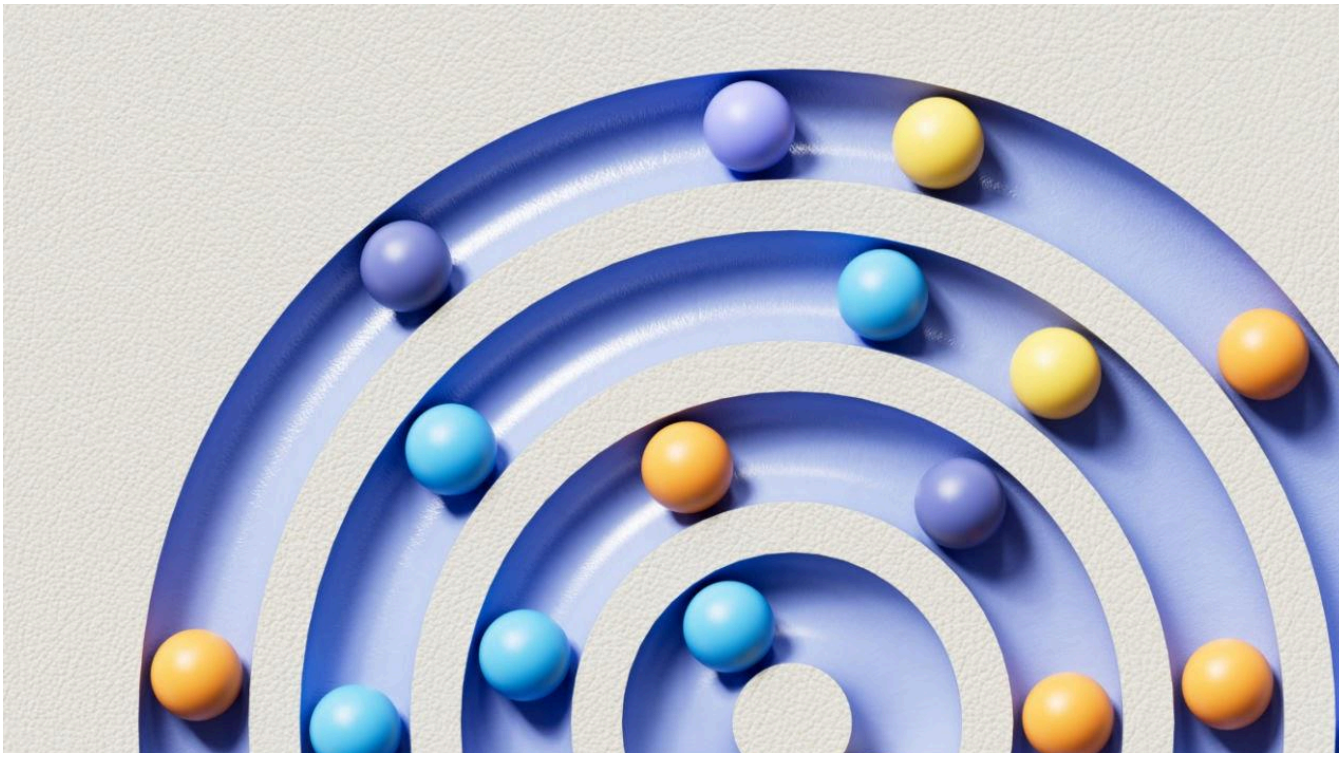
Seeking public support services for neurodivergent burnout recovery can be a valuable option, but accessibility varies widely depending on your location. Some regions offer disability accommodations, financial aid, therapy, or occupational support tailored to neurodivergent individuals, while others have limited or nonexistent resources. Even when services are available, the process of accessing them can be daunting—often requiring extensive paperwork, long wait times, and advocacy to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. This can be especially difficult when you're already in burnout, as executive dysfunction, fatigue, and overwhelm can make it harder to complete the necessary steps. If you’re considering this route, it may help to seek guidance from local disability organizations, peer support groups, or neurodivergent-friendly

professionals who understand the system and can help you navigate it with less stress.

On a side note, it may be worth exploring private services, such as employer-provided mental health support or income and disability insurance.

Next steps

Next steps



What should I prioritize? What are the next steps?

If you made it here, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the many different avenues for self-care and recovery. Recovery from burnout is messy, and it's okay for it to be messy. The last thing you need is another source of ableism about "what you should be doing". The first thing is to take a deep breath and give yourself permission to do or not do anything suggested in this guide. You have your own journey and your own pace, and it's nice to approach things from the perspective of self-empowerment rather than obligation. Do you feel inspired to explore or take action in any of the 12 key areas, even if it may feel unfamiliar or daunting? If so, you may like to pick one or two things you'd like to focus on, and trust that there will be time to engage in other areas as well, without needing to address them immediately. All things take time, so please remember to be compassionate towards yourself and listen to your body along the way as you consider your next steps.

Follow-up

I wrote this guide because I've experienced severe autistic burnout firsthand—at one point, I needed 14 hours of sleep a day and felt completely drained by even the most basic tasks, like showering or eating, despite having no external demands like a job or meal prep. I know how overwhelming and disorienting burnout can be, so I wanted to create a resource that offers quick clarity and reassurance—the kind of guide I wish I had when I was first navigating it.

The concepts in this guide come from a mix of sources: research on neurodiversity, lived experiences, and burnout recovery coaching I've received. My goal is to distill these insights into something accessible and actionable. If any part of this guide resonates with you—whether it sparks an "aha" moment or highlights something you'd like to see covered—I'd love to hear your thoughts.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or personal experiences you'd like to share, feel free to reach out! You can message me on Instagram (@neurospicytakes) or leave a note through my contact form. Your feedback helps make this resource even more useful.

Burnout coaching

I'm a life fulfillment coach with lived experience in giftedness, autism, neurodivergent burnout, chronic illness, and other intersectional challenges. I specialize in helping gifted and neurodivergent adults navigate the obstacles that stand in the way of a fulfilling life—focusing on sustainable, authentic ways of living and truly thriving rather than just surviving.

If you feel that you might benefit from **personalized online coaching support** on your journey, I offer a **free initial session** where we can explore what might be most helpful for you. There's no pressure or commitment—just a space to see if this feels like a good fit. You can learn more or get in touch through my coaching website: giftedadultcoaching.com

Other resources

If you're looking for more structured learning materials on burnout, the following resources may be worth exploring:

For autistic burnout, *The Autistic Burnout Workbook* by Dr. Megan Anna Neff—a neurodivergent psychologist and creator of Neurodivergent Insights—offers a thoughtful

and practical approach. Her work is known for being clear, systematic, accessible, and grounded in both clinical insight. It may especially resonate with those who appreciate a more structured or academically oriented lens. Dr. Neff also offers a wide range of accessible resources—including workbooks, infographics, and clinical tools—covering many neurodivergence-related topics, available in her online neurodivergent shop.

For a broader, community-informed perspective on neurodivergence, disability, and burnout, Janae Elisabeth (also known as *Trauma Geek*) facilitates virtual study groups that draw from collective lived experience. Janae uses research-storytelling to explore neurodivergent identity, nervous system regulation, non-pathologizing views, and **self-accommodation**, creating learning spaces that are intentionally neuro-affirming. Many of her insights and mini-essays can be found on her Facebook page.

Note: I am not affiliated with the above authors, I'm simply a consumer and admirer of their work.

Getting unstuck

Getting unstuck

Sometimes we try to be proactive and do all the sensible things, yet we seem to collide against some invisible barrier that prevents us from staying on track or feeling positive changes. This section attempts to address some of the common traps that catch people unaware in spite of their proactive efforts and cognitive awareness. These barriers can be especially relevant when recovering from severe and prolonged burnout for the first time.

Unreliable symptoms

The challenge of identifying health issues can be intensified during burnout, as nervous system dysregulation often creates inconsistent symptom patterns that can obscure underlying causes and confuse attempts at solution-testing. For instance, it can be tricky to assess whether dietary changes affect your energy levels when your baseline energy fluctuates unpredictably even on a stable diet. Keeping a journal of activities, symptoms, and potential triggers can help you trace patterns retrospectively and identify what may have contributed to unexpected fatigue. Over time, this practice also supports the development of interoceptive awareness. As recovery progresses, signals that once felt chaotic often reveal underlying patterns. What previously seemed like random fluctuations may gradually become recognizable as meaningful communication from your body. This process resembles learning to understand an infant's needs: what begins as ambiguous or overwhelming becomes clearer through consistent observation, patient attention, and compassionate care.

Changing needs

A common trap is assuming our needs are relatively stable. In reality, both our "spoons" (resources) and our needs can fluctuate, not just day to day, but within a single day. Even things we think of as fixed—like allergies—can come and go. Relying on long-held preferences or routines as a proxy for current needs can lead us to overlook key contributors to burnout. This is especially true when it comes to interoception and nervous system regulation: symptoms can shift dramatically depending on the attention we give them, even if the underlying causes remain unchanged.

Doing vs being

As with self-compassion, recovery is a holistic process. It doesn't happen just by thinking the right thoughts or taking the right actions. What's needed is an everyday way of being that's less stressful and more aligned with your needs and values. At times, it might feel like there's a conflict between your cognitive values and your body's needs. But bodily needs aren't separate from your emotions and values—they're part of the same system. While it's important to decide what matters to you, it's equally important to respect the boundaries your body sets to protect you from overextending. In other words, recovery calls for a two-way collaboration between head and heart, with both offering valid guidance for living sustainably.

Perfectionism

Healing from burnout is inherently messy. It requires learning about yourself and your environment—often in ways that challenge your usual ways of thinking, feeling, and coping. Dr Becky Kennedy describes the space between "knowing" and "not knowing" as *the learning space*—a frustrating, uncertain zone that is actually a sign of growth. Discomfort here isn't a sign of failure; it's often just a natural part of adjustment. (That said, there's no need to maximize discomfort—only to recognize it when it shows up.)

A common trap in this process is perfectionism. When burnout makes everything feel urgent, it's easy to fall into analysis paralysis—trying to fix everything at once or searching for "the right" way to heal. But progress doesn't come from perfect plans. It comes from taking small steps, even when some of them don't work out. Missteps are inevitable. No matter how smart or diligent you are, you'll make choices that don't align—but that's part of the process. Trying to be perfect often leads to more stress and more burnout, not less.

A helpful lens here is the four stages of competence:

1. **Unconscious incompetence** – not knowing what you don't know.
2. **Conscious incompetence** – realizing where you're stuck or misaligned.
3. **Conscious competence** – practicing new patterns with effort and intention.
4. **Unconscious competence** – integrating new habits until they become second nature.

Most of the areas in this guide do not come with quick fixes. They involve long-term shifts that unfold over months or years. You might clearly see what needs to change and still struggle to make it happen. It's frustrating when you're not reaping any visible benefits from the effort you're putting in. (Or sometimes, we're simply not accustomed to

noticing and celebrating the subtle but significant progress we make.) But that's often what building awareness feels like, and unfortunately there's no sustainable way to jump straight from occasional awareness to being fully competent on autopilot. That middle space—where the gap between where you are and where you want to be feels most painful—isn't failure, and it doesn't last forever. Staying in that space (within your window of tolerance), showing up when you can, and practicing imperfectly is what eventually leads to real, sustainable change.

An essential part of practicing imperfection is self-compassion—sometimes regarded as the antidote to perfectionism.

Control Strategies

Some neurotypes, such as autism, often come with a heightened need for structure, predictability, and certainty. One common way to meet this need is by exerting control—through logic, theory, or systems. Control itself isn't inherently harmful; in fact, it can be a powerful form of self-accommodation. But when control is used in service of masking—especially without deeper self-awareness—it can turn into a double-edged sword.

A common example is the struggle with procrastination. When you're stuck, what's the more effective solution: designing a rigid schedule with milestone deadlines? Or tuning into your body to explore what emotions you're trying to avoid, and offering yourself compassion for not being ready to confront them yet?

Highly masked individuals with internalized ableism often default to the former. It appears productive on the surface, but over time, it tends to amplify shame, guilt, and burnout. Attempting to force progress through inflexible systems can give the illusion of competence and control—while undermining both. This is especially deceptive because the negative effects are often delayed. You might push through a major task and feel accomplished, only to crash days later. Without mindfulness, you may never connect the crash to the overexertion, since you "felt fine" during the sprint.

Control becomes harmful when it overrides acceptance, suppresses valid needs, or imposes unrealistic standards—especially when those standards are shaped by internalized ableism about how things "should" be. Often, what's truly needed is not tighter control but the flexibility to set realistic expectations—and the self-compassion to honor when those expectations aren't met for valid, human reasons. Yet in neuronormative culture, control strategies are often glorified, reinforced by the belief that idealized notions of success are always achievable with enough effort.

Self-compassion

Sometimes we try to do all the “right” things—we follow the advice, implement sensible strategies, maybe even sustain them for a while—only to hit an unexplained wall or crash. These blocks can feel baffling, especially when we think we’ve done everything correctly. But often, they arise from a hidden missing piece: the emotional context around our actions.

Behavior doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Sustainable change isn’t just about what we do, but how we relate to ourselves while doing it. We often forget (or were never taught) that growth and healing require more than external actions—they require care. For example, we may forget to:

- **Offer ourselves compassion instead of criticism**
- **Give ourselves permission to be exactly where we are**, instead of measuring against where we hoped or expected to be
- **Allow ourselves to feel what we’re feeling**, rather than defaulting to denial or repression.

Imagine two versions of yourself making the same practical choices—but in one version, you speak to yourself with kindness and understanding, while in the other, you hold yourself to an unforgiving standard and withhold compassion. The external actions may look identical, but the long-term impact is not. Sustainable behavior requires your head and heart working together—not against each other.

If self-compassion feels unfamiliar or even uncomfortable, you’re not alone. It can feel unnatural at first, especially if you’ve learned to motivate yourself through pressure, perfectionism, or criticism. The good news is: it doesn’t have to be all-or-nothing. Even small shifts in how you relate to yourself momentarily can add up over time and pave the way for deeper change. For example:

- You might gently acknowledge, “I’m not perfect—and I don’t need to be”
- You could try a mini-experiment: “What if I did this one thing as a non-committal act of self-kindness, just to see how it feels?”
- Or you might simply say, “I’m not ready to be self-compassionate right now—but I’d like to become more open to it.”

These “soft” gestures can often feel harder to accept than the familiar edge of self-criticism. But how long can you keep pushing yourself through intolerance for imperfection? And what are you giving up by rejecting self-compassion? Often, it’s the very things we’re most longing for: emotional safety, authenticity, connection, belonging, satisfaction, peace—and the foundation for sustainable growth.

“Neurodivergent grief”

One of the most overlooked barriers to healing is unprocessed grief. Progress often depends not just on adding new strategies, but also on making space to feel what hasn’t been felt yet. What happens if you never grieve? You eventually get stuck. Emily and Amelia Nagoski express this beautifully: “Emotions are tunnels. You have to move all the way through them to get to the light at the end. When we get stuck inside an emotion, it burns us out. We can’t move on from rage or fear or sadness, and we keep ruminating on the same pain over, worrying at it like a loose tooth.”

When we think of grief, we often associate it with the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship. But for many neurodivergent people, grief can take on quieter, harder-to-name forms—grief for unmet needs, lost time/energy, missed opportunities, rejection, loss of identity, injustice, chronic exhaustion, broken dreams, or a persistent sense of not belonging.

These more subtle forms of grief often linger unacknowledged, especially for those who’ve had to mask heavily. Unprocessed grief doesn’t always feel like sadness—it can show up as numbness, procrastination, chronic anxiety, or a relentless push to “keep going.” The problem is, grief doesn’t disappear just because we don’t name or feel it. It accumulates. The emotions are still there, even if we’ve trained ourselves not to notice.

Over time, that unprocessed grief can cloud our judgment and make it harder to give ourselves what we truly need. Processing it is often a necessary precursor to letting go, or to discovering the right path forward. Some mindfulness or therapeutic practices can even backfire when they try to force release without first acknowledging the emotional weight that’s still waiting to be heard.

Giving ourselves space to grieve is not the same as wallowing. It’s about meeting what’s already there—below the surface—whether or not we’ve named it. When we ignore those emotions, they tend to drive us from the shadows. But when we face them with honesty and care, we can reconnect with our values, tend to our wounds, and offer ourselves compassion. And from there, we can begin to move forward—lighter, clearer, and more whole.

What does it look like to process grief?

Grief is deeply personal, and the process of working through it may take some trial and error. There's no single "right" way—it’s about discovering what feels natural and meaningful to you. Here are some possibilities to explore:

- **Naming unmet hopes or expectations**—acknowledging the dreams, identities, or experiences that didn’t unfold the way you needed.

- **Revisiting emotions from recent events**—especially the ones that slipped by unprocessed because life moved too fast.
- **Connecting with your inner child**—through creative play, tenderness, or revisiting parts of yourself that were once dismissed.
- **Creating a grief ritual**—whether it's eating ice cream with a friend, lighting a candle, listening to a sad playlist, or watching a comfortingly tragic movie.
- **Expressing your emotions for closure**—journaling, speaking to ChatGPT, or even reaching out to someone who hurt you (if this might bring you clarity or peace).

Mindfulness

Burnout, at its core, is the result of repeatedly exceeding one's sustainable capacity. For neurodivergent individuals who mask heavily or don't know how to manage burnout, the first foundational gap is often a lack of fluency in reading their body's internal signals. To build a lifestyle with a high degree of autonomy, an individual needs, at minimum:

- The ability to sense and understand the body's cues when approaching or exceeding capacity
- The ability to recognize what calm, regulation, and recharge actually feel like in their own body.

Once these two cornerstones are in place, even if crudely, it becomes possible to enhance awareness, understand the body's limits, predict the consequences of choices and environments, and make empowered, informed decisions. But without them, burnout prevention becomes a blind guessing game, and recovery a purely reactive endeavor.

A useful analogy: some people are born without the ability to feel physical pain—a condition that almost seems convenient at first, but in fact comes with serious risks. Broken bones go unnoticed. Infections spread unchecked. Wounds fester because the body gives no signal that something's wrong. Without pain as a guide, even minor injuries can become life-threatening. The same is true for emotional and sensory overwhelm: when you can't feel the warning signs, damage accumulates quietly—until it erupts into full-blown burnout.

The good news is that awareness can often be rebuilt. For many, the signals are still there—just buried or misinterpreted. The nervous system may have resorted to more ambiguous messengers, like digestive issues, anxiety, or fatigue, simply because earlier signals were ignored for too long. Rebuilding awareness takes intention and practice. And it helps to understand why this awareness got blunted in the first place:

- **Emotional numbing**: "We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions" (Brené Brown). All

emotions have value; some may feel better than others, but each one carries useful information.
- **Ableism and gaslighting**: Many neurodivergent people are subtly or explicitly told their experiences aren't valid, leading to chronic masking and mistrust of their own senses.
- **Lack of emotional modeling**: People who feel deeply are often not taught how to manage those feelings, and may come to see emotions as inconvenient or overwhelming, rather than finding positive ways to channel and express them.
- **Unsafe environments**: When expressing basic needs was met with disapproval or punishment in the past, the nervous system may have learned it was safer to tune out than to tune in.

Reconnecting with your body's signals requires three things:

1. Removing sources of unsafety (as much as possible)
2. Creating and reinforcing psychological safety
3. Engaging in intentional, regular practices to check in with yourself.

This is where mindfulness comes in—not necessarily in the traditional, "empty-your-mind" sense of meditation, but as any practice that brings awareness to your body, emotions, or surroundings in the present moment. Without it, we're like people without pain receptors for our energy—overexertion becomes inevitable. Mindfulness becomes even more essential when we have to contend with additional challenges, such as delayed processing, which can further complicate our awareness of physical and emotional states.

Importantly, mindfulness is not the same as meditation. Meditation is just one branch of a much broader tree. There are thousands of mindfulness techniques—and you may only need a few that feel natural, resonant, and dependable. In that sense, it's often more helpful to explore widely rather than commit too early to something that just feels "okay." As an example, you don't need to persevere through years of Zen meditation hoping it will eventually click. It might—but it also might not. If you try 10 distinctly different mindfulness practices instead, chances are at least one will feel significantly more effective right away than months of pushing through mild discomfort. In the spirit of self-accommodation, if a method feels only vaguely pleasant or requires external pressure to maintain, that's feedback worth listening to, rather than pushing through. Some things can also be worth trying twice, but at different times in your life. Maybe Zen meditation isn't right for where you are currently, but it might be a better fit later in your journey.

Do you need a formal mindfulness practice? Not inherently. The only real requirement is that you have ways to check in with yourself that feel accessible and aren't driven by

shame or “shoulds”—methods you’ll actually use without relying on willpower or discipline. Examples of informal mindfulness strategies:

- Playing music that matches what you think you might be feeling, as a way to explore your emotions
- Taking a walk and noticing your thoughts or bodily sensations as they arise
- Writing down what’s on your mind, without any pressure to act on it
- Practicing intentional boredom—e.g., sitting without a specific task, and seeing what happens.

These all count as mindfulness practices, even if they don’t fit popular stereotypes. Formal approaches can also be helpful—particularly if you seek more structure, resources, or a supportive community. In short: you don’t necessarily need mindfulness™, just a few dependable strategies for regularly tuning in, ones that work for you, whether or not they’re formal or guided approaches.. Without this, burnout becomes much harder to manage or prevent.

One final note: If you consider yourself emotionally sensitive, empathic, gifted, or a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), your need for mindfulness may be greater, not lesser. Mainstream advice often assumes that sensitivity is the problem and should be suppressed. But the issue is rarely the depth itself—it’s the lack of well-known tools and safe environments to channel it. When emotional depth goes unsupported, it leads to inner chaos, existential fatigue, and burnout—not because it’s “too much,” but because you haven’t been taught how to work with what you were given.

Coping vs acceptance

As we become more attuned to the difficult emotions and sensations we experience, it can sometimes feel overwhelming—and our instinctual coping mechanisms can kick in. The challenge lies in distinguishing between coping and genuinely addressing these emotions. For example:

- If you're feeling upset and decide to play video games, are you soothing yourself through relaxation and release, or are you avoiding the emotions and distracting yourself?
- When you're new to a group and engage in small talk despite disliking it, are you consciously adapting to establish safe boundaries while you build trust and rapport, or are you masking in a way that prevents genuine connection?
- If you experience chronic pain and numb its intensity because the pain is unavoidable, are you making the experience more bearable, or are you resisting the feelings that are present regardless?

Recognizing the difference between coping and acceptance is important. Coping can sometimes provide temporary relief, but true acceptance involves sitting with emotions and sensations, allowing them to move through you without avoidance. This understanding is a crucial step in learning how to respond to life's challenges in a way that supports long-term well-being.

In the case of chronic fatigue and pain, numbing the physical sensations can be counterproductive. Not only does it reduce your awareness of your physical state (leading to suboptimal decisions), but it can also inadvertently intensify your overall suffering. This idea is often highlighted in mindfulness practices, expressed by the equation: suffering equals pain times resistance.

When you're used to long-term masking, your instinctive behaviors can become misaligned with what you actually need. However, it's also important to pick your battles. It's okay to defer processing certain emotions until you have the resources to handle them—sometimes, pacing yourself and allowing space for healing is just as crucial as facing everything head-on.

Final thoughts

Burnout recovery, especially for neurodivergent individuals, isn't about returning to a previous version of yourself. It's about discovering a new way of living and engaging with the world—one that's more responsive, sustainable, and aligned with who you truly are. While it can feel like a detour or a breakdown to recover from, it's also an invitation to rebuild on your own terms, with greater honesty and compassion than before.

Long-term growth often involves periods of pause, slowness, or even temporary regression. The path forward isn't linear or neatly packaged. It's a process of attunement, experimentation, and the willingness to meet yourself where you are, again and again. The goal isn't to optimize, control, or perfect yourself, but to cultivate inner connection, self-trust, and a sense of safety in your own body and mind. Sustainable change emerges not from forcing progress, but from staying in honest (and imperfect!) relationship with your needs, limits, and values as they evolve. There's no final destination or fixed state to "achieve", just as there's no endpoint to loving or caring for yourself.

What emerges over time isn't just recovery, it's growth. A reclaiming of energy, authenticity, and direction. A quiet but profound shift toward a life that fits you, rather than one you're constantly trying to fit yourself into. However slow or uneven the journey may feel, change is possible. And you don't have to do it all at once. Each small act of self-respect—each time you choose to honor your needs—helps lay the foundation for a life lived on your own terms.