Autistic Burnout

"…Along with the overwhelming confusion of what was 'wrong' with me, why I couldn't really connect with anyone, why people singled me out or played tricks or used me, of what the hell was wrong with me and why I just kept hitting this wall over and over again, was what led me to crash and burn out – my physical body and mind started shutting down. I could feel each system in my body closing off as gravity got heavier than it had ever been. I didn't know what to do – did not understand what was happening to me – I had no way to communicate this.

It was like a switch had gone off, my verbal ability to convey what was going on in my mind and body was gone.

I did not want to die; I've never wanted to die.

I needed to step out.

I needed to remove myself from the environment and take myself elsewhere; I needed to escape.

But the only way I knew how to do that was to die. So, I tried."

- **An Autistic Burnout, Kieran Rose, The Autistic Advocate**

Autistic Burnout is a direct physical and mental response to the impact of everyday life and the energy used by autistic people in order to survive in a world where they are undergoing constant sensory assault and expected to communicate and act in ways not conducive and appropriate for them.
Autistic Burnout is predominantly a direct follow-on from the effort of Autistic Masking.

On a day-to-day basis an autistic person is usually dealing with a near constant sensory assault, or a lack of useful sensory input, the impact of which is exhausting.

On top of this the autistic individual is usually not communicating in ways that are completely appropriate for them, often with an expected reliance on verbal communication, or at least communication which needs to be evaluated carefully and assessed because of the lack of directness and unclearness associated with non-autistic styles of communication.

Layered above this is Autistic Masking and the conscious and unconscious suppressing of sensory issues and the constant effort of adhering to confusing and often unnecessary social expectations and norms.

The effort that goes into this is exhausting and in the short term is recognised as what is known as Social Burnout, or the more negatively clinical and pathological 'Autism Fatigue'.

This can present in a number of ways, but generally manifests as exhaustion, irritableness, lethargy, a lack of interest in 'normal' interests, or what appears to be an 'over-focus' in a 'normal' interest, an increase in meltdowns and/or shutdowns, a decrease in verbal communication, more withdrawal, increased stimming, over/under eating, increased demand avoidance, more noticeable repetitive behaviour and, in children, may be recognised as the beginnings of School Induced Anxiety (School Refusal)

To the uneducated eye this can appear as the person presenting as 'more Autistic.'

If this shorter term burnout goes unaddressed, it can lead to what is known amongst the Autistic community as 'Extreme Burnout'.

Extreme Burnout manifests much like Social Burnout but to a far more serious degree, involving more physical symptoms such as an increase in auto-immune issues, brain fog and reduced cognitive ability, a reduction in verbal communication, a 'loss of skills' (known in clinical terms as 'regression'), increased anxiety, massively increased demand avoidance, a huge dip in self-belief/confidence, aching joints and muscles, decrease in ability to regulate mood, inflexible thought and increased rigidity of thinking, increase in insomnia or the opposite: hypersomnia, an increase in overwhelm, more 'erratic' behaviour and moods and a noticeable increase in frustration, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

The list goes on. Extreme burnout generally lasts anything from weeks up to Months (Some Autistic people have reported these experiences lasting years).

Often Autistic people experiencing this are mistakenly identified as Clinically Depressed, when in fact they are presenting only with physical features similar to Depression, accompanied with frustration, increased anxiety and confusion - but because of the lack of Professional knowledge and insight into Autistic Burnout, despite it being something the Autistic Community has discussed for decades, it can be an unfortunately easy mistake to make.

There is no doubt that Autistic Burnout can lead to Depression – particular if the individual is unaware of what is happening to them and can only contribute it to something similar, or does not have the emotional vocabulary to be able to describe what is occurring to them, something shared by Autistic people who have either gone undiagnosed or have not been supported to understand themselves or their neurology.

The first tentative research into Autistic Burnout is being done in the United States, with more being planned in the UK, but for the moment we are reliant on the vast anecdotal evidence and reports from the Autistic community and reports from parents.

For more links see:

Kieran Rose and Kate Gastor Discuss Autistic Burnout

Amythest Schaber, 'What is Autistic Burnout?', Ask an Autistic Series

Kieran Rose and Kerrie Highcock on Autistic Burnout

Ryan Boren on Autistic Burnout

An interview with Dora Raymaker on her research into Autistic Burnout from The Thinking Person's Guide to Autism

Judy Endow on Autistic Burnout