Burnout, Expectations and Neurodivergent Ways of Being

This reflective piece explores the experience of autistic burnout, the impact of internalised neurotypical expectations, and the challenges neurodivergent clinicians can face navigating systems not designed with them in mind. It draws on personal experience as an autistic person, a parent of neurodivergent children and a clinical psychologist.

After the initial adjustment to my late identification as an autistic person, and the emerging recognition of the breadth of neurodiversity within our family, our path has increasingly been about finding a different way to live that considers everyone's sometimes colliding needs.

From a personal perspective, this has involved finding a balance between my individuality as an autistic person and how this aligns with being a father and husband. For example, my sons often seek and create lots of auditory stimulation, while I tend to function best with much lower levels of sound. At the same time, I am also navigating life as a clinical psychologist working within systems that are still largely structured around neurotypical expectations. The challenge becomes how to apportion fluctuating levels of capacity in a way that is sustainable. I am still learning how to do this, with varying degrees of success.

There have been periods where I have needed to reduce the level of social and professional demand in order to avoid autistic shutdown. For me this can occur when social, sensory and emotional load accumulate beyond what my resources can comfortably manage. My own experience of this includes profound exhaustion, increased sensory sensitivity, a rapidly depleted "social battery", and difficulties with executive functioning that can make everyday interaction and tasks significantly harder.

These experiences are closely linked to autistic burnout, something that can take many months to recover from once fully established. Learning to recognise these patterns earlier has become an important part of developing a more sustainable way of working and living.

One helpful step has been recognising that I do not have to navigate these challenges alone. Over time I have found support in a small network of trusted colleagues, mentors and peers (a kind of informal "virtual board") who have helped me think differently about what sustainable working might look like. Accepting that I may sometimes need more support than I once did has not been easy, particularly as someone who has always valued independence. Yet learning to advocate for my own needs has become an important part of my post-identification journey.

Through reflection and conversations with others, I have also become increasingly aware of the role played by what might be described as *internalised ableism*. These

are the implicit expectations and assumptions we absorb from living within societies structured around neurotypical norms. They shape ideas about what people “should” be able to do, how they “ought” to function, and what constitutes acceptable productivity or resilience.

These expectations often become internalised to the point where they feel like personal failures rather than systemic mismatches. For example, I might find myself thinking that I should simply be able to push through certain demands because that is what others appear to do. In reality, doing so often requires significant camouflaging and sustained effort, which can deplete resources further and increase the likelihood of burnout.

In this sense, shame can quietly become part of the cycle: the sense of not meeting implicit expectations leading to increased effort, which in turn increases exhaustion and the likelihood of shutdown.

Part of my learning has been recognising that the “neurotypical version” of myself I once believed existed was largely a self-protective construction. It was an attempt to fit into systems that were not designed with my way of thinking and experiencing the world in mind. Gradually I have been trying to become more connected with a version of myself that feels more authentic, while also acknowledging the realities of the environments I continue to navigate.

This sometimes involves recognising when the “show” I am trying to keep on the road needs to be rewritten, perhaps with fewer demands, fewer expectations, and a different set of priorities. Adjustments and boundaries become ways of preserving the resources needed to continue contributing meaningfully.

Through these experiences I have also become more aware of how far we still are from creating truly neuro-inclusive environments and ways of working. Greater inclusion would not only support neurodivergent professionals, but would also help ensure that services better reflect and understand the diversity of the people they aim to support.

Connecting with a wider community of neurodivergent colleagues has been an important part of this process. Shared lived experience can provide both practical support and a collective voice when advocating for changes to systems that unintentionally embed ableist assumptions.

Of course, taking on the work of advocating for change when already navigating burnout is not straightforward. Visibility can bring its own pressures, and each person has to find their own balance in deciding when to step forward and when to step back. At times it becomes necessary to pass the baton to others who have more resources available, recognising that meaningful change is often a collective effort.

Ultimately, creating more inclusive environments is not the responsibility of neurodivergent people alone. Everyone, regardless of neurotype, has a role to play.

Often the greatest potential for change lies with those who are part of the neurotypical majority.

For many people the first step is simply developing curiosity about how others experience the world. This involves recognising that there may be materially different ways of perceiving, processing and interacting with environments and systems. With practice, we can begin to notice how many of our assumptions about “normal” functioning are shaped by neurotypical norms.

Developing this awareness creates opportunities for genuine connection across neurotypes. When people feel safe enough to bring their whole selves into professional spaces, conversations about how environments and systems affect different individuals become possible.

If we continue working toward workplaces that are equitable, accessible and genuinely inclusive of neurodiversity, this not only benefits neurodivergent professionals but also helps create services that are more responsive to the people and communities they serve.

After all, as the title suggests, the boundaries between “us” and “them” are far more fluid than we often assume. With the right context and circumstances, many of us may find ourselves moving between those positions over the course of our lives.