

Managing Energy: Spoons & Burnout Cycles

TL;DR · QUICK SUMMARY

- “Spoon theory” is a popular way to describe limited daily energy, especially for ND and chronically ill people.
- Burnout in ND people often follows a build-up-and-crash cycle, not a sudden event.
- Recognising early warning signs can help you intervene before a full crash.
- Recovery from ND burnout typically needs rest and reduced demands, not just a weekend off.

A Note Before You Read On

This resource offers general guidance and reflects common experience, not professional, legal, medical or financial advice. It is not a substitute for employment law, HR policy, occupational health guidance, or individual professional assessment. Every person's experience of neurodivergence is different, so please adapt anything here to your own situation. The Uniquely Wired Network does not accept liability for decisions, actions or outcomes arising from the use of this material. If you need advice specific to your circumstances, please consult a qualified professional (e.g. HR, legal, medical, or financial advisor).

Why This Matters

Many neurodivergent people run on a much smaller energy budget than it appears from the outside, especially if masking is involved. Understanding this helps you plan sustainably, rather than constantly overspending and crashing.

What This Might Look Like

- Feeling fine on Monday, then completely drained by Wednesday for no obvious single reason.
- Needing a full weekend just to recover from a normal working week.

- A slow decline over weeks or months into full burnout: exhaustion, reduced capability, and loss of enjoyment in things you usually like.

Understanding “Spoons”

- A metaphor for limited daily energy: each task “costs” a certain number of spoons.
- Masking, sensory environments, and social interaction often cost more spoons than they appear to from outside.
- Some days you simply start with fewer spoons than others; that's normal, not a failure.

Recognising Early Burnout Signs

- Increasing exhaustion that doesn't improve with normal rest.
- Rising irritability, reduced tolerance for sensory input, or more frequent meltdowns/shutdowns.
- Losing interest in things you usually enjoy, or struggling with tasks that were previously manageable.
- Increased masking slip-ups, or feeling unable to keep masking at all.

Managing Energy Sustainably

- Build in recovery time after high-demand activities, rather than only after a full crash.
- Protect low-demand time, even if that means saying no to optional extras.
- Notice your own early warning signs and act on them, rather than pushing through.
- If burnout has already happened, genuine recovery usually needs sustained reduced demands, not just a short break.

Helpful Phrases You Can Borrow

You don't have to use these exact words. Take what fits and leave the rest.

“I'm running low on capacity this week. Could we push this non-urgent task to next week?”

“I think I'm heading toward burnout, so I need to scale back where I can for a bit.”

Quick Tips

- Rest before you're empty, not just after.
- Recovery from ND burnout often takes longer than people expect. Be patient with yourself.
- Notice patterns: certain environments or tasks may cost far more energy than others.
- It's okay to decline optional social or work activities to protect your energy.
- Masking is often a hidden energy cost. Factor it in even when nothing looks visibly hard.
- A GP or therapist can help if burnout symptoms are severe or ongoing.

Want to Know More?

- See our companion guide: "Open Office Survival Strategies" for reducing sensory energy drain.
- Search "spoon theory" for the original explanation by Christine Miserandino, widely used across chronic illness and ND communities.
- A GP or occupational health referral can help if burnout is affecting your ability to work.

Before You Go

Needing more recovery time than others isn't laziness; it's a real difference in energy cost.

Protecting your energy proactively is self-respect, not self-indulgence.