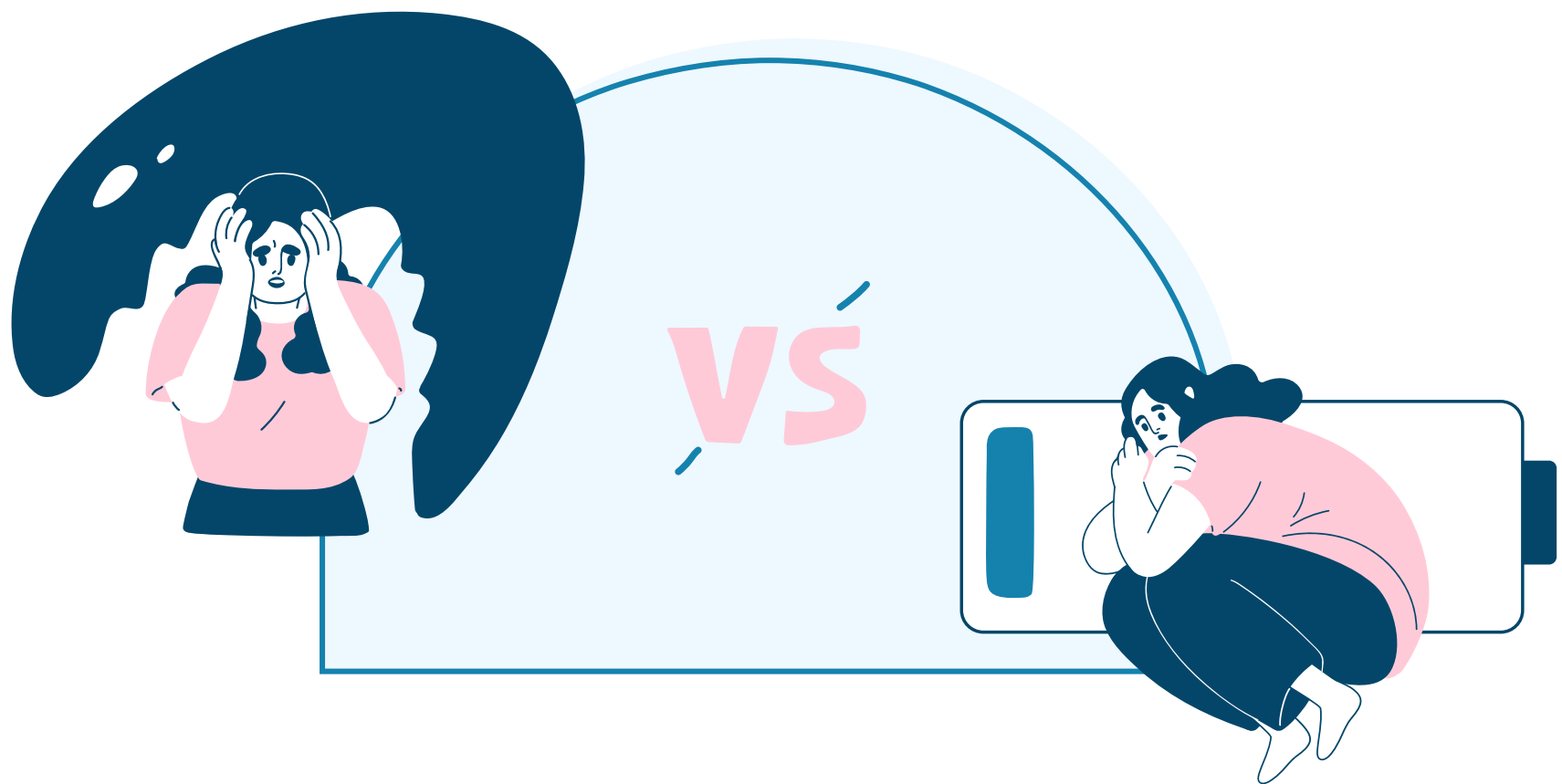


Autistic Burnout vs. Depression



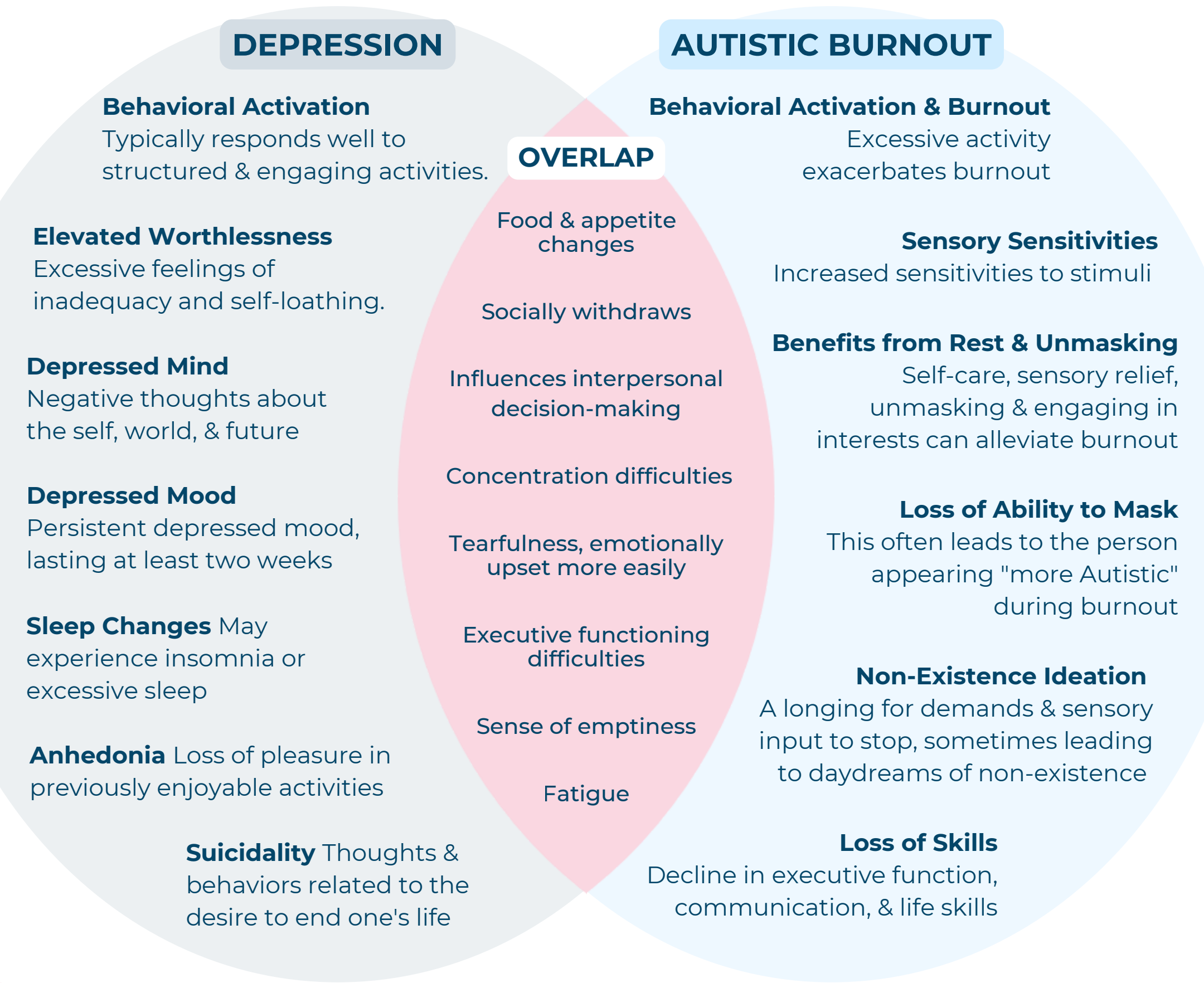
NDI Visual Guide

Dr. Megan Anna Neff

Autistic Burnout ≠ Depression



Autistic burnout can also look like depression; however, it needs to be supported differently. This Misdiagnosis Monday Venn diagram highlights the overlap and differences.



Autistic Burnout ≠ Depression

As you can see in the Venn diagram, there is quite a bit of overlap. But there are also important distinctions.

Depression:

Marked by a **persistently low mood** and a **loss of pleasure**.



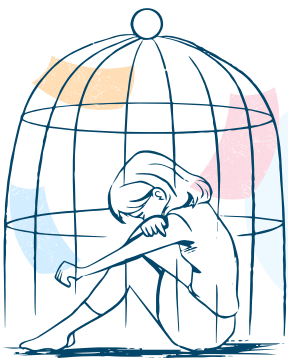
Autistic Burnout:

More about **depletion of energy, coping capacity**, and **access to daily functioning**.

While burnout and depression are distinct, they're often intertwined, and burnout can **pave the way to depression**.

1

In Autistic burnout, and it's prolonged, invalidated, and unsupported.

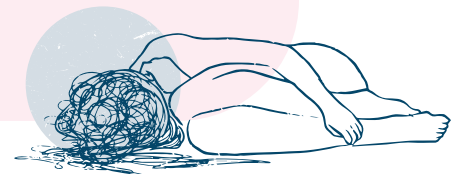


We have less energy to move toward the things that bring us meaning, connection, and joy.

2

3

Become vulnerable to hopelessness and despair. Risk of suicidality increases.



Autistic Burnout and Anxiety

Burnout can also **heighten anxiety**, particularly around:

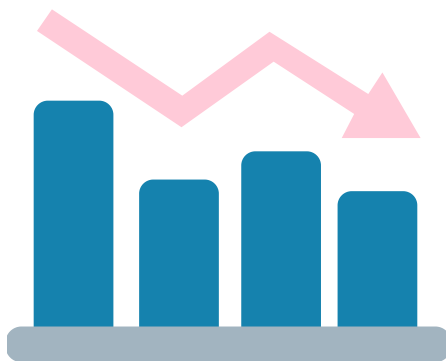
Nervous system dysregulation:



A shifting identity



Loss of skills



So often, it isn't just **depression** or **anxiety**. It's depression or anxiety that is rooted in burnout. And unfortunately, that context often gets missed.

When Autistic burnout escalates to include mood disorders, it's imperative to see an **affirming mental health professional** who can tailor a treatment to suit the complexities of Autistic burnout.

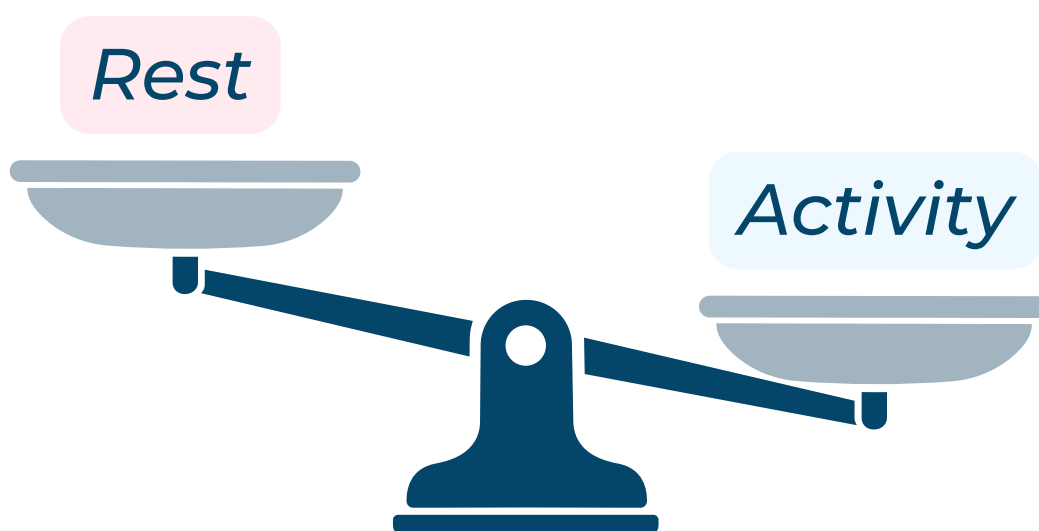


Behavioral Activation

behavioral activation:

Often used in depression treatment to help people re-engage with daily life and disrupt the lethargy cycle of avoidance and withdrawal.

However, when burnout is present, jumping into structured activity can backfire, leading to further depletion.



Instead of pushing through exhaustion, we need to **prioritize rest** as a key part of recovery.

Social Withdrawal

In many clinical spaces, withdrawal is seen as a red flag — a sign the depression is worsening, or that PTSD or anxiety is shrinking the person's world.

But for Autistic people, **strategic social withdrawal is often a wise adaptation.** It's a way to manage limited energy and sensory overload.



The goal of behavioral activation isn't just doing more. It's **engaging in ways that are meaningful, authentic, and aligned with true capacity.**

And for Autistic people in burnout, that means **honoring withdrawal** when it serves us — and gently **supporting reconnection with life** in sustainable ways.

Cognitive Reframing

Cognitive reframing is used in CBT to help people identify and challenge negative thought patterns.



This can be helpful in treating depression given our minds are more **prone to distortions when depressed.**

However, **people in Autistic burnout require extra care in reframing**, as thoughts may be influenced by:

internalized ableism



trauma of systemic invalidation



Autistic grief



Special attention should be given to ensure that CBT is not used in a way that invalidates the person's experience or leads to greater shame.

In a Nutshell

While burnout and depression can look similar and often co-occur, they are not the same, and **treatment needs to reflect that**.

Recovery calls for more than symptom reduction. It asks for:

1

Honoring **rest** and **thoughtful re-engagement**



Compassionate observation of the stories our mind is telling us

2

3

And **deep recognition and validation of the experience** — along with all the complexity that's interwoven into it



Next week, we will get into **sensory experiences and nervous system regulation**, so stay tuned!

Find additional information and resources about Autistic Burnout at Neurodivergent Insights:



neurodivergentinsights.com/burnout-resources