



Reflections from the Global South: A Narrative on Autistic Burnout

Navigating Burnout, PDA, and Depression: A Personal Journey

One Person's Journey Through Autistic Burnout

Have you ever had a week where your calendar looks normal, but your body feels like it's carrying a backpack full of bricks, every ping, every question, every "quick thing" landing like a fresh weight?

Where the lights feel too bright, the noise feels too sharp, and even kind messages can make your chest tighten because they still require a response?

That's the storm I just weathered. Autistic burnout layered with Demand Avoidance (PDA) and seasonal depression. On the outside, I still looked like me. On the inside, my nervous system felt frayed, like a phone stuck on 1% battery that keeps being asked to run more apps. Coming back from it has been raw and humbling, but it's also opened a door to a gentler kind of self-understanding, one I didn't know I needed.

The Heavy Weight of Autistic Burnout

People often describe autistic burnout as "extreme tiredness," but that doesn't quite capture it. For me, it's more like my whole system hits overload, like the circuit breaker flips and suddenly everything goes dim at once.

Things I can usually do without thinking, replying to a message, making food, choosing what to wear, start to feel like complicated puzzles. Everyday sounds get louder. Conversations feel like wading through wet cement. Even the things I normally love can feel out of reach, as if there's a pane of glass between me and my own life.

In my most recent burnout, ordinary life felt impossibly loud. Every demand, no matter how small, landed like another drop in an already-full cup. And that's where PDA started to show up even more intensely, because demands didn't just feel inconvenient, they felt unsafe.

And unlike ordinary exhaustion, sleep didn't reset anything. I could rest and still wake up feeling like I'd run a marathon in my dreams.

The Challenge of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

If burnout is the heavy weight, PDA is the alarm system that starts blaring the moment a demand appears. It's not just "stressful", it can feel like my nervous system reads demands as danger. Even things I care about, even things I want, can trigger a surge of anxiety and a wall of internal resistance.

From the outside, it can look like procrastination or a lack of motivation. Inside, it feels closer to paralysis. Imagine wanting to start an important assignment, knowing it matters, and still feeling your body refuse to move, hands heavy, thoughts racing, stomach tight. The pressure builds. Then guilt. Then more anxiety. And the more it matters, the harder it can be to begin.

That invisible tug-of-war is hard to explain if you've never felt it. And when I do push through and "get it done," what comes next isn't always relief in the way people expect.

The Emotional Rollercoaster

Here's the part that still surprises me: sometimes the hardest moment comes after the "success." The assignment gets submitted. The responsibility is finally finished. The crisis passes. For a second there's relief, and then, as the adrenaline drains away, it's like the floor drops out from under me.

For me, this often feels like collapsing into a darkness I had temporarily outrun. The nervous system, having operated in survival mode for so long, suddenly no longer has the energy to keep going. Relief quickly becomes grief, emptiness, or emotional shutdown.

A big part of healing has been learning to stop calling that crash a personal failure. It's information. It's my body telling the truth about what it cost to get through.

The Enigma of Alexithymia

One of the most disorienting parts of this journey has been recognising the role of alexithymia. So many emotions live beneath the surface, yet the moment I try to identify or explain them, they seem to disappear. I often carry emotional weight long before I understand what I am actually feeling.

This can make burnout especially confusing because the body often recognises distress before the mind does. Sometimes the only sign is exhaustion, tears, and sometimes shutting down completely.

I'm learning that I don't need perfect emotional language for my experience to be real. And that realisation has shaped how I'm trying to move forward with more honesty.

Moving Forward: Advocacy and Self-Compassion

If this season has taught me anything, it's that recovery isn't something you "power through." It's something you build, one boundary, one honest conversation, one small act of self-advocacy at a time.

Not every season requires pushing harder.

Sometimes healing looks like practical, unglamorous choices, like:

- reducing demands (even temporarily) and treating that as a strategy, not a failure
- asking for support in specific ways ("Can you sit with me while I start?" or "Can you take one task off my plate?")
- resting without guilt, because rest is what makes the next step possible

- slowing the pace on purpose (fewer plans, more buffer time, more recovery time)
- spotting sensory overload earlier (headphones, dimmer light, quiet breaks before I hit the wall)
- choosing gentleness over punishment, talking to myself like I would talk to someone I love

Some days progress looks like completing a task. Other days, progress looks like stopping early, cancelling plans, or letting my nervous system settle without shame. If you're in a similar place, I hope you can hear this: your pace is allowed to be different, and your needs are allowed to be real.

What This Season Has Taught Me

There is no prize for rushing recovery. I no longer want to force myself back into functioning before my body is ready. Emotions do not need perfect words and even when feelings are difficult to identify, they still deserve care and attention. Resting is not failure and burnout recovery requires compassion and not constant self-correction.

Self-advocacy has become my anchor. The more I understand my needs, the more honestly, and intentionally, I can communicate them. And that changes everything: it turns survival into something closer to steadiness.

A Gentle Reminder

If you are navigating autistic burnout, PDA, depression, or alexithymia, you are not alone. Healing may look slower than expected, resting may feel uncomfortable and understanding yourself may take time. Your nervous system is not something to fight against.

Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is meet yourself with kindness, right in the middle of the storm.

I'm sharing this story because so much of this experience happens quietly, behind 'I'm fine,' behind late replies, behind the effort it takes just to keep showing up. Naming it doesn't fix it, but it does make room for honesty, for support, and for the reminder that none of us are meant to carry this alone.

If any part of this resonates with you, I'd love to hear from you. You can share your own experience, what burnout looks like for you, how PDA shows up, or what helps when feelings are hard to name. Your story matters too, and connection can be a lifeline.

With love and light

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