



# **Burnout Early-Warning Checklist**

**Spot the signals early... and intervene before shutdown**



**Contact: [info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk](mailto:info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk)**

© 2025 Neal Glendenning / The Neuro Inclusion Project / NdCare Group.  
All rights reserved.

This material may not be reproduced, distributed, adapted, or used for training, commercial, or educational purposes without prior written permission.

Burnout is not sudden.  
It builds when your **nervous system is overloaded for too long without recovery**.

This checklist helps you:

- notice **early warning signs**
- understand **what your system is communicating**
- take **protective, stabilising action early**

You do **not** need to experience everything listed.  
If **2–3 signs are showing up repeatedly**, that's enough to respond.

---

## 1. Overwhelm

“There’s too much and I can’t hold it all.”

### Early warning signs

- Your to-do list feels impossible, even when it’s short
- You freeze when choosing what to do first
- You jump between tasks but don’t complete them
- Everything feels equally urgent
- You feel pressure in your head, chest, or stomach

### What’s actually happening

Your brain is **over capacity**. Executive functioning drops when cognitive load exceeds safety.

This is **not a motivation issue**.  
It’s a **load issue**.

### What helps... step by step

#### Immediate stabilisation (5–10 minutes)

1. **Stop adding inputs**
  - No planning, organising, or problem-solving yet
2. **Externalise the load**
  - Write *everything* down exactly as it is in your head
3. **Ask one grounding question**

“If I only did *one* thing today, what would reduce pressure the most?”

## Short-term adjustment (today)

- Shrink tasks to **the smallest usable step**
  - Not “write report” → “open document”
- Remove at least **one non-essential demand**
- Use permission language:

“I am allowed to slow this down.”

---

## 2. Emotional Flooding

“My feelings are louder than my thinking.”

### Early warning signs

- Sudden tears or irritability
- Feeling criticised or rejected easily
- Emotional reactions feel intense and fast
- Strong shame, guilt, or self-blame
- Urge to explain, defend, or withdraw

### What’s actually happening

Your emotional regulation system is **overloaded**. Reasoning will not work until the body settles.

This is **capacity loss**, not emotional immaturity.

### What helps... step by step

#### Immediate stabilisation (2–5 minutes)

1. **Slow the nervous system**
  - Inhale through the nose for 4
  - Exhale through the mouth for 6
  - Repeat 6–10 times
2. **Name the state silently**

“I’m flooded. I don’t need to fix anything yet.”

3. **Pause interaction**
  - Delay messages, emails, conversations

### Short-term adjustment (today)

- Reduce emotional input:
  - social media, news, conflict
- Choose one **emotionally safe anchor**
  - a person, animal, familiar show, music
- Use containment language:

“This feels intense because I’m overwhelmed, not because I’m wrong.”

---

## 3. Shutdown Drift

“I can’t engage, even though I want to.”

### Early warning signs

- Feeling blank, numb, or distant
- Difficulty speaking or replying
- Heavy fatigue or slowed movement
- Avoiding people or responsibilities
- Thinking: “*I can’t.*”

### What’s actually happening

Your nervous system has shifted into **energy conservation**. Pushing will deepen shutdown.

Shutdown is **protective**, not failure.

### What helps... step by step

#### Immediate stabilisation

1. **Reduce demands immediately**
  - No explaining, just lowering load
2. **Decrease stimulation**
  - dim lights, reduce sound, fewer people
3. **Allow stillness**
  - lying down, quiet presence, minimal expectation

### Short-term adjustment (today)

- Cancel or postpone non-essential commitments
- Communicate simply:

“I’m not able to engage properly today. I’ll reconnect when I can.”

---

- Focus on:
    - warmth
    - hydration
    - gentle nourishment
    - rest without guilt
- 

## 4. Sensory Overload

“The environment is too much.”

### Early warning signs

- Noise feels painful or sharp
- Light feels too bright or flickering
- Clothing or textures feel intolerable
- Strong urge to escape busy places
- Rising panic or irritability in crowds

### What’s actually happening

Your sensory filtering is compromised... often due to cumulative stress.

This is **neurological**, not behavioural.

### What helps... step by step

#### Immediate stabilisation

1. **Change the environment**
  - leave the space if possible
2. **Buffer sensory input**
  - headphones, sunglasses, hoodie
3. **Ground the body**
  - deep pressure, warm drink, steady temperature

#### Short-term adjustment (today)

- Build in **sensory recovery time**
  - Avoid high-stimulus environments if possible
  - Plan exits in advance for unavoidable situations
-

## 5. Depletion & Burnout Risk

“I’m running on empty.”

### Early warning signs

- Waking already exhausted
- Losing interest in things you care about
- Increased mistakes or forgetfulness
- Resentment toward demands
- Thoughts like: *“I can’t keep doing this.”*

### What’s actually happening

Your system is **chronically overdrawn**.  
This is the stage where early intervention matters most.

Burnout is not solved by pushing harder.

### What helps... step by step

#### Immediate stabilisation

- Stop adding new demands
- Lower expectations without apology
- Choose **rest that restores**, not just collapse

#### Short-term adjustment (this week)

- Reduce workload or pace where possible
- Ask for accommodations or support
- Review what is unsustainable:
  - workload
  - environment
  - expectations
  - lack of recovery time

---

## Important Reminders

- Burnout signals are **information**, not failure
- Early response prevents long-term shutdown
- You do not need to be “bad enough” to rest
- Changing the **system** is often more important than changing yourself

Listening early is an act of care.