

Autistic Burnout & ACT: A Neuroaffirming Approach

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ACT Tips and Insights for Mental Health Practitioners



Autistic Burnout: When Your System ‘Overloads’

‘Autistic burnout’ is not a DSM diagnosis, but it’s an incredibly common problem! It’s a debilitating state of chronic exhaustion, high distress, and loss of skills that adversely impacts every area of life. Unfortunately, it’s often inappropriately treated – especially when misdiagnosed as depression or occupational burnout.

The good news is, a neuroaffirming ACT approach is often incredibly helpful for this complex, chronic condition - and in this eBook, we’ll look at simple, practical tips for applying it.

But first ... if you haven’t read my eBook on [ACT As A Neurodiversity-Affirming Therapy](#), please do so. It’ll get you up to speed (or give you a quick refresher) on The Neurodiversity Movement and how ACT aligns with it, plus other important topics such as neuroaffirmative language, neuroaffirming therapy, medical vs social models of disability, the double empathy problem, and so on.

What Is Autistic Burnout?

It's not a sign of 'laziness', 'weakness', 'personal failure', 'lack of coping skills', or 'not trying hard enough' - as many autistic clients initially believe! Nor is it clinical depression or occupational burnout - as clinicians often mistakenly diagnose it. Here's the best definition I've found:

'Autistic burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports. It is characterized by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimuli.' (Raymaker, D.M., et al, 2020)

Basically, autistic burnout is what happens when your nervous system is over-stressed in every domain of life, while continually working to the max, around the clock, with no rest or respite: eventually it 'overloads' and 'crashes'.



Autistic folk often describe their burnout in terms of a deep exhaustion that's unrelieved by rest or sleep, along with a profound loss of capacity. All sorts of things they could previously do well – e.g. communication, socialising, self-care, work tasks – become overwhelming or impossible. There's also a huge drop in their ability to tolerate sensory stimuli, social stress, or work pressure, and a simultaneous rise in emotional reactivity.

Burnout tends to have devastating effects in every area of life – leading to loss of friends, loss of jobs, loss of health, loss of independence, and more. In a state of burnout, even 'small' actions of 'basic' self-care may be completely overwhelming; and that deep sense of unending, unendurable, unrelievable suffering may segue into suicidality.

Common burnout symptoms include:

- **Extreme exhaustion, physical and mental** - unrelieved by sleep
- **Loss of skills** – especially social, communication, and executive function skills
- **Sensory overload**
- **Intensified anxiety**
- **Increased emotional reactivity** – often leading to more meltdowns and shutdowns
- **Difficulty thinking or focusing**
- **Reduced tolerance for demands**
- **Social withdrawal** – due to reduced capacity, not anxiety
- **Self-judgment, shame, and self-blame** – much of which is 'internalised ableism'

What Causes Autistic Burnout?

Basically, burnout results when **chronic stress** with **inadequate support** leads to **expectations that exceed abilities**. I explain it to clients like this: *'You've got stress coming at you from every angle, 24/7, non-stop, no relief, and little or no support. Eventually, your nervous system overloads and crashes. No wonder you're completely exhausted. No wonder so many things you used to do well now seem almost impossible.'*

Let's unpack these three contributing factors:

1. Chronic Stress

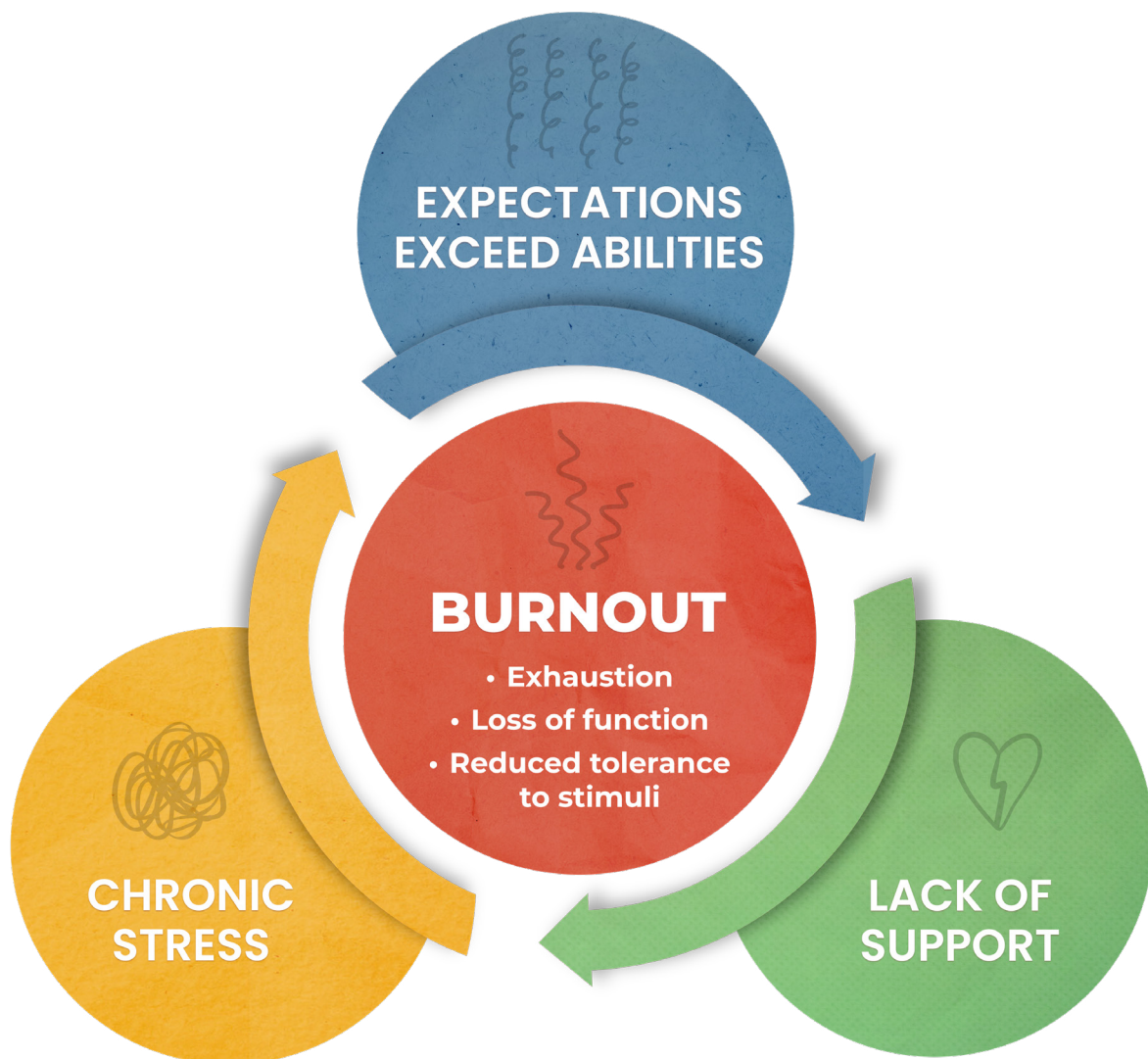
By far the most common chronic stressor is 'autistic masking': the ongoing attempt to hide/suppress autistic traits, to fit in with (or at least reduce rejection/hostility/prejudice from) neurotypical others. This takes a huge physical and mental toll. Other common stressors include expectations and demands from family, friends, and work; life-change stress (e.g. bereavement, break-ups, transition to adulthood); and the ongoing challenge of compensating for disabilities - especially in environments that are not neuroaffirming.

2. Inadequate Support

Many autistic folks report a lack of access to disability services, therapy or childcare – along with an inability to get any rest or respite from ongoing life stressors. In addition, many find it hard to advocate for accommodations, set boundaries, or ask for help. And on top of all that, often their needs are dismissed, mocked or trivialised by others.

3. Expectations Exceed Abilities

Together, **chronic stress** and **lack of support**, lead to an increasing gap between **expectations** (from self and others) of what one can or should do, and one's **abilities** to do it. As this gap persists and grows, it fuels further stress in a vicious cycle.



So How Can ACT Help?

ACT can help in sooooo many ways, if I tried to cover them all, this document would become a full-length textbook! So here instead are 10 practical tips.

1. Safety & Support

It comes as no surprise that the single most important consideration is the therapeutic relationship. Embodying the ACT stance of mindfulness, compassion, curiosity, and openness, we make the therapy room a safe and supportive, neuroaffirming space; a place where autistic clients feel seen and heard and valued, and able to be their authentic selves without any need to mask.

2. Validate, Validate, Validate

Compared to many other models, ACT 'goes the extra mile' in terms of validating human suffering. And with autistic clients, we go even further. From the word go, we validate their experience: it makes perfect sense that they are exhausted, distressed, debilitated. It makes perfect sense that they are struggling and suffering. The ongoing stress of trying to make their way in a neurotypical world that's far from welcoming – with little or no good support - would exhaust and incapacitate anyone!

3. Think Small

Clients are already exhausted and struggling to cope with the demands of everyday life - so we need to be cautious with ACT interventions. We don't want to exacerbate burnout by encouraging clients to do things that increase their burden. So it's important to embrace the classic ACT principle of 'thinking small'. The more burnt out the client, the smaller the intervention. Remember, small changes over time can have big effects. This naturally leads us to the next tip...

4. Mindfulness On The Go

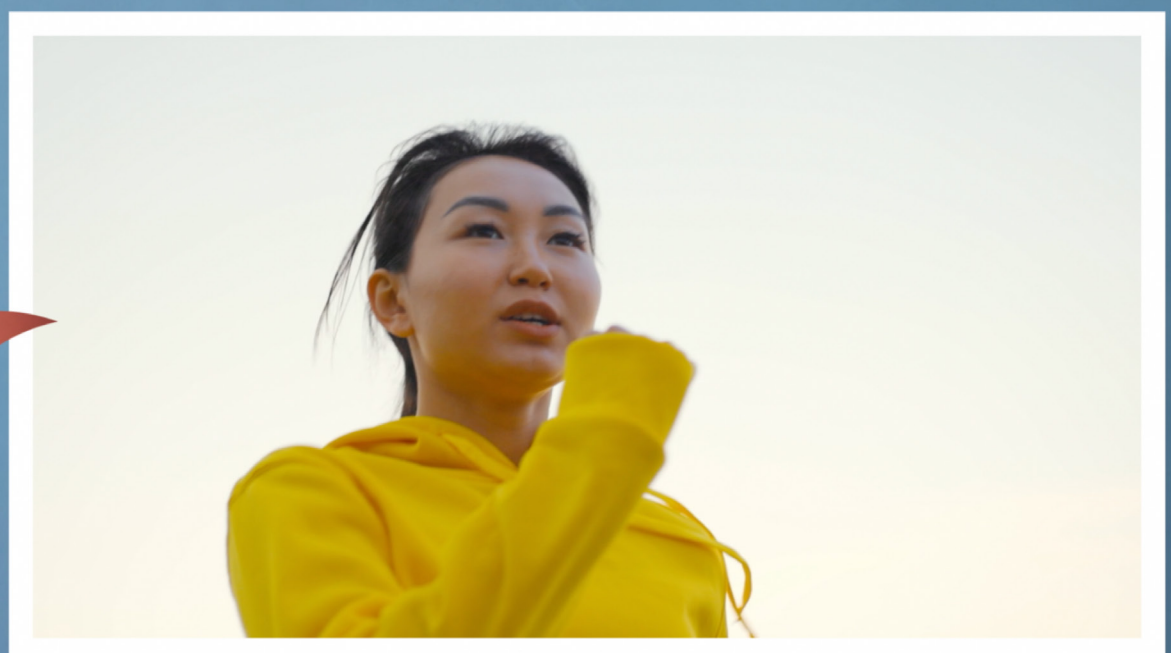
When clients are burnt out, executive function is significantly lower than usual – so if there's one thing that's a big no-no, it's intense, demanding mindfulness practices, such as formal meditation! And this is where ACT really comes into its own. Indeed, if there's one theme that runs through almost everything I've ever written about ACT, it's about making mindfulness quick and simple, and easy to incorporate into everyday life. An increasingly popular term for this kind of approach is 'mindfulness on the go'.

Classic examples of 'mindfulness on the go' include:

- **Savouring The Shower:** shower mindfully – even if only for a minute or two; savour the warmth, the scent of the shampoo, the water massaging your skin
- **Simple Defusion:** practice quick defusion techniques such as 'I'm having the thought that ...', naming the story, or thanking the mind
- **Mindful Mouthfuls:** when eating, slow down, and eat one or two mouthfuls mindfully – savouring the taste and texture. You don't need to eat the whole meal this way (who has the time, right?!) – but at least savour the first couple of mouthfuls
- **Mindful Steps:** from time to time, mindfully notice your walking: notice your feet lifting and falling, the movement of your legs, the air on your face
- **A Quick 'Kind Hand':** gently place a hand over an uncomfortable feeling, and 'send in' warmth and kindness, softening and loosening up around the sensation.

- **Breathing Breaks:** when you're stuck at red traffic lights, or waiting in a queue, or watching commercials on the telly, take a sloooow, gentle mindful breath (or perhaps two or three if time allows)
- **Mindful Petting:** mindfully stroke, cuddle or play with your dog or cat or kangaroo, tuning in to the sensations and the sense of connection
- **5-5-5:** Notice, with curiosity, 5 things you can see, 5 things you can hear, and 5 things you can touch or feel
- **Slow Stretching:** do some form of slow, gentle stretch – and really notice how the loosening and lengthening, and the warmth as blood flows into the area.
- **Dropping Anchor:** there are all sorts of quick, simple dropping anchor exercises, that are easy to incorporate into everyday life. We'll look at these in #8.

Of course there are many other possibilities, and we can invite our clients to come up with their own.



5. Defusion From Self-judgment & ‘Try Harder’

As well as validating their difficulties, we help clients defuse from harsh, self-critical narratives such as: ‘I’m weak’, ‘I’m stupid’, ‘I need to try harder’, ‘I’m a failure’, ‘I’m not enough’, ‘I haven’t got what it takes’, ‘I need to toughen up’, ‘I need to make more effort’, ‘I just need more discipline/willpower’, ‘I’m a loser’.

As soon as possible, we want to work on quick, simple defusion skills to take the power out of these. As mentioned above, good options are ‘I’m having the thought that ...’, naming the story, or thanking the mind.

6. Self-compassion & Self-Soothing

Fostering self-compassion is an essential and ongoing part of our work with ACT. #1, #2, and #5 all play an important role in developing it, but we also want to bring in kind self-talk, kind self-touch, and kind self-nurturing deeds. The quick ‘kind hand’ exercises mentioned in #4 are often good to bring in early.

However, it’s not uncommon for autistic clients to have some resistance towards self-compassion – at least initially. This is hardly surprising if you’ve been fused with harsh self-judgment for many years! This eBook addresses such problems: [12 Common Barriers To Self-Compassion](#).

Self-soothing overlaps with self-compassion, and it’s important to bring this in early, as an antidote to chronic stress. In addition to traditional ACT self-soothing, it’s important to incorporate the client’s own unique self-soothing methods, e.g. through ‘stimming’ (self-stimulatory behaviours) and ‘spins’ (special interests).

7. Committed Action: Pacing & Resting

Therapists sometimes mistakenly think that ‘committed action’ in ACT means ‘doing more’ - but in the case of burnout, it means ‘doing less’. When people are chronically exhausted for any reason – autistic burnout, chronic illness, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pain, chemotherapy, etc – an essential part of recovery is a behavioural intervention called ‘pacing and resting’. (A good example of this in neuroaffirming communities is the popular concept of ‘spoon theory’.) Here’s the basic idea:

a. Pace Yourself!

Whether it’s a bad day or a good day, don’t spend all your energy; always keep some in reserve. And at the start of the day, assess how much energy you realistically have, then carefully plan how much of it you will expend: when, and where, and on what.

At times this may involve:

- Modifying an activity so it’s easier to do, eats up less energy
- Declining a task, or rescheduling it to another day or week
- Breaking the task down into small steps, and just doing one or two of them rather than trying to complete the whole thing
- Asking others to help out – to share, assist with or take over the task

And as well as pacing yourself, you also need to...

b. Rest Up!

Whether it’s a bad day or a good day, schedule activities that help you rest, relax, and recharge your batteries. On bad days, you’ll need to do more of this than on good days. And on all days – good

and bad alike - you want a good balance between resting up and doing things.

So, if you're doing low-energy activities, you'll likely need shorter and less frequent rest breaks; but when you're doing high-energy activities, that usually warrants longer and more frequent rest breaks.

For more information about 'pacing and resting' and handouts/worksheets to share with your clients, [click here](#).

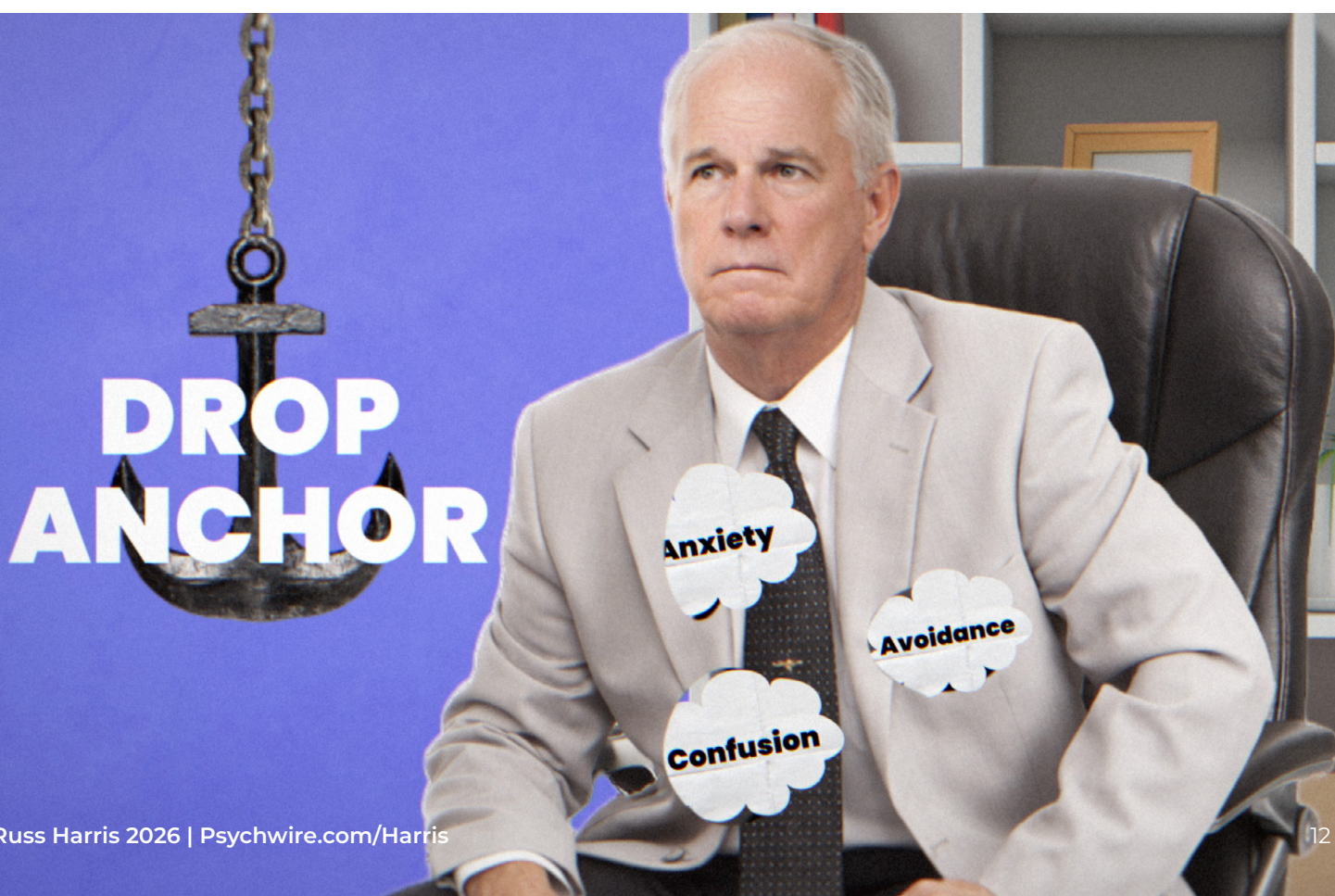
8. Dropping anchor

'Dropping anchor' is an umbrella term for literally hundreds of exercises, based on a simple three-part 'ACE' formula, which involves:

A - Acknowledging & allowing your thoughts and feelings,

C - Connecting with physical movement, and

E - Engaging in the world around you or what you do



Because they are quick and easy to teach and modify, can be as short as you like (even just a few seconds, once you know what you're doing), can be easily adapted to suit an individual's challenges (e.g. chronic pain or sensory overload), and can be done just about anywhere, they make great 'mindfulness on the go' interventions.

However, we can also scaffold them into longer exercises, useful for many different purposes including grounding, focusing & refocusing, self-soothing, self-compassion, disrupting rumination and worrying, responding well to anxiety and hyperarousal, preventing or interrupting impulsive behaviours, getting out of bed, increasing tolerance for stimuli, and so much more.

9. Flexible Masking & Unmasking

As mentioned earlier, the most common stressor in burnout is autistic masking - which takes a huge physical and mental toll. However, the antidote is not to stop masking. The antidote is to learn how to mask and unmask flexibly and effectively: to choose when, where, and with whom, and in what manner, and to what extent you do it. And to do this based on what's most likely to build the sort of life you want.

In ACT terminology, this is 'committed action', and it's important to connect with the values beneath it. For example, it may be in the service of values like self-care and self-protection, or intimacy and openness, or all of those and more. Such work is often challenging, and a long term pursuit. For some guidelines read this pdf on [Flexible Masking & Unmasking](#)

10. Self-advocacy

Rooted in the disability rights movement, autistic self-advocacy refers to the actions of autistic individuals or groups: asserting their rights, speaking up for their needs, securing necessary support, taking control of their lives, and shaping public policy.

Again, in ACT terms, this is committed action – and again, it's important to help clients connect with the underlying values, e.g. self-care, self-respect, fairness, justice, and so on.

In educational or workplace settings, it often involves advocating for extra time to complete tasks, or more breaks, or reduced responsibilities, or flexible work/study arrangements (e.g. working/studying from home), allowing for different modes of communication (e.g. writing rather than speaking), or availability of rooms that offer relief from difficult sensory stimuli (e.g. low-lighting, low-noise environments).

Clients often have significant psychological barriers to self-advocacy. They may be fused with helplessness or hopelessness; or unaware of their rights; or guilty, ashamed or anxious about asking for support; or fearful of being refused/ rejected/ bullied/ discriminated against - especially when such outcomes have happened before.

So while this work is of vital importance, it may be wiser to leave it (at least, in part) until later in therapy. Once the client has more resources (both internal, like 'mindfulness on the go' skills, improved executive functioning, higher energy levels - and external, like supportive others), the likelihood of success is greater. (The same cautions apply to the previous tip: flexible masking and unmasking.)



In Summary

Autistic burnout is a complex condition, arising from chronic stress with inadequate support. It commonly brings autistic clients to therapy, but may be misdiagnosed and mistreated. A neuro-affirming ACT approach is often helpful. Of course, there's so much more to neuroaffirming ACT than this, but I hope these tips are useful. (And if you want to learn more, you may like to check out my 6-week online course on [ACT for Autism.](#))

Best of luck with it all,

Cheers,

Russ Harris

Reference:

1. Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, A., Kapp, S. K., Hunter, M., Joyce, A., & Nicolaidis, C. (2020). "Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew": Defining Autistic Burnout. *Autism in adulthood*, 2(2), 132–143. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>



About Russ Harris

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