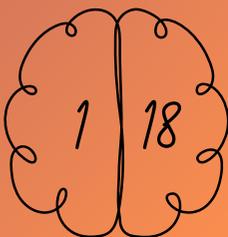


**When Burnout  
Arrives Disguised as  
Belonging:  
An Experience, A  
Truth, An  
Acceptance**



## When Burnout Arrives Disguised as Belonging

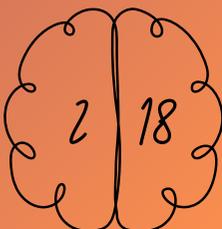
Autistic burnout doesn't always explode into your life – it creeps in like a slow leak, filling every corner until you realise you've been holding your breath for weeks, maybe months.

When mine hit, it arrived right as something new was forming in my life.

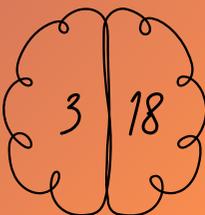
Something that, in my heart, felt like it might finally be community.

I was exhausted. Beyond exhausted. I was exhausted down to the bone-tired in a way that sleep couldn't touch.

I was dragging myself through days with a nervous system frayed down to threads.



But I kept telling myself:  
If I can just find my people...if I can just share  
space with others who get it...maybe I'll be  
okay...maybe connection would help...  
Maybe if I found people who understood the  
way my brain layered meaning on top of  
meaning, who didn't flinch at passionate  
honesty or quiet overwhelm, something in me  
would settle.  
So when a group came together – early days,  
early dreams – I let myself hope. I let myself  
soften. I let myself unmask just a little.  
And for Autistic people, that is no small act.  
It is an act of trust, intimacy, vulnerability, and  
risk.  
And for a moment, it seemed like it would be  
safe.



On the surface, it looked like I had found exactly that.

There is a specific kind of joy, a quiet glow, when you believe you've found community. When you think, these people understand my brain, my heart, my pace, my difference. When you imagine that maybe you don't have to translate every thought, every feeling, every sensory experience.

I walked into those early conversations tentative but hopeful, masking loosened but not fully gone.

I let myself believe I was safe enough to unmask just a little more than usual—to share the pieces of myself that usually stay behind glass. It felt big. Tender. Like that moment when you open your hand and hope someone grasps it gently, then holds it ever so tightly.



But early burnout is sneaky.

You don't always see how few resources you have left until someone reaches for you with the wrong touch. Autistic burnout makes everything delicate.

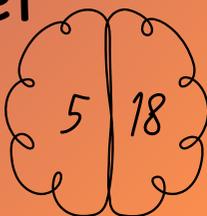
It makes hope slippery. And it makes misattunement feel like a physical injury. Slowly – then suddenly – the support I thought I'd found began to crumble.

At first, I thought the discomfort was just anxiety.

I told myself I was overreacting. I was used to that familiar story.

But slowly, the space that looked like safety began to twist.

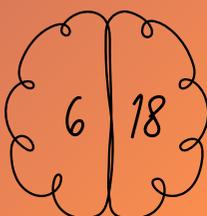
People who said they "got it" shifted the moment I actually showed my Autistic inner world.



I would share a vulnerability and get told how to “fix” it with old, familiar neurotypical frameworks of unsolicited helping, correcting, and redirecting.

I’d watch this develop into responses with behavioural strategies and guidance, dressed up as kindness and care, based off assumptions and nothing more. Listening...but only to respond, not to understand.

My natural communication—straightforward, sincere, deeply felt—was treated like a problem to be solved.



Others walked away entirely once they realised I wasn't the tidy, packaged version of "Autistic" they imagined.

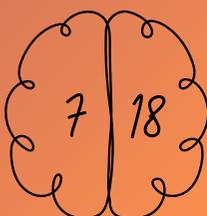
The version of myself that made them comfortable.

Because yes – it can be a very autistic trait to believe that connection is mutual and equal, simply because we feel it strongly.

Some tried to reshape me.

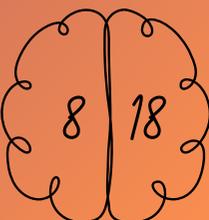
And some... well, some manipulated, gaslit, or placed expectations on top of a nervous system already collapsing, expectations that no one in burnout could meet.

Autistic or not.



Suddenly I was carrying all the pressures of society again- social demands, emotional labour, constant justification, the subtle but heavy pressure to be “on”, to be “understood but not too much”, to hold everyone else’s feelings while mine were spilling everywhere – compliance, normality, emotional labour, tasks, organising, social energy, “be fine”, “be flexible”, “don’t be too much”, “don’t be too little”.

It was like being handed a backpack full of bricks while drowning.



Every tool I had carefully constructed to cope—executive functioning strategies, scripting, planning, masking, humour—was slipping through my fingers.

My brain felt like a tangled forest on fire. I couldn't tell what was mine, what was theirs, what was expectation, what was manipulation, what was burnout, and what was trauma repeating its old familiar patterns.

The worst part wasn't the overwhelm or confusion. It was the grief.

Grief that I had opened myself up, cautiously and bravely, only to be met with the same old story in a different outfit:

You are too much. You are wrong. Be different.

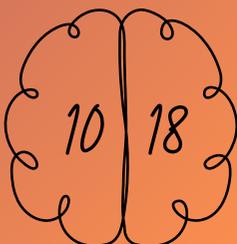
But NOT LIKE THAT!



And when you're Autistic, betrayal can hit like a physical injury.

Because we don't do "half-connection."  
We map people into our lives in deep, intricate ways.

We believe what we say and what we hear.  
We attach with our whole nervous system.  
So when those threads were cut—when the pressure, the judgement, the misattunement became impossible to ignore—my brain and body simply collapsed.



It wasn't just burnout.

It was the kind of burnout that drags you to the edge of yourself.

Where the edges of reality blurred into a near-psychotic unraveling.

A sense of losing my grip on language, time, logic, the world.

My brain felt like static.

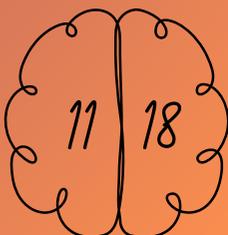
My body felt like lead.

Everything inside me screamed for silence, darkness, stillness.

I remember one night sitting in the dark, curled into myself, whispering, "I can't do this anymore.

I can't be what people demand".

And for the first time, the thought didn't feel dramatic. It felt factual.



Autistic burnout isn't just tiredness.

It is system shutdown.

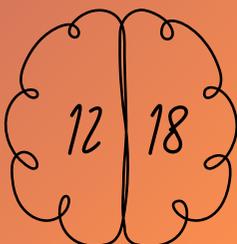
A forced reboot.

A survival mechanism.

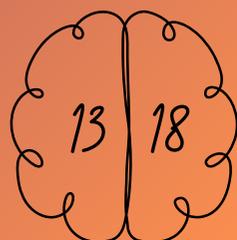
It is collapse.

It is what happens when sensory overwhelm, relational mismatch, emotional labour, masking, trauma, miscommunication, and unmet needs pile themselves so high that your nervous system has no space left to exist.

And yet – in that collapse came clarity.



I realised the community I thought I had found  
wasn't actually built for people like me.  
It welcomed the idea of neurodiversity, but not  
the lived reality of it—not the messy, nonlinear,  
overwhelmed, deeply sensitive parts of Autistic  
experience that don't package neatly.  
The fog lifted just enough to show me what was  
real:  
not all community is your community.  
Not all "support" is safe.  
Not all beginnings are meant to last.  
It loved the glow, not the flicker.  
And so I withdrew—quietly, slowly, almost  
invisibly. Not because I didn't care, but because I  
finally understood I had nothing left to give.



Burnout didn't ruin the dream.

It refined it.

It taught me the difference between the people who want to shape you and the people who want to meet you, not who they want you to be, but where you are.

Between those who try to fix you and those who honour you.

Between those who disappear and those who remain when things are complicated, human, messy, Autistic.

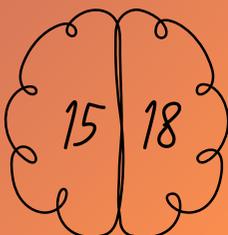
It taught me that Autistic people don't thrive in spaces where we're managed.

We thrive in spaces where we're witnessed – fully, gently, without conditions or correction.



And from that pain – from that deep, shaking ache of burnout – something new began to take shape. Something slower, softer, safer. Something built not from the expectations of others, but from lived experience and fiercely earned truth.

That "something" eventually became what I am today – crafted in the ashes of burnout, but rooted in clarity, care, and the belief that Neurodivergent people deserve spaces where we can finally exhale.



It evolved into what GRANN is today.

Because community is not who is there at the beginning.

Community is who stays when you unravel – and who helps you stitch yourself back together without changing the pattern of your soul.

Recovery was not quick.

It was months of rest.

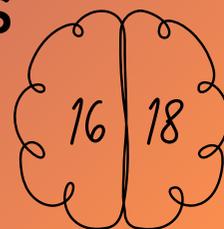
Months of unlearning other people's expectations.

Months of sitting with the parts of myself I had offered too freely to people who didn't know how to hold them.

But somewhere in the rubble, something true remained:

I still believed in connection.

Just...not the kind that asks me to be less Autistic to be loved.



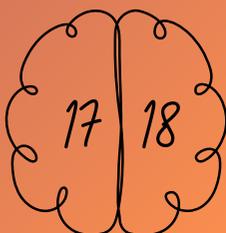
I learned to build slower.

Gentler.

More intentionally.

With people who don't flinch at autistic intensity, who don't misread directness as danger, who don't treat difference as something to shape. People who understand that Autistic burnout is not a failure of strength, authenticity, or self-determination.

It's a sign that we have been expected—for far too long – to carry things we were never meant to.



And now, standing further down the path, I can look back at that collapse and see it clearly:

It wasn't the end of something.

It was the beginning of me choosing myself.

The beginning of building community differently

– with honesty, softness, spaciousness, and

boundaries that honour the way Autistic bodies

and brains move through the world.

Not belonging that demands we shrink, but

belonging that lets us breathe.

Not “fixing,” but witnessing.

Not masks, but glimmers.

