

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Spoon Theory

In the last few months I've heard several Autistic people talk about '*how many spoons they had*', relating to how much ability they had to function that day.

I fought using that phrase because in my mind, spoons are kept in a drawer and they all have to be lying together in the same direction. I preferred talking about how much "*people energy*" I had.

I've changed my mind after seeing how discussing "*spoon theory*" has helped more than just Autistic clients, and I realised it's more than just "*people energy*". I've seen a range of people find it useful, some with chronic illness, some neuro-divergent and some who've never thought about this before – so here's my take on it:

WHAT IS "SPOON THEORY"?

Spoon Theory was created by Christine Miserandino:

butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/

The idea is that we all start the day with a drawer full of spoons. If you have boundless energy and no mental health problems, you might have more spoons than you need and you've never had to think about them. Someone living with chronic pain may only have 12 spoons that day.

Every time you do a task which taxes you – you have to give away a spoon. Someone living with extreme pain may find getting out of bed and getting dressed has used up all their spoons.

Autistic people often have to give up spoons in social situations. For example chatting to a stranger in the street might cost 3 spoons, small talk at work is 4 spoons, and a wedding full of people you don't know is 100 spoons.

You might spend spoons at different rates. If you've had a night with little sleep, the next day everything might cost twice as many spoons.

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Once the spoons are gone that could lead to an angry outburst, a meltdown, a migraine or physical pain. You might suddenly disappear from a social situation, be unable to speak or have to go to bed until you've recovered. When the spoons are gone you'll need to find a way to recover so you can start functioning again.

There's another explanation at autisticmama.com/what-is-spoon-theory/

HOW ARE SPOONS SPENT?

No Autistic people are the same, so the amount of spoons we spend on things is different. For some people background noise costs spoons and they might need to wear noise cancelling headphones or move from an open plan office to a quieter environment.

Someone else may have to give up spoons if they're interrupted in a task – and need advance warning before changing an activity, or allowed to complete the task they're on first.

Having to mask our autistic traits to fit in costs spoons, as does being told not to fidget.

Small talk is often very costly. My worst nightmare is being asked to circulate a room and introduce myself to people I don't know. That will cost MANY spoons.

ON TOP OF THIS, THE DRAWER OF SPOONS CAN GET EMPTIED IN ONE GO.

If I think I've upset someone I love – that drawer magically empties of spoons and I cease functioning.

For other Autistic people it may be when they perceive a situation is unfair or feel someone is being bullied.

It may be they've been asked too many questions in a row they can't answer, or have been made to feel stupid or weird for not understanding something.

We can have triggers that render us incapable until we've reset.

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HOW DOES "SPOON THEORY" HELP?

Trying to explain to someone you're getting low on functioning ability is difficult when you're already low on functioning energy. The explanation itself costs spoons, but saying to someone "I'm low on spoons" or "I'm out of spoons" is a lovely shorthand that doesn't cost as much.

It might be difficult for the person concerned to realise that they are low on spoons. I don't always know, which is why a bad day can come as a surprise. However, if I'm struggling to answer a question my partner can ask "*are you low on spoons today?*" which is a brilliant, non-judgemental way to show they care.

CAN YOU CONSERVE SPOONS?

Some people have found it useful to give "energy units" to tasks, so you know how much energy you're expending. Then you can factor in quiet days when you need them before you get overtired.

For instance, if you have a full day of work group calls on a Friday you might ask if some of them can be moved as you know the cost will be too high to attend them all on one day. Alternatively schedule a quiet day before and after without calls so you know you'll have the spoons to cope.

It might be worth investigating what workplace accommodations can be made so you aren't spending spoons unnecessarily. *Thriving Autistic* has a webpage about the kinds of adaptations that could be made in a workplace and also a workbook you can complete on your own to have greater clarity on your needs: www.thrivingautistic.org/workplace-resources/

CAN SPOONS BE REPLENISHED?

You can add spoons to your drawer by taking time out on an activity that restores you. Some people find gardening or walking through "trees and bees" helps. Some people like stimming (*repetitive movements or noises*) or fidgeting. It may help to find a place where you can be yourself without having to mask, or lose yourself in a special interest. It's different for each person, but it might be worth making a list of the things you find helpful before you reach a "low spoons" day.

Hope that helps. Please get in touch if you have any questions.

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