



## Energy Accounting – Look after your spoons to avoid that meltdown!

### Why do we need to take account of energy?



The amount of energy we have is not an endless well. All of us will have had very busy days, when we needed to go home and just have a restful evening. This can spill over several days; ever had a busy week and then felt shattered all weekend? Energy is not just spent on physical activity, such as walking or lifting, but also mental and emotional activities, like concentrating very hard or having a stressful deadline.

### Where do spoons come into this?



This is sometimes referred to as ‘Spoon Theory’, particularly by those who have a disability or chronic illness. This came from a paper written by Christine Miserandino ([www.butyoudontlooksick.com](http://www.butyoudontlooksick.com)) who used a ‘number of spoons’ as a metaphor for how much energy she had. As a lady with Lupus and chronic fatigue, she explained that she not only starts the day with fewer spoons than her friends, but the day-to-day things she does also take up more spoons. That meant she sometimes had to choose between jobs like shopping or washing and social activities. She talked about how it is possible to borrow spoons from the next day to do something big, like a trip, but she would then crash afterwards and be able to do very little on that next day.

### What has this got to do with autism and meltdowns?

This is a useful way to think about life for people with autism (and their families). Think about the things that might drain energy (or use up spoons) for someone with autism at school...

- A bright florescent light in the classroom
- Noise in the lunch hall
- Poor sleep
- Not eating enough
- Interoception – sensations within my own body, like hunger, pain or needing the loo
- Paired talk – the discomfort of close social interaction with a peer
- Social anxiety – do they like me? Am I weird? What are the rules to this game?
- Group work including negotiating and other people doing things a different way to you
- Anxiety around work – what if I make a mistake? What if I get it wrong?
- Problems with language processing – I am trying to listen really hard, but I keep missing bits and now I don’t know what to do ?!

Working together to make sense of the world

- Hyper vigilance – I am super aware of everything around me and I can't focus in on what I should be looking at or listening to
- Organisation – I'm struggling to think about what I am going to need for this lesson

... the list is endless and different for everyone with autism.

**The result is often that things get too much and we see a meltdown, seemingly without a direct trigger. For some young people, the reaction to this may be different, such as becoming very withdrawn or to begin trying to control their environment to make things more comfortable.**

For their families, the list may include lack of sleep, 'walking on egg shells' to avoid a meltdown, anxiety over how to help and the stress of trying to remember every trigger and pre-warn their child of every change.

### So how do we help?

Just as there are things that use up energy, there are things that give it back. Sleep is an obvious one and really the list is very different for each different person, but it could include;

- Time engaging in special interests or obsessions
- Time out in a quiet, low-distraction space
- Mindfulness exercise like colouring, yoga or deep breathing
- Positive sensory play, or deep pressure/heavy work exercises
- Meditation
- A drink or a snack
- Time alone
- Blocking the world out with ear defenders, or music on headphones

Plus some of the above factors can be mitigated with good autism-friendly strategies, such as a visual timetable, a pair of ear defenders or a Social Story. Just being aware of the need to balance energy expenditure can help us to plan a young person's day in a way that makes success more likely and ideally to teach them to recognize for themselves when their energy is running low. Very simply, if you put a lot in that drains energy, you will need to put some things in that give it back!

## Energy Accounting



Too much energy out and not enough in is bad. It leads to overload, and exhaustion.



Balancing your energy using energy accounting is good. It leads to feeling regulated, calm and happy.



Here are some examples:

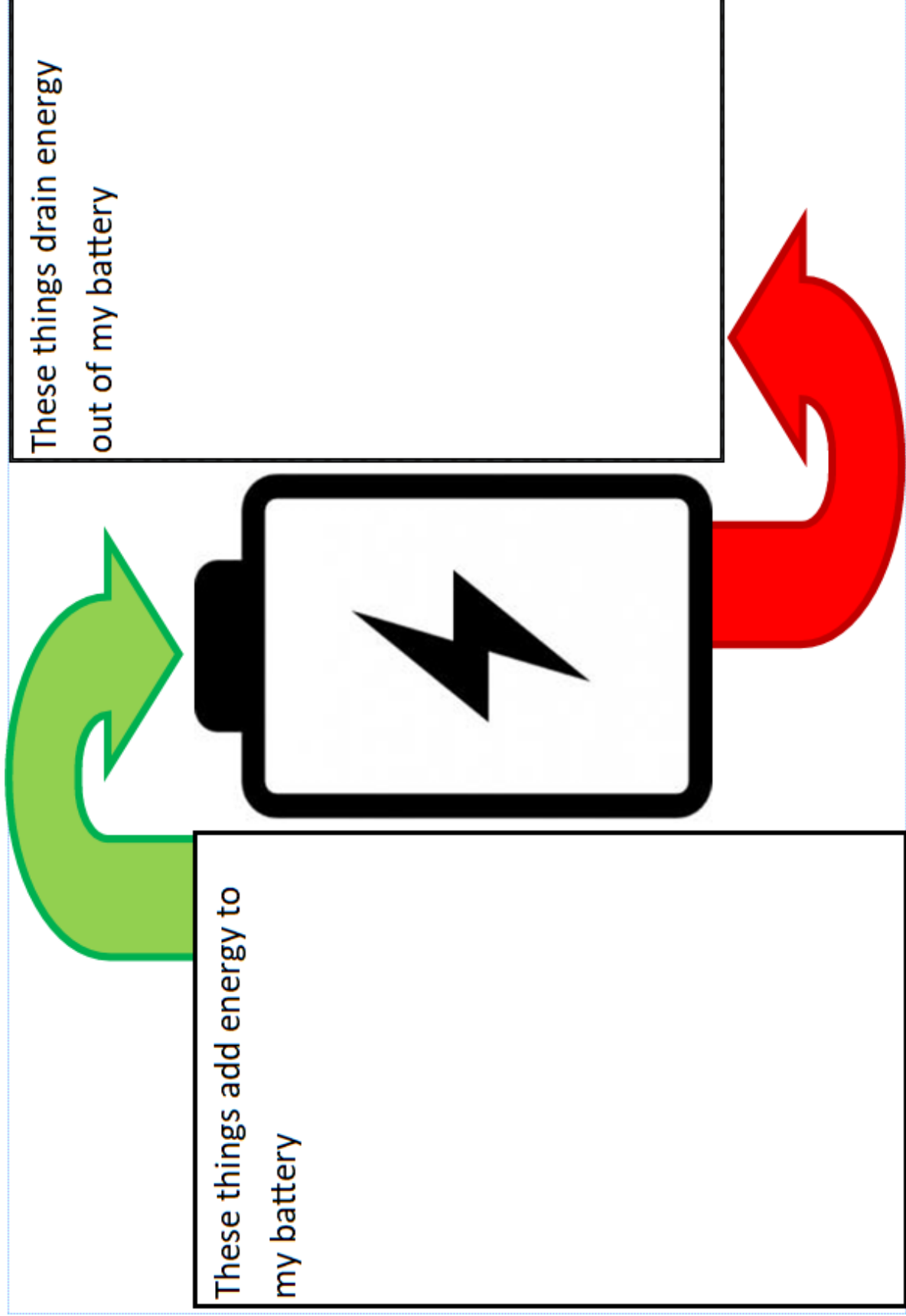
*Tom can struggle with the busy transition into school in the morning and the first lesson is always literacy, which he finds hard. Tom was having a lot of meltdowns midmorning, but school found that these stopped when they let him stay in the classroom during assembly and play with the Lego. He was then ready to continue with his day.*

*Sarah was holding her anxieties in during the school day and masking. When she got home each evening she would hide in her room under the duvet and if parents tried to engage with her, she would lash out. School put into place a break at the end of the morning and at the end of the afternoon to do some breathing exercises and mindfulness colouring. Sarah was then able to go home calmly and she only needed a few minutes in her room, before she could join her family downstairs.*

Sometimes this will include thinking about a child 'balancing' their energy over several days.

*Josh was really anxious about the school trip coming up. He coped brilliantly on the day, but afterwards he was so tired that he needed the next day off school. School staff understood that he had used up all of his energy the day before and were happy to record this as sick, rather than as unauthorised absence.*

**The key is to find a balance in activities or situations which use up energy and the things that give it back, always trying to leave a little energy left over to cope with any unexpected changes.**



These things add energy to  
my battery

These things drain energy  
out of my battery