

How can recognizing Ability but failing to recognize Atypical Energy Limits set people with Neurodevelopmental and Psychiatric Disorders up for failure?

Recognizing **strengths** while missing **energy limits** can create demands people cannot sustain, worsening failure and distress.

This question splits into three linked issues: **masked impairment**, **state-dependent performance**, and **misfit supports**.

Masked Impairment

Many neurodevelopmental and psychiatric presentations include real strengths, so outward ability can hide underlying vulnerability rather than rule it out (Michelini et al., 2024; Dan, 2023; Colzato et al., 2022; Young, 2026). High achievement can delay recognition because clinicians and institutions often infer that success means no disorder, even though compensation can depend on excessive effort, structure, or unusually favorable contexts (Astle et al., 2021; Thapar et al., 2016; Young, 2026).

- **Strengths and impairments coexist**, not as opposites but as uneven profiles across tasks and settings (Dan, 2023; Colzato et al., 2022).
- Failure to recognize neurodevelopmental conditions can cause **substantial harm** through delayed diagnosis and poor outcomes (Gajwani & Minnis, 2022; Cawthorne & Woolgar, 2025).
- Overreliance on categorical or trauma-first interpretations can obscure the actual barrier profile (Michelini et al., 2024; Gajwani & Minnis, 2022; Cawthorne & Woolgar, 2025).

State-Dependent Capacity

Several papers converge on the idea that performance is partly constrained by **brain energy availability**, not just by fixed skill level (Killeen et al., 2016; Kelley et al., 2025). In neurodevelopmental conditions, executive control can be conditionally available and deteriorate when demand exceeds energetic capacity, especially under fatigue, stress, or prolonged complexity (Rahimi, 2026; Killeen et al., 2016; Young, 2026).

- **Mitochondrial and ATP abnormalities** are reported across several neurodevelopmental conditions and linked to cognitive symptoms (Valenti & Vacca, 2023; Payares et al., 2024; A et al., 2021).
- Stress raises energy demand on a **finite budget**, pushing resources toward short-term survival and away from long-term optimization (Kelley et al., 2025).
- Cognitive problems often involve **attention, executive function, processing stability**, and behavioral regulation, all domains likely to fail first when resources are strained (Gil-González et al., 2025; Zelazo, 2020; A et al., 2021).

Misfit Supports

When systems notice ability but ignore atypical endurance, they often raise expectations instead of redesigning demands, which sets up repeated underperformance, self-blame, and misdiagnosis (Colzato et al., 2022; Young, 2026). The literature favors **transdiagnostic, dimensional, and context-sensitive** assessment because diagnosis alone often misses the actual interaction between strengths, stress, and energy-limited functioning (Michelini et al., 2024; Astle et al., 2021).

- **Task-context fit matters** because the same cognitive style can be adaptive in one setting and disabling in another (Colzato et al., 2022; Jami et al., 2025).
- Better support likely requires identifying both **potential and limits**, rather than training only deficits or assuming uniform capacity (Colzato et al., 2022; Zelazo, 2020).
- Ignoring these profiles impedes finding the real barriers children and adults face and the best route to support (Astle et al., 2021; Cawthorne & Woolgar, 2025; Young, 2026).

Recognizing ability without recognizing **atypical energy limits** sets people up for failure by mistaking uneven, effort-dependent capacity for stable capacity. The result is often delayed recognition, excessive demands, and preventable distress rather than a true lack of ability.

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