FTS WHITE PAPER

The Perpetual Cycle

For Brilliance and Burnout in High Achieving Neurodivergent Women

By Becky Hirst and Karen Cocks, 2026

We did not set out to build a model. We set out to stop feeling blindsided by our own burnout. Somewhere between hundreds of voice notes sent between us over a couple of months, we noticed we kept describing the same six moments, in the same order, over and over, just with different names for what had triggered them that week. This paper is that pattern, written down properly, with the research that says we are not imagining it.

The Hypothesis

High achieving neurodivergent women are routinely told two separate stories about themselves. One story says they are brilliant: full of ideas, fast to execute, capable of pushing change through systems that resist it. The other story says they burn out: overwhelmed, overstimulated, needing more rest than everyone around them. Most support, from workplaces and from wellbeing content alike, treats these as two different problems to manage separately, one to celebrate and one to fix.

Our hypothesis is that they are not two problems. They are one cycle. The same traits that produce the ideas and the impact are the ones that produce the crash, and the crash is not a malfunction in an otherwise brilliant system, it is part of the cycle. If that is true, then trying to keep the brilliance while engineering out the crash is not a fix, it is a misunderstanding of how the whole thing works.

Executive Summary

This paper sets out a six stage cycle, Ideas, Create, Impact, Push, Crash, Reset, developed from our own repeated experience and cross checked against four bodies of published research: work on incubation and creative insight, work on mind wandering during rest, the challenge hindrance stressor framework from organisational psychology, and recent findings linking ADHD traits to divergent thinking and real world creative output.

We are not presenting this as a diagnostic tool or a claim about every neurodivergent woman's experience. We are presenting it as a pattern we found first in ourselves, then found again in the literature, and are now offering as language. The paper walks through how we found it, what the

research says about why each turn of the cycle behaves the way it does, and what changes when you stop treating the crash as separate from the brilliance that came before it.

The Body: How We Found the Pattern

Two Voice Notes, One Pattern

Becky and Karen do not work in the same room. Some days they do not work in the same country. What they had instead, in the early months of building FTS, was a long, ongoing stream of voice notes, sent whenever one of them had a thought worth saying out loud. Neither of them set out to track a pattern. But after enough months of it, a shape started to repeat.

A voice note about a brilliant idea, sent in the middle of the night because it would not wait. Days later, a voice note about that idea becoming a real plan. Then one about it going out into the world and meeting resistance. Then, reliably, a voice note that sounded different, flatter, further apart from the last one, describing exhaustion that had arrived faster than either of them expected. Then a gap. Then rest. Then, without fail, a new voice note about a new idea, as if the whole thing had never happened.

It took hearing this back enough times for both of them to say some version of the same thing to each other: this keeps happening, and it keeps happening in the same order.

Drawing It Out

Becky is the one who turned the pattern into a shape. Her instinct, once something repeats often enough to name, is to draw it, so she sketched the six moments as a circle rather than a line, because a line implies an end point and nothing about this ever felt finished. Ideas led to Create, Create led to Impact, Impact led to Push, Push led to Crash, Crash led to Reset, and Reset led straight back round to Ideas again. The shape mattered as much as the labels. A circle says you are not broken for coming back round to the start. A circle says this is the design, not the failure.

Adding the Clock

The first full version of the diagram was not trying to timestamp the stages with real duration. It was trying to give the reader a second, more intuitive way of naming their own position, a clockface layered around the outside of the ring so someone could say, in effect, I am sitting at five o'clock right now, and mean nearing Push, without reaching for the more clinical sounding stage label. It made sense on paper, and it made sense to Becky, whose brain likes exactly this kind of layer, a second symbolic system sitting underneath the first one, letting you translate between them depending on which one fits the moment.

It did not make sense to Karen. Read back together, the clock version asked the reader to hold two systems at once, the six named stages and a twelve position analogue sitting on top of them, translating between the two in real time just to say where they were. Karen's own description of the effect was blunt: it hurt her ears.

That reaction has a real anchor in the literature on autistic and AuDHD cognition, not just a personal quirk. Monotropism, the attention theory set out by Murray, Lesser and Lawson (2005, Autism), describes autistic attention as tending to pull tightly into one channel at a time rather than spreading evenly across several running at once, so holding two live symbolic systems simultaneously, translating a label into a clock position and back, costs more for a monotropic attention style than it would for a mind built to run several channels in parallel. It sits alongside the wider, well established literature on atypical sensory processing in autism, including auditory sensitivity (Robertson and Baron-Cohen, 2017, Nature Reviews Neuroscience), where an added processing layer can register as something closer to physical discomfort than ordinary inconvenience. We are not claiming this proves what was happening for Karen in that specific moment, only that hurting to process is a documented reaction in AuDHD cognition, not an overreaction to a diagram.

Stripping It Back

So they took the clock off. What is left is the version in this paper, six stages, six one line descriptions, arranged in a ring, nothing else competing for attention. It is a smaller, plainer object than the first draft, and it is the one that actually works when someone is standing in the middle of Push wondering why everything suddenly feels unbearable. The stripped back version is not a compromise. It is the editing.

The Research

We went looking for research after we had already named the pattern, not before, because we wanted to know if what we had noticed in ourselves held up against anything published, not to build a model to fit a citation list. It held up better than we expected. Four findings map directly onto four of the six turns in the cycle.

Turn in the cycle	What the research says	Source
Reset back to Ideas	Deliberately stepping away from a problem, incubation, measurably improves the odds of solving it, compared with working straight through	Sio and Ormerod, 2009, meta-analysis, Psychological Bulletin
Reset back to Ideas	Letting the mind wander during a break specifically boosts creative performance on problems left unresolved beforehand	Baird et al., 2012, Psychological Science
Push into Crash	Stressors you can push through and grow from behave differently, physiologically and psychologically, from hindrance stressors, the red tape and blocked goals that do not move no matter how hard you push. Hindrance stressors are the ones that reliably predict burnout	Cavanaugh et al., 2000, challenge hindrance stressor framework

Turn in the cycle	What the research says	Source
Ideas and Crash, same cycle	ADHD traits positively predict divergent thinking, fluency, flexibility and originality, up to a point, and specifically track with real creative achievement in writing, humour and visual art, not just laboratory test scores	Stolte et al., 2022, Frontiers in Psychiatry

None of this makes the six stage model itself a clinical instrument, and we are not claiming it does. It means the pattern we are naming has already been documented in pieces, by researchers who were not looking at us, or at each other, or at the specific shape of a founder's week. We just seem to be living inside a cycle other people have already measured from the outside.

The Model

This is the first white paper in this series to carry a visual, because the model itself is a diagram, not just an argument.

Ideas. Curiosity kicks in. The dots start connecting. Possibility takes over.

Create. Plans, projects and solutions come together, often fast.

Impact. The work goes out into the world, advocating, challenging, collaborating, making change happen.

Push. The system pushes back. Bureaucracy, resistance and plain unfairness make it exhausting to keep going.

Crash. Overwhelmed, overstimulated, running on empty. You saw it coming. You crash anyway.

Reset. Rest, reflect, recharge. Give yourself grace and protect your energy, on purpose.

Then back to Ideas. That is the cycle.

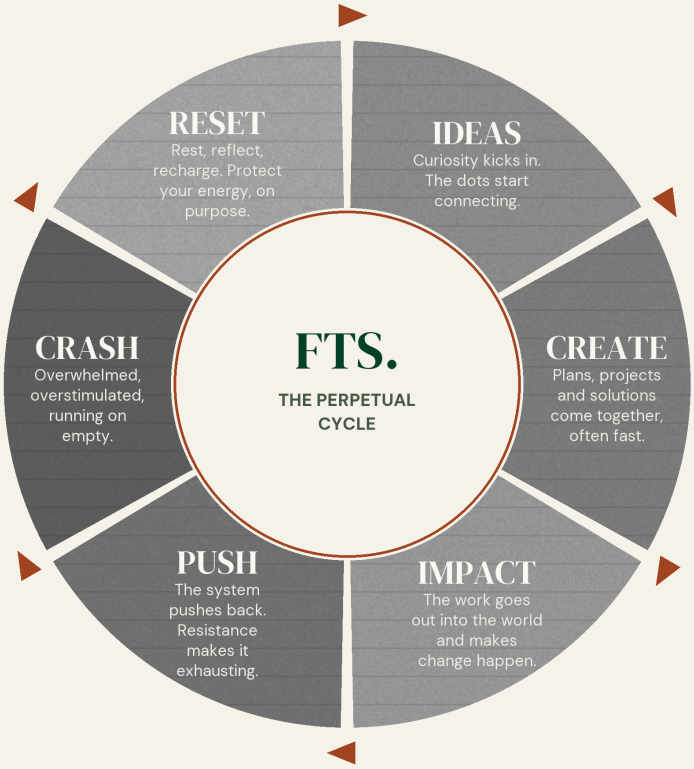

Figure 1. The Perpetual Cycle. Six stages, one loop.

The Fix: What Changes When You Stop Separating Them

Most support aimed at high achieving neurodivergent women tries to solve one half of this cycle without touching the other. Productivity advice targets Ideas, Create and Impact. Wellbeing advice targets Crash and Reset. Almost nothing addresses Push, the stage where a genuinely capable person meets a system that will not move, because Push is uncomfortable to name, it points at the organisation rather than the individual.

What we think actually helps is naming the whole circle out loud, on purpose, before you are standing inside Crash wondering what happened to you. Knowing Push is coming does not make bureaucracy move any faster, but it changes what the crash means when it lands. It stops being evidence that something is wrong with you and becomes a recognised part of the cycle, arriving in a familiar way.

The trade offs in this cycle matter, particularly in leadership roles. If organisations want to benefit from the insight, creativity and drive of neurodivergent women, they must also design for what follows sustained Push. That means reducing avoidable resistance where they can and putting practical mechanisms in place for rest, recovery and Reset where they cannot. Burnout should never be treated as the price of brilliance, but neither should the conditions that lead to it be ignored while the brilliance is welcomed.

We do not just push hard. We care hard. That includes caring hard about the crash, not just the parts either side of it.

Disclaimer

This model draws on published research into incubation, stress and creative cognition, cited throughout. It is not itself a clinical instrument, a diagnostic tool, or a claim that every high achieving neurodivergent woman moves through these six stages in this order. It is a pattern we noticed in ourselves first, checked against what the research says about rest, burnout and divergent thinking, and now offer as a tool in case it helps you name your own.

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Version log

The Perpetual Cycle, by Becky Hirst and Karen Cocks

Our white papers are forever evolving. As our thinking deepens and the research grows, we update them. This log shows the date of the latest version of this paper and the changes made along the way.

VERSION	DATE	WHAT CHANGED
1.1	13 September 2026	Subtitle updated: for creativity and burnout is now for brilliance and burnout. This version log added.
1.0	8 September 2026	Original publication.