

OxPCF & Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC Webinar: Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Depression

Introduction

Depression can present differently in neurodivergent children and young people, making it harder to recognise and support. This webinar, hosted by OxPCF and Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC, explored the signs of depression, key considerations for neurodivergent individuals, and effective strategies for support.

This document provides a summary of the key points discussed, including expert insights, practical strategies, answers to common questions, and recommended resources. The goal is to help parents, carers, and professionals understand how to support neurodivergent children experiencing depression with a tailored and compassionate approach.

Key Insights from the Webinar

Recognising Depression in Neurodivergent Individuals

Symptoms may look different in neurodivergent children and young people. Some key indicators include:

- Persistent low mood or sadness.
- Loss of interest in activities, including previously loved special interests.
- Changes in sleep patterns (sleeping too much or too little).
- Changes in appetite and eating habits (overeating or lack of appetite).
- Low energy and fatigue, often leading to difficulties in daily tasks.
- Physical symptoms, such as unexplained aches and pains.
- Irritability or intolerance of others, which may be more noticeable than sadness.

Unique Considerations for Neurodivergent Individuals

- Depression may not always present as sadness. It can show up as increased withdrawal, shutdowns, meltdowns, or changes in routines and interests.
- Sensory sensitivities may become more heightened, making everyday environments feel overwhelming.
- Changes in special interests (loss of enjoyment or hyperfocus as an escape) can be an important indicator.
- Communication differences – Some autistic and ADHD children may struggle to express feelings of sadness verbally.

Strategies for Supporting a Neurodivergent Child with Depression

◆ Reconnecting with Interests & Routine

- Encourage activities and hobbies that previously brought joy.
- Maintain a consistent structure to provide a sense of security.

◆ Addressing Environmental Factors

- Reduce sensory overwhelm where possible.
- Identify and remove potential stressors contributing to low mood.

◆ Encouraging Movement & Outdoor Time

- Gentle physical activity (e.g., walking, yoga, stretching) can help improve mood.
- Access to natural light and fresh air can have a significant impact.

◆ Supporting Sleep Hygiene

- Keep consistent sleep and wake times.
- Reduce sensory triggers at night (use blackout blinds, weighted blankets, or white noise if needed).

Seeking Professional Support

- The CAMHS Neurodevelopmental Conditions (NDC) pathway provides support for complex cases involving neurodivergence and depression.
- Traditional therapies (e.g., CBT) may need adaptations to be effective for neurodivergent individuals.
- Medication may be an option, but it is only one part of a wider support plan and should be considered alongside lifestyle adjustments and emotional support.

Q&A Summary – Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Depression

⚠ Unfortunately due to a technical issue during the webinar, we are unable to provide a transcription of the Q&A session. However, we have included answers to some common questions about depression in neurodivergent children.

1 How do we differentiate between depression and autistic burnout?

- Autistic burnout is often linked to chronic overwhelm and results in shutdowns, exhaustion, and difficulty with daily tasks
- Depression includes ongoing low mood, loss of interest in activities, and changes in sleep or appetite
- Both can overlap, so focusing on reducing stressors and supporting emotional recovery is key.

2 How can we help a child who has lost interest in their special interests?

- Encourage engagement in a low-pressure way, without forcing activities.
- Explore adjacent interests that might feel easier to access.
- Check for external stressors that may be affecting their ability to enjoy activities.

3 What can schools do to better support neurodivergent children with depression?

- Provide predictability and flexibility within the school environment.
- Offer low-demand, quiet spaces where children can regulate emotions.
- Encourage breaks and movement to help with emotional regulation.
- Ensure staff are trained in recognising how depression presents in neurodivergent children.

4 Are there specific therapies that work better for neurodivergent children?

- Adapted Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – Adjusted to work with neurodivergent thought patterns and communication styles.
- Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) – Helps build self-acceptance and emotional resilience.
- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) – Works on reducing distress by meeting underlying needs.

5 What role does family support play in recovery?

- Recognising early signs and helping identify patterns and triggers.
- Advocating for accommodations at school and in daily life.
- Modelling healthy coping strategies, such as emotional regulation techniques.
- Reassuring the child that they are not alone and that their feelings are valid.

Useful Resources

These resources have been recommended by both professionals and parent carers as valuable sources of support, guidance, and information for families raising neurodivergent children. The list includes mental health services, education support, advocacy, sensory regulation, and local organisations that provide free or community-led assistance.

Sleep & Sensory Support

- [Cerebra](#) – Advice on sleep difficulties and sensory processing for neurodivergent children.
- [The Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation](#) – Strategies and resources for supporting sensory regulation.
- [Fledglings](#) – A social enterprise offering sensory-friendly products to help children with regulation and daily living.

School & Education

- [Autism Education Trust](#) – Guidance for parents and schools on supporting autistic children in education settings
- [IPSEA](#) (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice) – Free legal advice on EHCPs, SEND rights, and school support
- [SENDIASS Oxfordshire](#) – Independent, impartial support for families navigating SEND services.
- [Oxfordshire's SEND Local Offer](#) provides a directory of SEND services, including education, health, and social care
- [Contact](#) – A national charity supporting families of disabled children with education rights, benefits, and advocacy.

Mental Health & Anxiety Support

- [Oxfordshire CAMHS](#) – The main mental health service for children and young people in Oxfordshire
- [Living Well with Neurodivergence](#) – A service from Oxford Health CAMHS in partnership with Autism Oxford for those open to Oxfordshire CAMHS offering courses, peer support, and resources for neurodivergent young people and their families.
- [YoungMinds](#) – A leading mental health charity offering support and advice for young people and parents.
- [The Curly Hair Project](#) - an organisation that helps people on the autistic spectrum and the people around them, founded by autistic author Alis Rowe
- [MindEd for Families](#) – Free online mental health training for parents and carers.
- [PDA Society](#) – Resources for understanding Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) and reducing anxiety-driven avoidance.
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Children & Young People’s Services – Support for mental health, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies for young people.
- [Tellmi](#) – A safe, moderated peer support app for young people struggling with mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression.
- [Supportive Steps](#) – A peer support service run by CAMHS for parents and carers supporting children with mental health challenges.
- [Walking With You \(WWY\) Group](#) – A peer support group for parents and carers in Oxfordshire, offering online sessions via Teams. This group provides a safe space to share experiences and learn strategies for supporting children’s mental health, supported by Oxfordshire CAMHS.

Local Oxfordshire Charities and Organisations

[Oxfordshire SENDIASS](#) (Special Educational Needs & Disability Information, Advice and Support Service) SENDIASS Oxfordshire provides free, impartial advice to help parents and carers understand their child's rights and access the right school support, EHCP guidance, and dispute resolution.

[Autism Family Support Oxfordshire \(AFSO\)](#): AFSO supports autistic children and young adults through:

- Parent workshops and training.
- Social groups and activities for young people.
- Advocacy services for families.

[Oxfordshire Mind – Wellbeing for Children & Young People](#): Oxfordshire Mind offers:

- One-on-one emotional support for young people.
- Workshops and social groups to develop coping skills.
- Resources for parents and professionals.

[Carers Oxfordshire](#): Carers Oxfordshire provides support for unpaid carers, including:

- Advice and guidance on benefits, wellbeing, and legal rights.
- Training and workshops for carers.
- Peer support groups for parents caring for children with additional needs.


Recommended Books: Supporting Neurodivergent Children with Anxiety & Depression


These books have been recommended by professionals and parent carers as helpful resources for understanding and supporting neurodivergent children and young people experiencing anxiety and depression. They focus on sensory-friendly, practical, and strengths-based approaches, rather than traditional CBT-focused methods.


Books for Parents & Carers


Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children: A Guide for Thriving – Dr. Luke


Beardon explains how reducing environmental triggers rather than focusing on behaviour changes can significantly ease anxiety in autistic children.

 **The Parents' Guide to Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism** – A parent-friendly guide focusing on sensory-based strategies, emotional regulation, and reducing overwhelm.

 **Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life** – A non-CBT approach to understanding and managing stress, helping children regulate emotions naturally.

 **Neurodivergent Insights: A Handbook for Autism, ADHD & More** – A strengths-based guide covering anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation from a neurodivergent-affirming perspective.

 **The Big Book of Dysregulated Love** – Explores emotional dysregulation, meltdowns, and burnout, helping parents support children experiencing low mood and anxiety.


 **Can't Not Won't: A Story About a Child Who Couldn't Go to School** – Eliza Fricker shares her lived experience of supporting a child experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), with practical guidance and validation.

The Family Experience of PDA: An Illustrated Guide to Pathological


Demand Avoidance – Eliza Fricker combines illustrations and real-life stories to help parents understand PDA-driven anxiety and strategies for supporting children with demand avoidance.


Changing Our Minds: How Children Can Take Control of Their Own


Learning – Dr. Naomi Fisher, a clinical psychologist, explores alternative approaches to learning and why traditional education can contribute to anxiety and depression in neurodivergent children.


 **A Different Way to Learn: Neurodiversity and Self-Directed Education** – Naomi Fisher provides insights into how self-directed education can be beneficial for anxious and disengaged neurodivergent children, particularly those experiencing school-based trauma or EBSA.

Books for Children & Young People


 **All Birds Have Anxiety** – Uses simple language and visual storytelling to explain anxiety in a non-clinical and neurodivergent-friendly way.


 **The Panicosaurus: Managing Anxiety in Children Including Those with Autism Spectrum Disorder** – A story-based approach to helping young children understand and manage anxiety.


 **Braver Than You Think: A Child's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety** – Specifically written for neurodivergent children, avoiding CBT-based techniques in favour of sensory-friendly strategies.


 **My Big Emotions: A Book for Autistic Children About Managing Big Feelings** – Helps autistic children recognise and understand their emotions, including low mood and anxiety.

 **The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens** – Provides self-regulation strategies, sensory-friendly coping mechanisms, and emotional support for autistic young people.

 **The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic** – Includes self-care, emotional regulation, and anxiety management strategies for autistic girls and non-binary teens.

 **How to Be Me** – A fictional story about a neurodivergent child navigating social anxiety, emotional overwhelm, and self-acceptance.

 **Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels** – A powerful memoir about anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation from a neurodivergent perspective.

 **The Teenager's Guide to Burnout** – A neurodivergent-friendly guide for teens experiencing burnout, exhaustion, and overwhelm, offering practical strategies to recover and rebuild energy.

Stay Connected and Share Your Voice with OxPCF


Join OxPCF (Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum) to stay informed, connect with other parent carers, and have your voice heard in shaping services for SEND families.

Links


 Website: www.oxpcf.org.uk

 Email: info@oxpcf.org.uk

 Join our Mailing List: eepurl.com/dNVTTE

 SEND Connect Newsletter: tinyurl.com/SENDConnectNewsletters


 Events: oxpcf.org.uk/events

 Volunteer with Us: oxpcf.org.uk/volunteer

 Join our Online Peer Support Group: facebook.com/groups/oxsendroom/

 Join our Community WhatsApp Group: [chat.whatsapp.com/
BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE](https://chat.whatsapp.com/BRH9Knm8fuNBIFY1OhrZIE)

Help Us Build Our Resource Page!

We're putting together a comprehensive resource page to support families of neurodivergent children in Oxfordshire. If you have any useful recommendations—whether it's a local support group, charity, website, book, or practical resource—we'd love to hear from you!  Please email your suggestions to: info@oxpcf.org.uk