



SWAN
Psychology

ADHD and Depression

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I'm Rita Lacerda

❖ Clinical Psychologist | Founder of SWAN Psychology

*Training, consultancy, and neurodivergence-affirming practice:
therapy, coaching and assessments*

❖ AuDHD woman (she/her), late-identified

informing neurodivergence-affirming clinical and organisational work

❖ I work with NHS services, charities, and organisations to support:

- Neurodivergence-affirming clinical practice
- Staff wellbeing and burnout
- Adaptations, risk, and complexity



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sadness

tired

*No
motivation*

When you hear 'depression',
what words immediately come to mind?

hopelessness

numb

Can't get out of bed



ADHD & Depression Bingo

- Accidentally became furniture
- Inbox: 4,732 unread
- Emotional support duvet
- Applied for the Olympics in overthinking
- Felt guilty for resting
- Convinced everyone secretly hates you
- "I'm fine 😊 "
- Started 12 things. Finished... none
- Avoided a simple task, then spent 3 hours feeling guilty
- Cried because the toast fell butter down



Why Me?

ADHD doesn't cause depression.

But these factors can make us more vulnerable.



BIOLOGY

- Dopamine differences
- Emotional regulation
- Rejection sensitivity
- Sleep difficulties
- Impulsivity
- Sensory sensitivities



ENVIRONMENT

- Criticism & judgement
- Masking & camouflaging
- School experiences
- Work stress & demands
- Lack of understanding
- Impossible expectations



INTERNAL BELIEFS

- I always mess things up.
- I'm unreliable.
- I'm lazy.
- I'm too much.
- I'll fail anyway.
- I'm not enough.

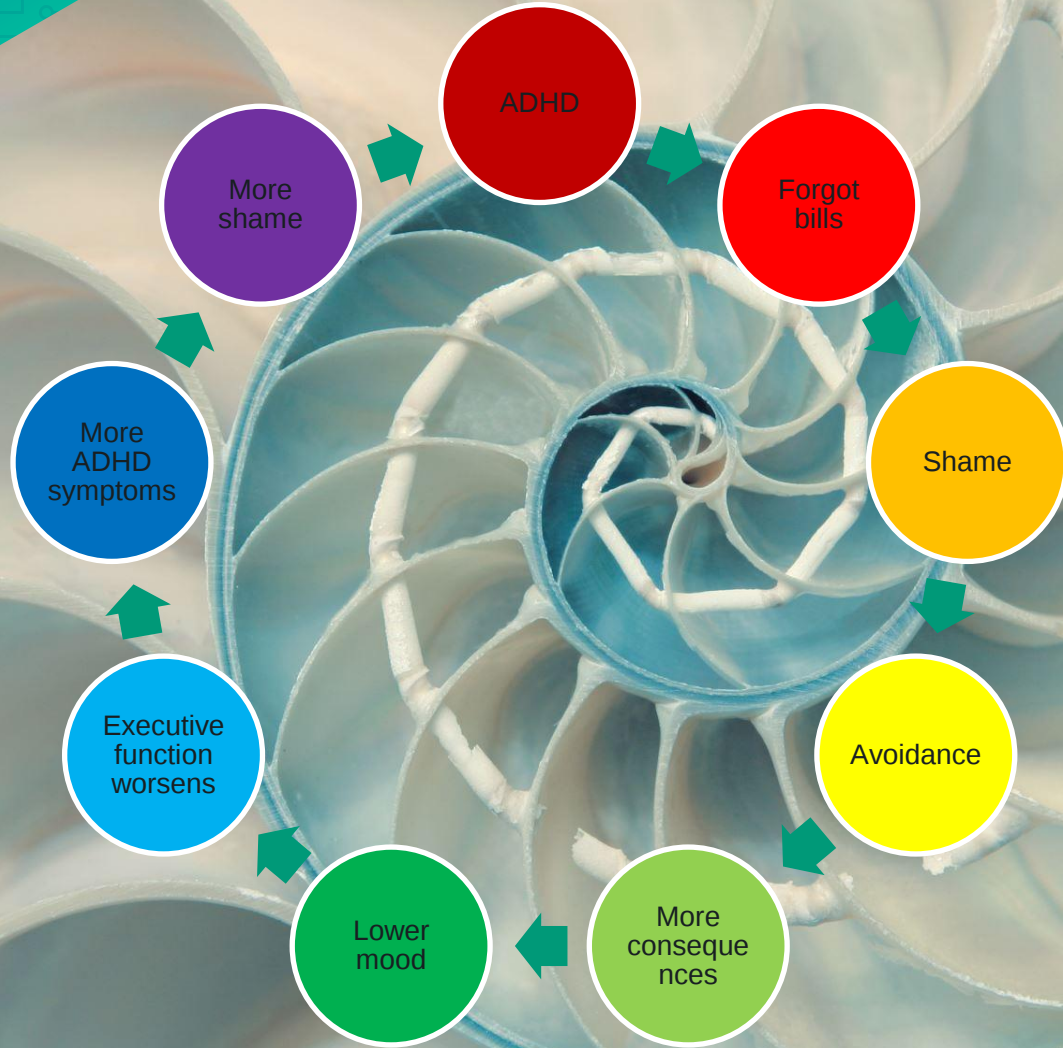


Over time, these experiences can shape how we see ourselves.
And that can fuel low mood and depression.



ADHD, Burnout or Depression?

Ask yourself...	ADHD	Neurodivergent Burnout	Depression
When did it start?	Lifelong	After prolonged stress or high demands	Episode (can happen at any time)
What happens with something you love?	Can still hyperfocus	Interest is there, energy isn't	Little or no pleasure, even in favourites
How does rest affect it?	Helps recharge	Essential but often not enough on its own	Often little improvement with rest alone
How does your energy feel?	Variable and interest-based	Drained, depleted	Heavy, slowed, empty
What's happening emotionally?	Frustration, overwhelm	Irritability, numbness	Persistent sadness, emptiness or hopelessness
What helps most?	ADHD support & structure	Reduced demands & recovery	Treatment for depression + support





Atypical distress signals

- Neurodivergent people are at higher risk
- Risk is often missed, not overstated
- Distress may look different

May look like:

- *Shutdown, silence, withdrawal*
- *Exhaustion or loss of function*
- *Increased masking or people-pleasing*
- *Sensory overwhelm*
- *Reduced executive function*

Low expressiveness ≠ low distress or risk



Safety plans should teach others

- How I show distress
- What makes things worse
- What helps
- How to communicate with me
- Who to involve (and who not to)





Fundamentals of psychological wellbeing

- Diet/hydration – no evidence for dietary restrictions – just eating well
- Exercise
- Activity – work, education, leisure (impact on functioning, mood)
- Managing sleep issues
- Managing substance use (including legal substances: caffeine, nicotine, alcohol)





But really...

What actually helps

Reduce shame

- One compassionate conversation.
- One person who gets it.
- Diagnosis.
- Peer groups.
- Realising you're not lazy.

Reduce friction

- Medication
- Body doubling
- Visual reminders
- Lower expectations
- Environmental changes
- Less decision-making



Executive Functioning in ADHD

Support the system, not just the symptom.

Small, consistent supports across these areas create the biggest change.



1. ACTIVATION

Getting started when the task feels hard or boring.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ Body doubling
- ✓ 5–10 min rule
- ✓ Visual timers
- ✓ Lower the barrier to start
- ✓ Movement first
- ✓ Celebrate tiny starts



2. FOCUS

Sustaining attention and shifting it when needed.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ Reduce distractions
- ✓ Noise, fidgets, music
- ✓ Clear priority
- ✓ Chunk the task
- ✓ Pomodoro / timers
- ✓ Mindful resets



3. EFFORT

Regulating energy, motivation and mental stamina.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ Break tasks down
- ✓ External motivation (accountability)
- ✓ Pair with novelty
- ✓ Reward progress
- ✓ Balance hard + easy
- ✓ Rest before crash



4. EMOTION

Managing frustration, overwhelm and big feelings.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ Name it to tame it
- ✓ Pause & breathe
- ✓ Self-compassion not self-criticism
- ✓ Emotion tools (grounding, journaling)
- ✓ Supportive people
- ✓ Plan recovery time



5. MEMORY

Holding information, accessing it, and recalling it.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ External memory aids (lists, apps)
- ✓ Visual reminders
- ✓ Notes everywhere
- ✓ Repeat & rehearse
- ✓ Link it to meaning
- ✓ Reduce cognitive load



6. ACTION

Monitoring progress and following through.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓ Checklists & trackers
- ✓ If–Then plans
- ✓ Review & reflect
- ✓ Adjust, don't abandon
- ✓ Build routines that flex
- ✓ Progress > perfection



THE BIG PICTURE

Environment + tools + self-understanding = more capacity, less shame, more freedom.



But really...

What actually helps

Restore dopamine

Not "fun."

- Meaning
- Curiosity
- Novelty
- Play
- Creativity
- Movement
- Connection
- Tiny wins

Repair the nervous system

- Sleep
- Sensory regulation
- Time in nature
- Recovery
- Saying no
- Unmasking



But really... *What actually helps*

(re)Build identity and pride

Depression says
"Everything about me is wrong."

ADHD-informed work asks
"What if my brain simply works differently?"



Things I Wish We Could **All** Intuitively Know *(and Don't)*



**You're probably
not lazy.**

Your brain just needs
different support.



**Rest isn't
earned.**

You need it to function,
not as a reward.



**Consistency isn't
the only measure
of success.**

Progress is not linear.



**Productivity
isn't your worth.**

You are more than
what you produce.



**Self-compassion
isn't self-indulgence.**

It's the foundation
for change.



**You don't need
to recover alone.**

Connection changes
everything.



**Small changes
count.**

Tiny shifts create
big ripples.



**Your brain
deserves support,
not punishment.**

Work with it, not
against it.



**You are not too much. You are not behind.
You are a human with a brilliant, complex brain.**



Depression tells us that our future will look exactly like today.

ADHD tells us our brains work differently.

Neither of those means we are incapable of building a life that works for us.

Recovery isn't becoming neurotypical.

It's building a life that fits your brain.



Where to get help

Therapy

- Nottinghamshire Talking Therapies *(free, self-referral, limited number of sessions)*
- The Offload Project *(very cheap, usually staffed by trainees)*
- Nottingham Counselling Service *(means-tested, affordable, different kinds of therapy available)*
- Nottingham Women's Centre *(affordable counselling for self-identified women)*
- Not cheap but clearly the best, me 😊 – info@swanpsychology.org



Where to get more help

Peer support, informational and charities

- ✨ Nottingham Adult ADHD Support Group ✨
- Disability Direct Nottingham
- ADHD UK
- Autistic Nottingham
- Autistic Parents UK
- Meetup



THANK YOU!

Stay in touch!

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