



The Relationship between Neurodivergence and Mental Health

Facilitators

Emily Coribel – Lead Practitioner in MHST, Nurse

Lucy Cicoria – Education Mental Health Practitioner in MHST



Agenda

Neurodiversity Umbrella

Focus and Attention

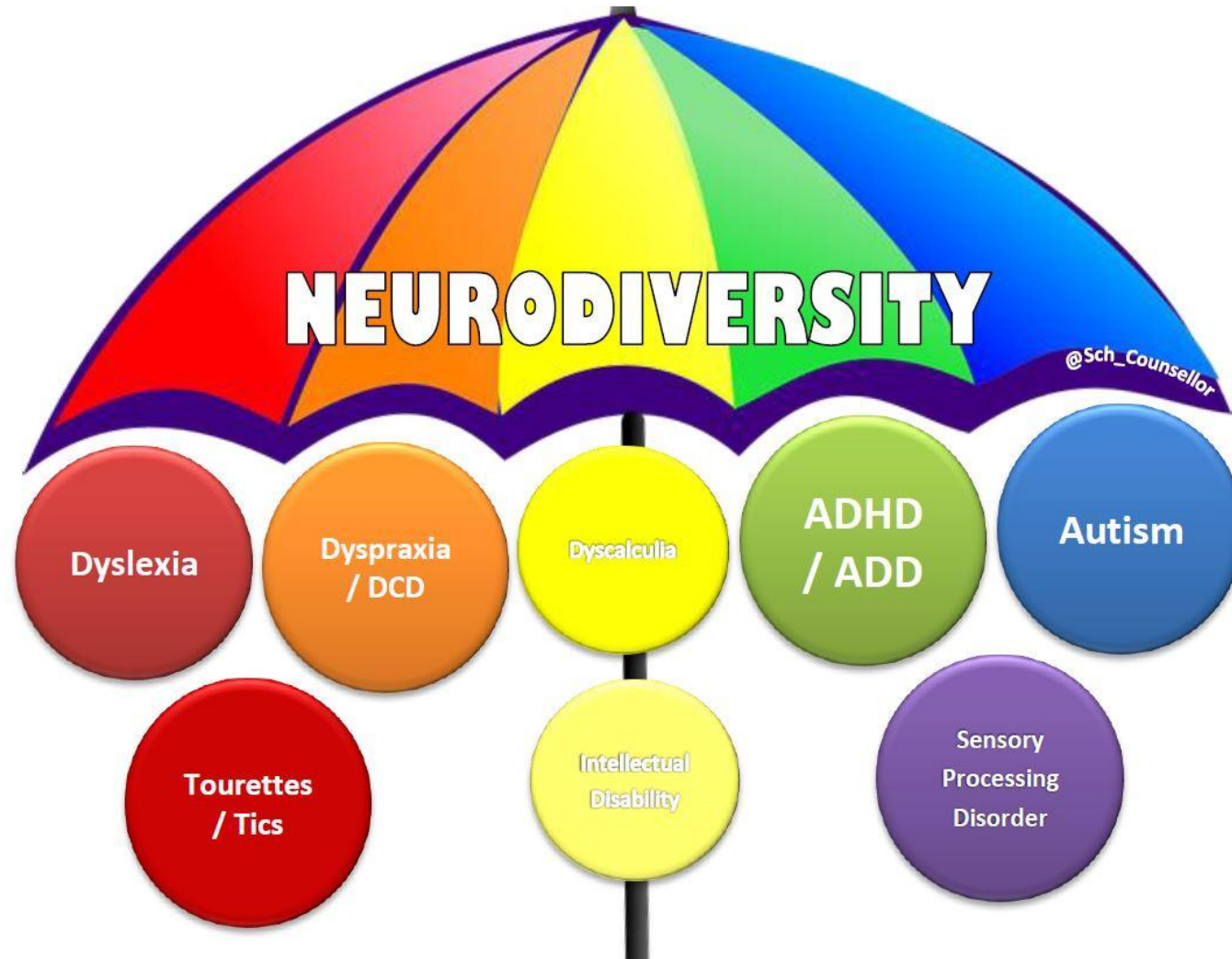
Differences with Emotions

Sensory Sensitivities

Social Factors

Layers of Identity

Neurodiversity Umbrella



Focus & Attention



Executive Functioning Difficulties:

Everyday tasks feel harder



More stress + more negative feedback



Lower self-esteem + emotional overwhelm



Anxiety / low mood



Even harder to use executive functioning

👉 Cycle continues

An Example: Monotropism



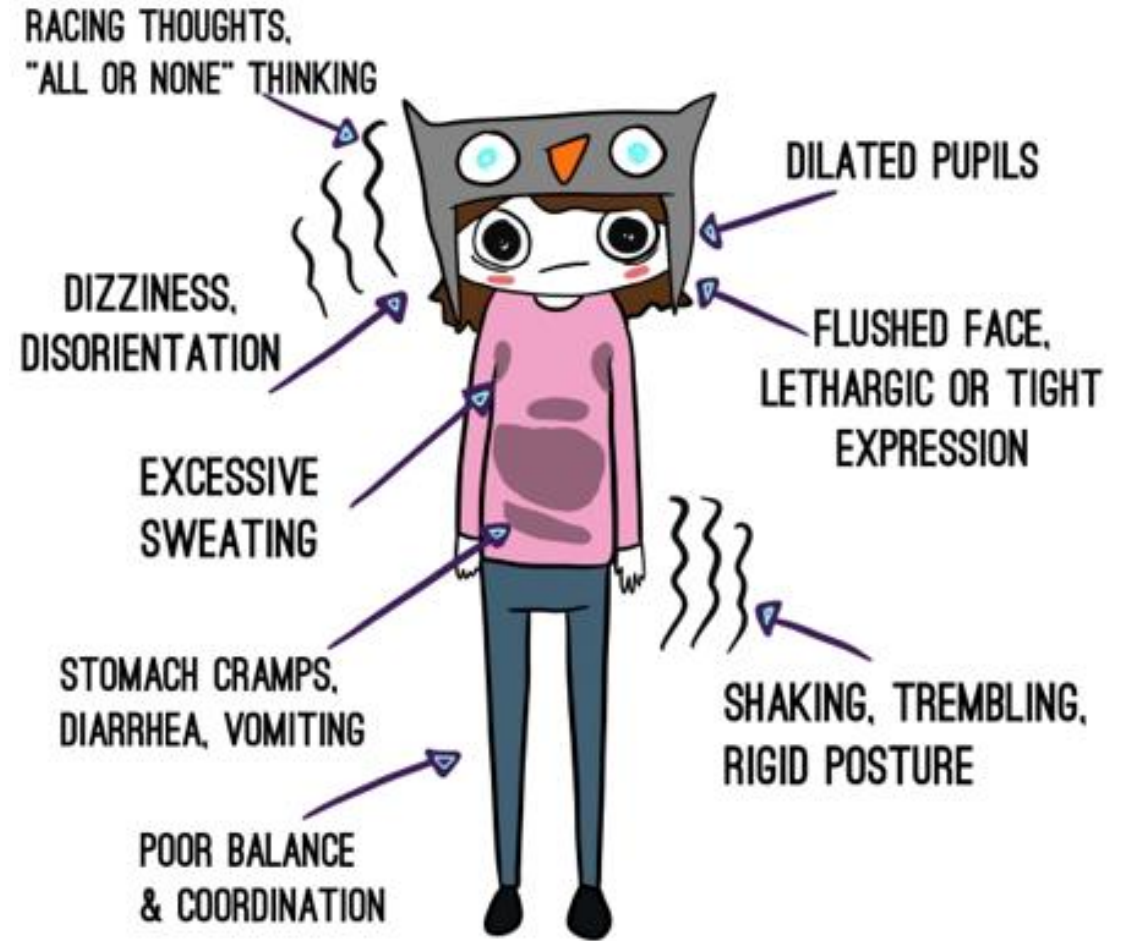
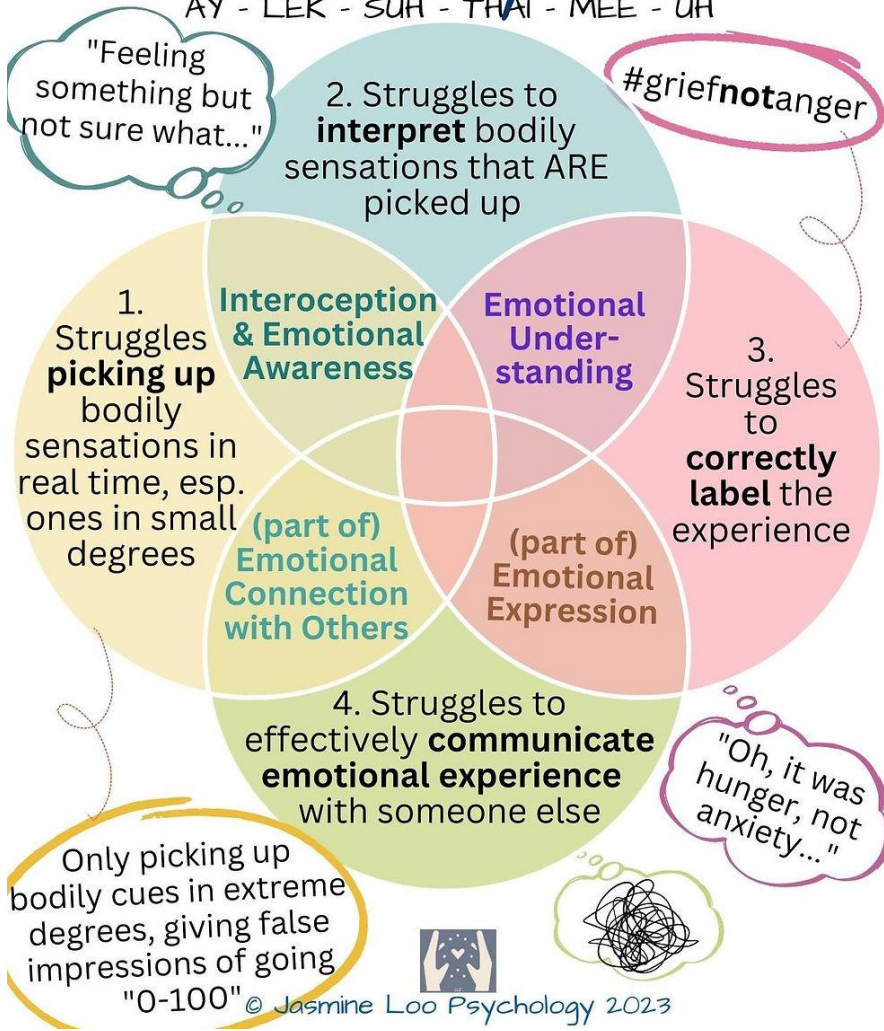
The Autistic
Advocate



- Difficulty with transition leading to stress, overwhelm, juggling different expectations and commitments
- May fixate on worries or difficult events
- Increased anxiety and rumination
- If little time for interests reduced “flow” experiences
- Burnout and fatigue from task switching

Alexithymia

AY - LEK - SUH - THAI - MEE - UH



Differences with Emotions

SENSORY SEEKING VS. SENSORY SENSITIVE



Sensory Differences

- Can lead to frequent experiences of overwhelm, as everyday environments may feel intense, unpredictable, or even painful.
- This ongoing strain on the nervous system increases vulnerability to anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and avoidance behaviors, which can in turn limit opportunities for social engagement and confidence-building.
- When these sensory needs are misunderstood or dismissed, individuals may also develop low self-esteem, shame, or low mood.
- Over time, the cumulative effect of coping with an overwhelming sensory world can contribute to exhaustion or burnout.

Social Factors: Masking



- Low self-esteem and loss of identity
- Mental exhaustion -> Burnout -> Dysregulation ... Cycle continues
- Delayed or missed support due to apparent coping
- Internalized difficulties
- Relationships and connection can feel effortful or inauthentic which may lead to feelings of lack of belonging or loneliness

Social Factors: Double Empathy

The DOUBLE EMPATHY Problem

in a nutshell.



NeuroWild

SQUIRRELS have NO PROBLEM communicating and making friends with other SQUIRRELS.



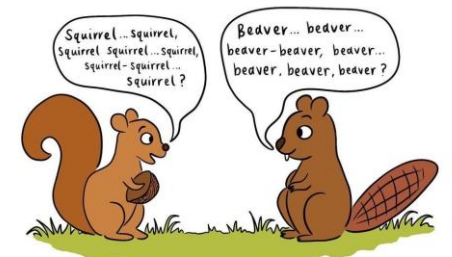
NeuroWild

And BEAVERS have NO PROBLEM communicating and making friends with other BEAVERS.



NeuroWild

BUT when SQUIRRELS and BEAVERS try to communicate...



NeuroWild

Curiously, society decided that it's ONLY the SQUIRRELS' job to repair any miscommunications.



NeuroWild

How very STRANGE.

Does anyone else feel like that's a MISTAKE?



NeuroWild

FIND YOUR TRIBE



Masking/ Camouflaging

The continuous effort to suppress natural autistic traits and mimic neurotypical social behaviors.

Chronic Sensory Overload

Constant exposure to overwhelming sensory environments without adequate breaks or coping mechanisms.

Executive Function Demands

Persistent demands on planning, organizing, self-regulation, and task initiation that exceed a person's capacity.

Causes of Neurodivergent Burnout

Social & Communication Demands

Navigating complex, unwritten social rules and communication styles that don't come naturally.

Life Transitions & Stressors

Major life changes (e.g., starting college, a new job, moving) can push an already strained system over the edge.

Lack of Understanding & Support

Feeling misunderstood, judged, or unsupported in their struggles.



Signs of Neurodivergent Burnout

Changes in sleep



Headaches or other stress-related physical pain

Difficulty initiating or completing tasks



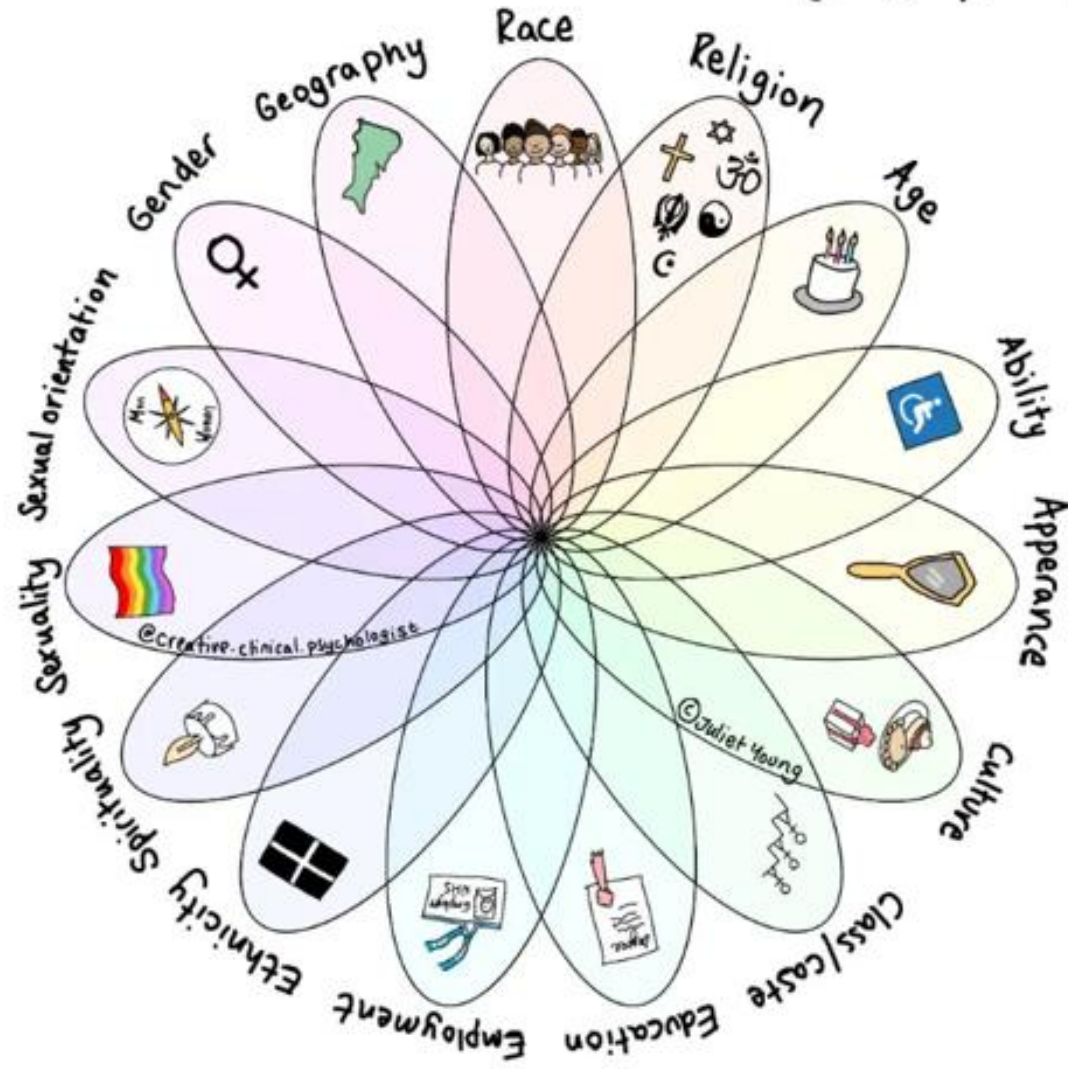
Avoiding social interactions

Difficulty concentrating or making decisions



Social GRRRAACCCESSS

(Burnham, 2012)



Take Home Message...

The relationship between neurodivergence and mental health does not stem from the individuals themselves, but rather missed opportunities for acceptance, inclusion and adjustments due to lack of awareness and understanding in society.

How does this all relate to anxiety-based challenges coping with the school environment and/or learning?





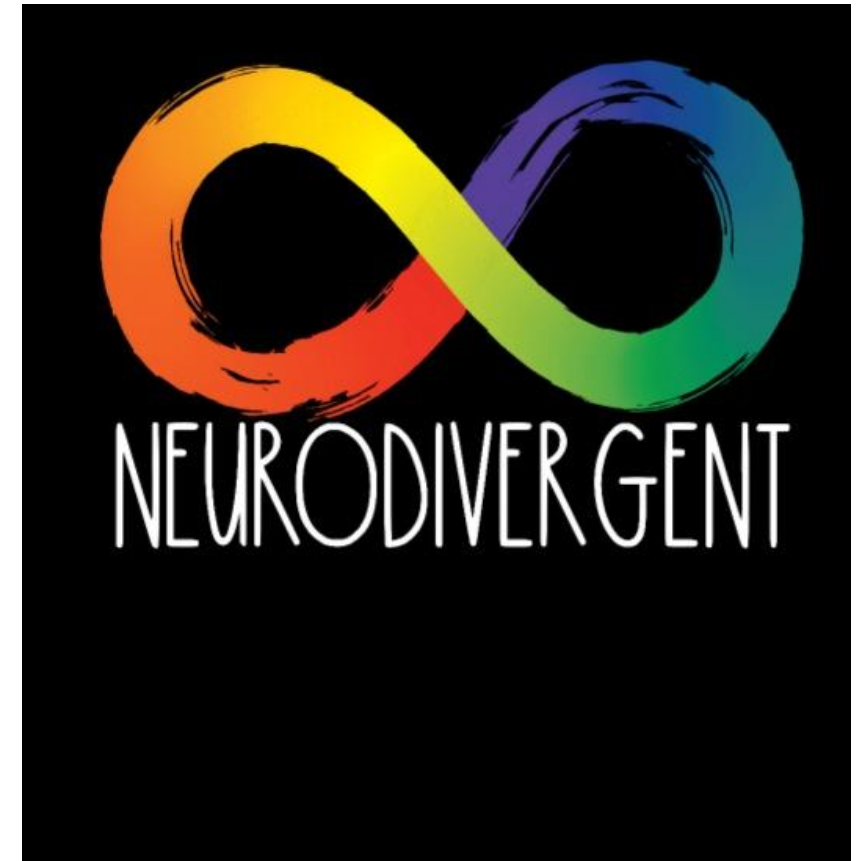
Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

- Following the Covid-19 pandemic the UK (like many other countries across the world) has seen a rapid increase in the numbers of children ***experiencing challenges with school attendance and/or engagement with learning.***
- Research and casework has identified that in the majority of cases these challenges are underpinned by ***excessive anxiety.***
- The term currently used in Bexley to describe this presentation in a child is '***Emotionally-Based School Avoidance***' (EBSA) as this is a broad umbrella term that recognises that the avoidance has its root in emotional wellbeing and / or mental health issues.
- Avoidance becomes the ***automatic coping strategy*** that a child uses to reduce the overwhelming feelings of stress / anxiety / exhaustion they are experiencing.

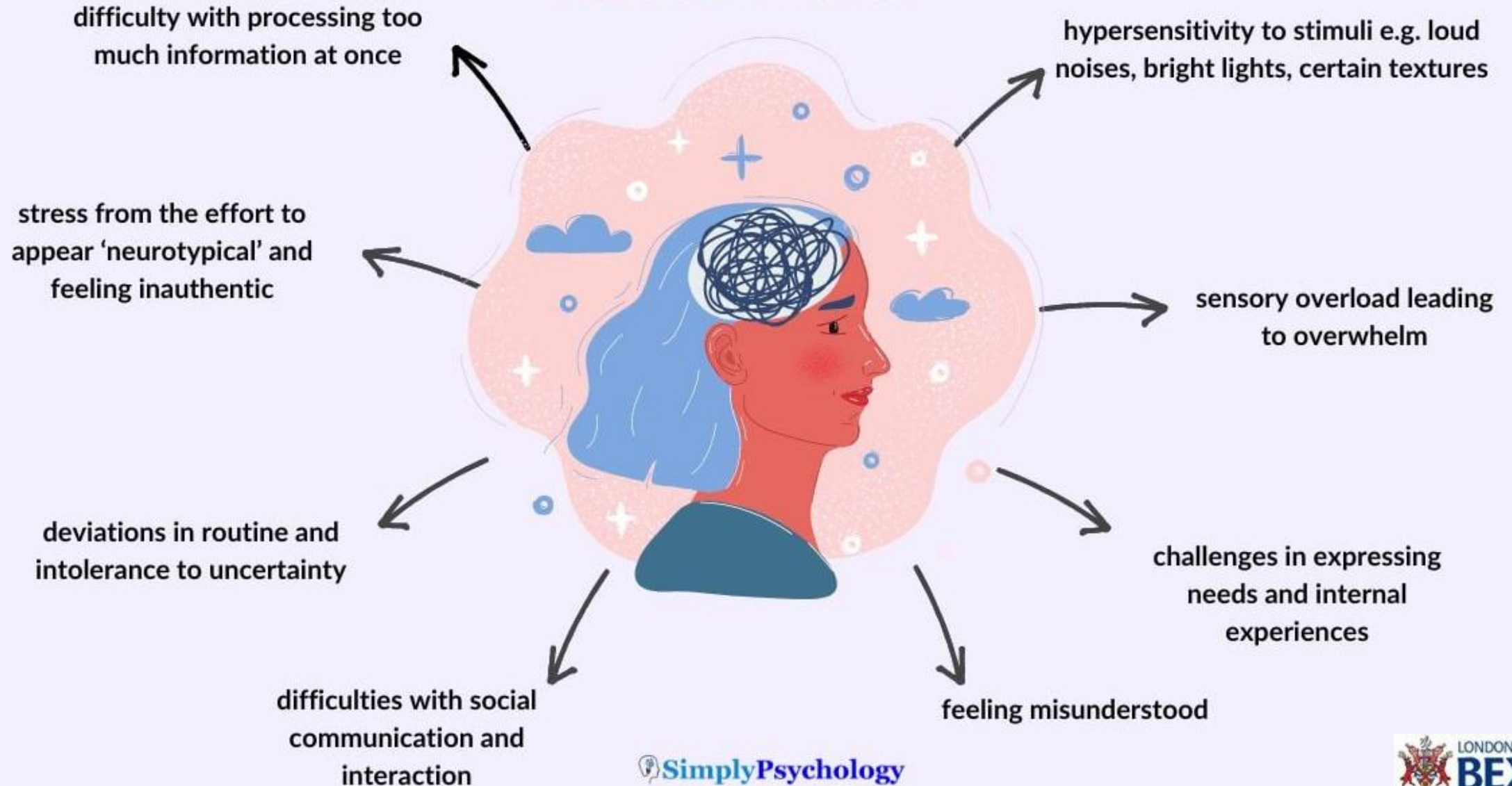
Links between Neurodivergence and the risk of Emotionally Based School Avoidance - EBSA

- Research shows that the *risk* of EBSA is **significantly higher** for children who are **neurodivergent**.
- The highest risk is for children who are **autistic**.
- **92.1%** of children currently experiencing EBSA are **neurodivergent** and **83.4%** are **autistic**.
(Connolly, Constable and Mullally, 2023)
- Over **30% of autistic students** in England are identified as being persistently absent from school (Hamilton, 2024)

That is around 1 in 3 autistic children across England



WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY IN AUTISM?



Autism, Anxiety and the risk of EBSA: why are autistic children more at risk?

Children with autism experience **higher levels of anxiety**, experience it **more intensely** and over a **longer period of time** than non-autistic children:

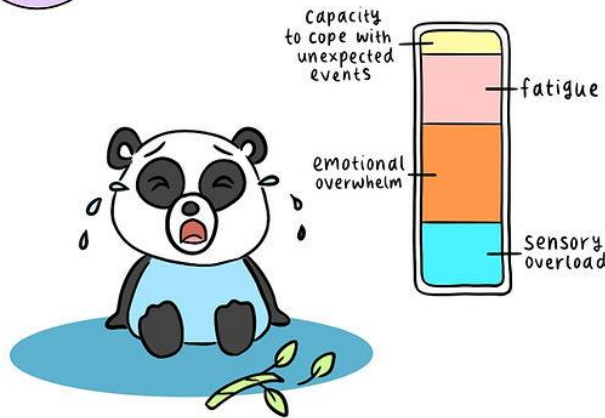
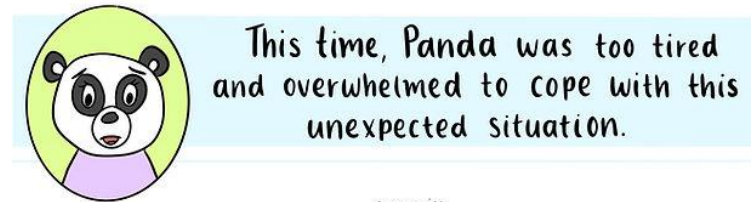
- Separation anxiety (attachment)
- Social anxiety (relational)
- Performance anxiety (learning)
- Environmental anxiety (safety and sensory processing)

They also experience differences in relation to **managing their internal world**, including their **emotions**:

- Interoception
- Alexithymia
- Masking/social camouflaging
- Executive Functioning



Dynamic Capacity, Exhaustion and Burnout

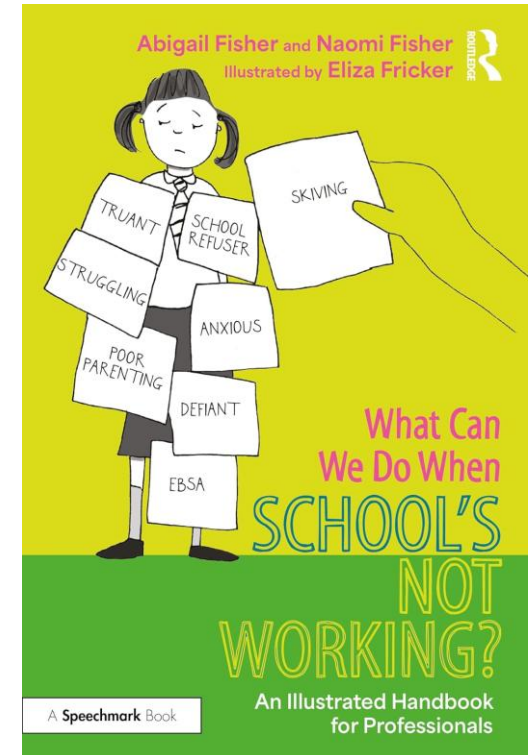
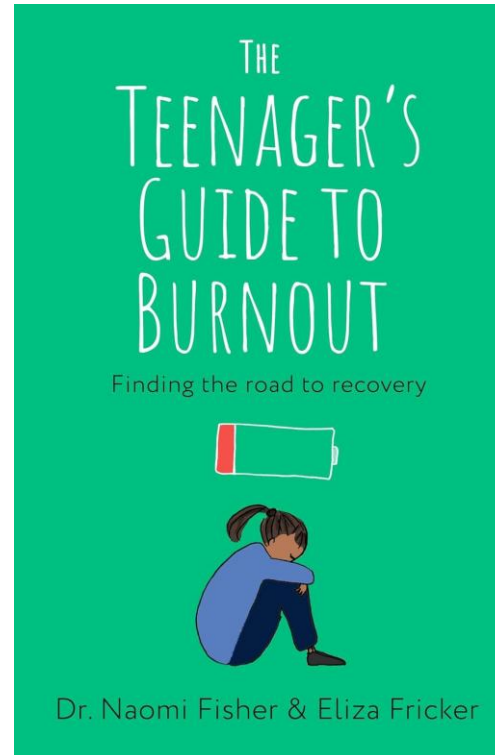
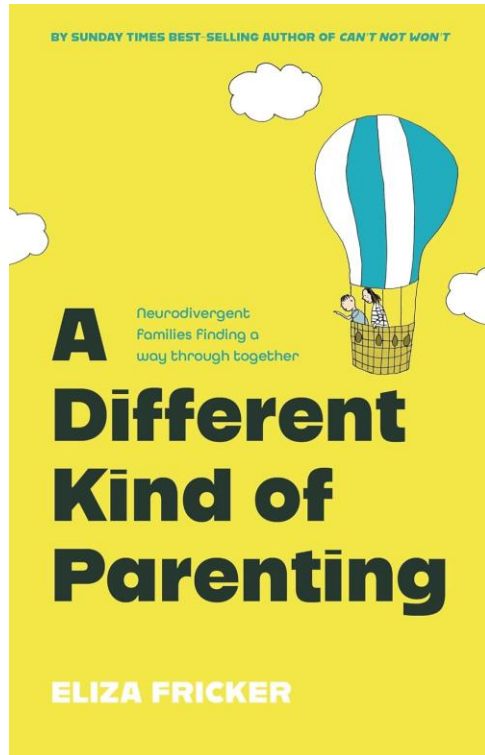


Check his bar - this response is not a choice. He's coping the best he can. NeuroWild



Resources

[Home](#) | [NeuroWild](#)



Time for a break before..... Session 2:

What can we do to protect
and support our
neurodivergent children's
mental health?

