

Depression and the Neurodivergent Nervous system

Why it settles in and what helps it shift

What do we mean by depression?

Not just sadness, not just a bad week. It is a persistent flatness or heaviness that stays. Interest and curiosity drain out of the things we used to cherish and enjoy. Energy and hope deplete. You slowly start to see yourself and your life in a different way. Depression can arrive after something hard, or seemingly out of nowhere.

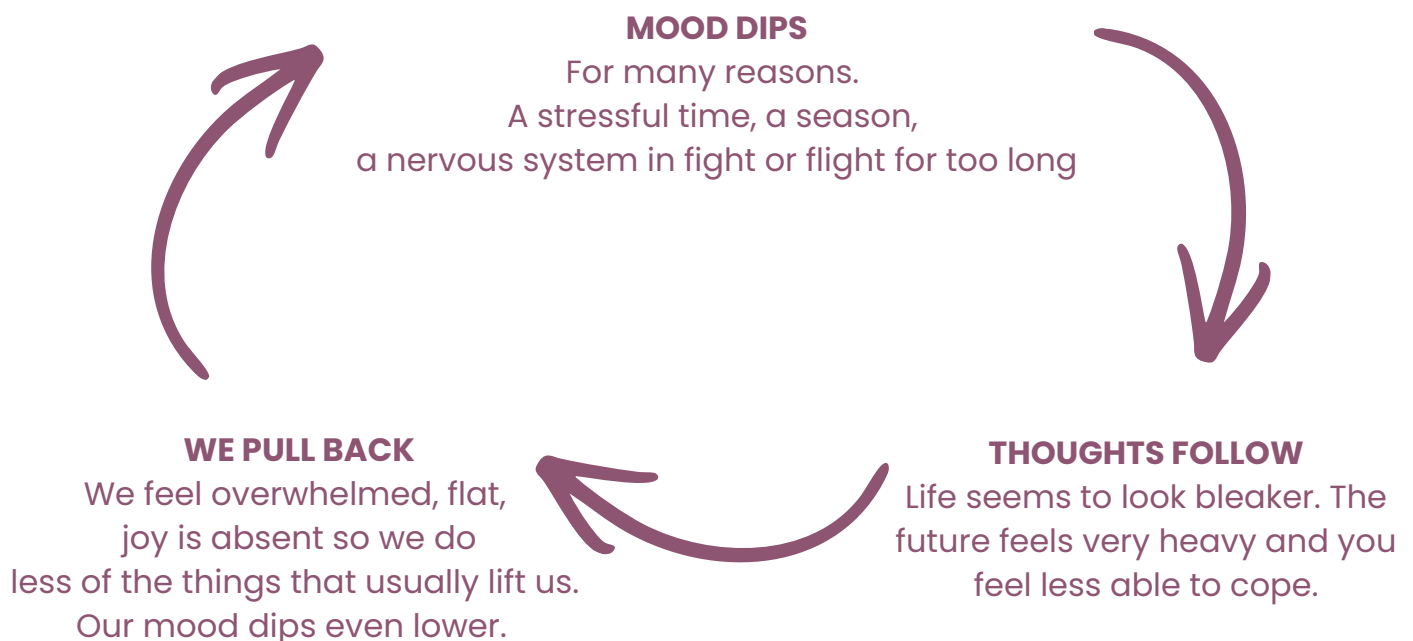
Neurodivergent people are more likely to experience depression than the general public. But we often ask the question:

Does ADHD/Autism cause depression?

But it is more complex than this simple question. We must ask ourselves instead:

What is it like for me to live in a neurodivergent body and nervous system, in a world built around a different way of being?

Why the depression loop is so hard to break



Why this hits harder for us

Depression can settle on anyone, neurodivergent or neurotypical. However, some things cause us to lose our balance and we are more likely to fall into the loop. Climbing out of that swirling tidal wave can be harder for someone who is also facing the challenges of being neurodivergent.

Emotions arrive fast and often furious

Emotions can stumble in at top speed and collide with a whole host of other challenges and sensitivities. We search for an emotional dimmer switch that often feels out of reach.

Rejection strikes with emotional and physical force

A glance, a distinctive tone, a significant pause, a delay in a reply. The pain is visceral, internal and highly consequential. Often our instinct is to mask, people please, shut down or instigate overthinking.

Shame and misunderstanding

Enduring years of hearing we were lazy, too sensitive, too careless, too needy, too chaotic. Words that generate shame and low self esteem. A self belief that we are not enough.

Executive function is already stretched to its limit.

On a good day we can face task paralysis and procrastination. Depression is highly skilled at stealing whatever is left.

Which of these have you experienced?

It does not always look like sadness

Depression is often described in terms of low mood. This does not always fit every person. For some of us this means our depression becomes invisible to other people.

Shutdown rather than displays of sadness

Less crying and emotional outbursts, more withdrawal and quiet. Words escape us as we struggle to articulate our needs. We often retreat into our own safe space and distance ourselves from the outside world.

Flatness and emptiness that is hard to describe

This void can often feel like sensory overload, tiredness, burnout or complete and utter overwhelm, both physically and mentally. A fog that never really dissipates. The challenge here is telling them apart and this can feel impossible when sitting on the inside of all this turmoil.

Not knowing what you feel and unable to express your emotions.

Identifying our emotions can often be difficult for us, particularly if we have Alexithymia (a difficulty with identifying, understanding and putting words to our own emotions, it isn't a lack of emotions, we can feel emotions very strongly, but we have trouble working out what we are feeling or explaining it). Depression can leave us feeling empty of emotions, a feeling of nothingness or extreme tiredness.

Special interests start to wane

When we stop experiencing joy from the things that usually absorb us, or we stop gravitating towards our special interests, this can be one of the first signals that something has shifted.

What depression does to your thinking

Depression, no matter how it presents itself, it does not just change how we feel. Instead, it strives to change what our minds feed us. Along with how much we believe what the depression is saying.

Thoughts start to feel like facts

An example of this is when 'I am useless' stops being just a thought that pops into our head and starts to be a way to describe ourselves. Language and words become our truth. One thing that helps is to name it. Not 'I am useless' but 'oh the useless comments are playing again'.

Good memories become out of reach

When we are in the depths of a low mood, it often gravitates towards negative memories and thoughts. The good memories are still there, they are just harder to find in the abyss of self doubt and despair.

The spiral

Our thoughts sit high and mighty on the fairground loop rather than be naturally processed and move on. By allowing them some freedom, spoken, written down or drawn, they tend to cascade out of the loop and the loop loses its velocity.

Everything asks for more energy than we have

Concentration, memory and starting a task take a huge hit, on top of whatever else we are already carrying. Write things down, set alarms, place the information outside of your head and somewhere you can see it.

Remember, not every dark thought is a distortion. Some of our thoughts are an accurate reading of a world that has not made room for us and our needs. The aim is not to convince or argue ourselves out of what is true. Instead it is to notice when our mind has taken something true, distorted it and then allowed it to bleed into every part of our life.

Is it depression or is it burnout?

From the outside these can look almost identical. Exhaustion, withdrawing, letting things slide, feeling overwhelmed, losing interest. However, underneath the surface they are doing very different things. Why does this matter? Because what helps one can make the other worse.

When is it burnout

Built up over time from too many demands and too little capacity

Deep exhaustion, physical, mental and social fatigue

Sensory sensitivity increases along with brain fog

Inability to mask, may need to stim more

Loss of daily skills, washing, eating, communicating

The issue is overload and not how we see ourselves

When is it depression

Low mood most days and negative views of self, world and future

Pleasure drains out of things we used to enjoy

A sense of guilt, worthlessness and hopelessness attacks us

Sleep and appetite are disrupted

It can arrive after something very hard or from nowhere.

Suicidality

**If you are having thoughts of not wanting to be here, please tell someone. Your GP, someone you trust or Samaritans on 116 123, free and open at any hour*

Overlap

Social withdrawal
Food and appetite changes
Decision making is impaired
Executive functioning is affected
Tearful, anxious, easily upset
Difficulty concentrating
Sense of emptiness
Extreme fatigue and exhaustion

Finding your way back, what can help

Complete rest and recuperation both physically and emotionally. Reduce any demands and responsibilities where possible, reaching out for help to those that can support you.

When there is a little capacity back, gently and slowly add things in to your life that help restore joy and hope. Your special interests will play a major part in allowing you to rest and digest and self regulate. But not before you have increased your capacity to do these things. You may need to test the water and see how you respond to a small change.

If you continue to shoulder heavy burdens and responsibilities your capacity will not recover and the burnout gets heavier. Doing more in burnout is the last thing you need. Concentrate on reducing stress, fight and flight, overwhelm and demands.

Samaritans, 116 123, any time

NHS 111, option 2 for mental health

Your GP, for a starting conversation about depression, medication, or referral.

Informed by research summarised by Dr Megan Anna Neff, Neurodivergent Insights, neurodivergentinsights.com