

OxPCF & Oxfordshire CAMHS NDC Webinar – Compassion and Self-Compassion for Parents and Carers

Introduction

Hosted by OxPCF in partnership with Oxfordshire CAMHS Neurodevelopmental Conditions (NDC) team, this webinar explored how compassion-focused approaches can help parents and carers support both themselves and their neurodivergent children. Clinical psychologists Dr James Stacey and Dr Jenny Chapman shared insights from Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), introducing practical strategies for cultivating compassion in daily life.

This document summarises the key themes, psychological concepts, interactive exercises, and audience Q&A, with useful resources for those wishing to explore compassion further.

Key Insights from the Webinar

Understanding Compassion

Compassion involves a deep awareness of suffering, both our own and others, combined with the wish and effort to relieve it.

Dr Stacey and Dr Chapman highlighted that compassion is not just being kind. It requires courage, wisdom, warmth, and a willingness to face difficulty rather than avoid it.

Why Compassion Matters

Research shows that compassion and self compassion can:

- Reduce stress, anxiety, and depression
- Increase emotional resilience and wellbeing
- Help parents regulate emotions, respond calmly, and model these skills for their children

Parents of neurodivergent children often face chronic stress, guilt, and self criticism. Developing self compassion helps counter these pressures and supports the whole family's wellbeing.

The Three Flows of Compassion

1. Self to others, showing care and understanding to others
2. Others to self, allowing and accepting care from others, which many carers find difficult
3. Self to self, being kind to ourselves, validating our emotions, and meeting our own needs

Participants were encouraged to reflect on which flow comes most naturally and which feels hardest to practise.

The Compassionate Mind: Understanding Our Brains

Human brains contain both an old brain, responsible for survival instincts such as fight, flight, and freeze, and a new brain, responsible for imagination, planning, and self evaluation.

While the new brain enables creativity, it can also generate worry, self criticism, and rumination.

Compassion training helps activate the soothing system, the part of the brain associated with calm, safety, and connection.

The Three Emotional Systems

1. **Threat system:** *Detects danger and can lead to anxiety, anger, or avoidance*
2. **Drive system:** *Motivates us to seek rewards or achievement*
3. **Soothing system:** *Creates feelings of safety and contentment*

When the threat system dominates, we can feel overwhelmed. Compassion helps rebalance these systems, reducing threat responses and promoting calm regulation.

Compassion Attributes and Skills

Six Core Attributes

1. Care for wellbeing
2. Sensitivity to suffering
3. Sympathy
4. Empathy
5. Distress tolerance
6. Non judgement

Practical Skills for Developing Compassion

- Compassionate attention, mindfully noticing experiences without judgement
- Compassionate imagery, using imagination to evoke warmth and safety
- Compassionate thinking, reframing self critical thoughts into supportive ones
- Compassionate behaviour, acting courageously to relieve suffering, even when difficult

Guided Exercises from the Session

Soothing Rhythm Breathing

A simple grounding exercise to calm the threat system and activate the body's natural soothing response.

Purpose: To bring awareness to your breath, slow down your internal rhythm, and create a sense of safety and steadiness.

How to practise:

1. Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting loosely in your lap.
2. Gently close your eyes or soften your gaze.
3. Begin by noticing your natural breathing pattern without trying to change it.
4. Gradually slow your breathing down so that it feels steady and soothing. You might breathe in for a count of four, and out for a count of five or six – but choose a pace that feels natural.
5. As thoughts arise, acknowledge them gently and then bring your focus back to your breath.
6. If it helps, silently say to yourself, “Notice and return” each time your mind wanders.
7. Continue for two or three minutes, then gently bring your awareness back to the room.

Tip: Practise this whenever you notice tension building – before a meeting, after a challenging moment, or when your child is upset.

Imagining the Compassionate Other

A reflective exercise to evoke a sense of warmth, support, and emotional safety.

Purpose: To help you access the feeling of being cared for and understood, even when life feels difficult.

How to practise:

1. Sit comfortably and take a few slow, soothing breaths.
2. Bring to mind an image of a compassionate presence. This could be a person, an animal, a symbol, or even a sense of light or warmth.
3. Imagine that this presence embodies wisdom, strength, and kindness.
4. Picture their face or form, notice their calm expression, and imagine their caring tone of voice.
5. Allow this compassionate other to direct warmth and care towards you. Notice how it feels in your body to receive this kindness.
6. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the image or to the feeling of being cared for.
7. When you are ready, let the image fade and bring your focus back to your breathing before opening your eyes.

Tip: You can return to this image whenever you need reassurance or strength. Over time, you may find it easier to extend the same compassion to yourself.

Q&A Summary – Compassion and Self-Compassion for Parents and Carers

The following questions were submitted by parent carers during the webinar and have been anonymised for privacy. Our CAMHS professionals have provided answers to help address common concerns and offer practical strategies for supporting neurodivergent children and young people with their coping needs.

1. What are some everyday ways to bring more compassion into family life?

Small, consistent acts of compassion make a big difference.

- Try bringing mindful attention to ordinary moments such as cooking, eating together, or getting ready for bed. Notice details and stay present.
- Name and validate emotions: “It makes sense that you feel tired” or “Of course you’re upset.”
- Model self-compassion by acknowledging your own needs and boundaries.
- Encourage children to use the same language of kindness and validation when talking about their own feelings.

2. As a parent, how do I know when to push my neurodivergent child and when to hold back?

This balance can be very difficult. Dr Chapman explained that parents often feel torn between protecting their child and encouraging independence.

- First, observe whether your child’s reluctance is due to capacity (for example, sensory or cognitive overwhelm) or anxiety (fear of failure or change).
- If capacity is the issue, make environmental or sensory adjustments and try again at a calmer time.
- If anxiety is the barrier, use gentle encouragement and break tasks into small steps.
- Only attempt challenges when your child feels calm and safe. Compassion works best when both parent and child are in a soothed state.

3. How can I be compassionate when my teen refuses to engage and nothing ever seems to improve?

This situation is painful and can leave parents feeling hopeless.

- Try first to empathise with your child's perspective. Imagine what emotions or fears might underlie their withdrawal.
- Look for even small moments of connection—shared humour, a cup of tea, or a smile. These build trust over time.
- Remember to extend compassion to yourself. Frustration and resignation are valid responses to a very hard situation.
- Change takes time; maintaining a calm, consistent presence is more powerful than it might feel in the moment.

4. What if my child cannot communicate how they feel, for example if they are non-verbal or selectively mute?

Compassion can be shown in many non-verbal ways.

- Focus on warmth of tone, facial expression, and gentle body language.
- Use sensory tools your child finds regulating, such as touch, light, or sound, if tolerated.
- Keep a simple diary noting what happens before, during, and after signs of distress. Over time, patterns may become clearer.
- Trust your intuition—you know your child best. Compassion in this context means staying patient, observant, and accepting of uncertainty.

5. I feel too much compassion for others and very little for myself. How can I overcome this?

This is common among caring professionals and parents.

- Recognising the imbalance is the first step.
- Practise offering yourself the same understanding you give to others.

- Try writing or saying phrases such as, “It’s understandable that I’m finding this difficult,” or “I’m doing the best I can right now.”
- Schedule small acts of self-care that honour your limits rather than push through them.
- Remember that compassion for yourself does not reduce your compassion for others—it strengthens it.

6. What if I try to show compassion, but my child doesn’t want it or pushes me away?

Resistance to compassion can be part of the process.

- Children and teenagers, especially those who feel ashamed or anxious, may find it hard to accept kindness.
- Keep interactions calm, steady, and non-intrusive.
- Avoid forcing conversation; sometimes sitting nearby quietly is enough to convey care.
- Over time, gentle consistency helps reduce defensiveness.
- Dr Stacey noted that true compassion takes courage and persistence—keep going, even when it feels unreciprocated.

7. How can I access therapy or support that uses a compassion-focused approach?

- Start with self-help: explore The Compassionate Mind Workbook (Paul Gilbert) or guided meditations from Kristin Neff or Tara Brach.
- Professional routes: If you feel you or your child need targeted support, contact the Oxfordshire CAMHS Single Point of Access. They can advise on available therapies and suitability for compassion-focused approaches.
- Peer groups: Look at the resources section for suggestions.

8. What practical first steps can I take at home to begin practising self-compassion?

- Use soothing rhythm breathing once or twice a day to calm your body's stress response.
- Keep a small notebook for compassionate reminders or phrases that resonate.
- Choose one moment each day to pause and ask, "What do I need right now?"
- Notice when self-criticism appears, and gently reframe it as if speaking to a friend.
- Remember that self-compassion is a skill, not a personality trait—it strengthens through repetition and patience.

9. How can schools and professionals apply compassion in their approach?

- Recognise that emotional safety is a prerequisite for learning.
- Provide predictable routines, quiet regulation spaces, and reduced sensory load.
- Respond to distress with curiosity, not punishment or consequence.
- Include families in problem-solving and listen to lived experience.
- A compassionate culture at school benefits staff as well as students.

Useful Resources

These resources have been recommended by CAMHS clinicians, OxPCF, and parent carers as valuable sources of support, guidance, and practical tools for families raising neurodivergent children and young people.

They include compassion and mindfulness resources, mental health and wellbeing services, sensory and sleep support, educational advocacy, and peer networks across Oxfordshire and beyond. Click on the blue text to visit each website directly. Where a book is mentioned, we've included an Amazon link for convenience.

Compassion and Emotional Wellbeing

- [The Compassionate Mind Workbook – Paul Gilbert](#)

A practical introduction to Compassion Focused Therapy for reducing self-criticism and building emotional resilience.

- [The Compassionate Mind – Paul Gilbert](#)

The foundational text explaining how compassion supports courage, balance, and mental health.

- [Self-Compassion – Kristin Neff](#)

A research-based guide to developing kindness toward oneself and understanding its positive impact on motivation and wellbeing.

- [Mindful Self-Compassion – Kristin Neff & Chris Germer](#)

Exercises and meditations to build mindfulness and warmth in daily life.

- [Tara Brach – RAIN Meditation](#)

Free online meditations using the “Recognise, Allow, Investigate, Nurture” approach to self-awareness and acceptance.

- [Compassionate Mind Foundation](#)

Resources, training, and community events promoting compassion-based wellbeing.

- [Kristin Neff – Self-Compassion Resources](#)

Free guided practices and talks for cultivating self-compassion in everyday situations.

Mental Health and Peer Support

- [Oxfordshire CAMHS](#) – The main mental health service for children and young people in Oxfordshire.
- [Walking With You \(WWY\)](#) – A parent and carer peer support group facilitated by Oxfordshire CAMHS, meeting online via Teams.
- [Supportive Steps](#) – A CAMHS-run peer support service for parents and carers of children with mental health challenges.
- [Carers Oxfordshire](#) – Support for unpaid carers, including wellbeing advice, training, and carer's assessments.
- [Oxfordshire SEND Room](#) – a peer support group hosted and moderated by Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Children and Young People's Services – One-to-one support, workshops, and emotional wellbeing resources.
- [MindEd for Families](#) – Free online training and advice for parents and carers about children's mental health.
- [YoungMinds](#) – National charity supporting young people's mental health and parent advice.
- [The Curly Hair Project](#) – Practical and emotional support for autistic people and their families, founded by Alis Rowe.

Online Tools, Platforms, and Concepts

[NDC YouTube Channel](#) – Short, accessible videos on topics such as anxiety, self-harm, aggression, and emotional regulation.

[21 and Sensory](#) – Engaging, visual content sharing lived experiences and sensory coping strategies.

Helpful Apps and Tools

- [Google Maps](#) – Use Street View to prepare for new places and reduce anxiety.
- FaceTime or video calls – Maintain connection and reduce separation anxiety.

Core Concepts

- Window of Tolerance – Understanding when someone is regulated or overwhelmed.
- Bucket, Battery, and Spoon Theories – Visual ways to explain and manage limited daily energy.
- Double Empathy Problem – Recognises mutual communication differences between autistic and non-autistic people.

Sleep and Sensory Support

- [Cerebra](#) – Guidance on sleep difficulties and sensory needs in neurodivergent children.
- [The Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation](#) – Strategies to support sensory regulation and daily living.
- [Fledglings](#) – Sensory-friendly and adaptive products for comfort, sleep, and self-regulation.

Education and Advocacy

- [Autism Education Trust \(AET\)](#) – Resources for parents and educators to support autistic children in schools.
- [IPSEA](#) – Free legal advice on SEND rights, EHCPs, and school support.
- [SENDIASS Oxfordshire](#) – Free, impartial advice for families navigating SEND services.
- [Oxfordshire's SEND Local Offer](#) – Directory of local SEND services across education, health, and social care.
- [Contact](#) – National charity providing information on education rights, benefits, and advocacy.

Local Oxfordshire Charities and Organisations

- [Autism Family Support Oxfordshire \(AFSO\)](#) – Parent training, advocacy, and youth activities.
- [Oxfordshire Mind](#) – Wellbeing support for children, young people, and families.
- [Carers Oxfordshire](#) – Information, training, and peer support for parent carers.

Recommended Reading

For Parents and Carers

- [Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Children: A Guide for Thriving](#) – Dr Luke Beardon
- [The Parents' Guide to Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism](#) – Raelene Dundon
- [Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child \(and You\) Break the Stress Cycle](#) – Dr Stuart Shanker
- [Can't Not Won't: A Story About a Child Who Couldn't Go to School](#) – Eliza Fricker
- [A Different Kind of Parenting: Neurodivergent families finding a way through together](#) - Eliza Fricker
- [The Family Experience of PDA](#) – Eliza Fricker
- [Changing Our Minds](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher
- [A Different Way to Learn](#) – Dr Naomi Fisher

For Children and Young People

- [All Birds Have Anxiety](#) – Kathy Hoopmann
- [The Panicosaurus](#) – Kay Ingle
- [The Red Beast](#) - Kay Ingle
- [The Teenager's Guide to Burnout: Finding the Road to Recovery](#) – Eliza Fricker

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

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