

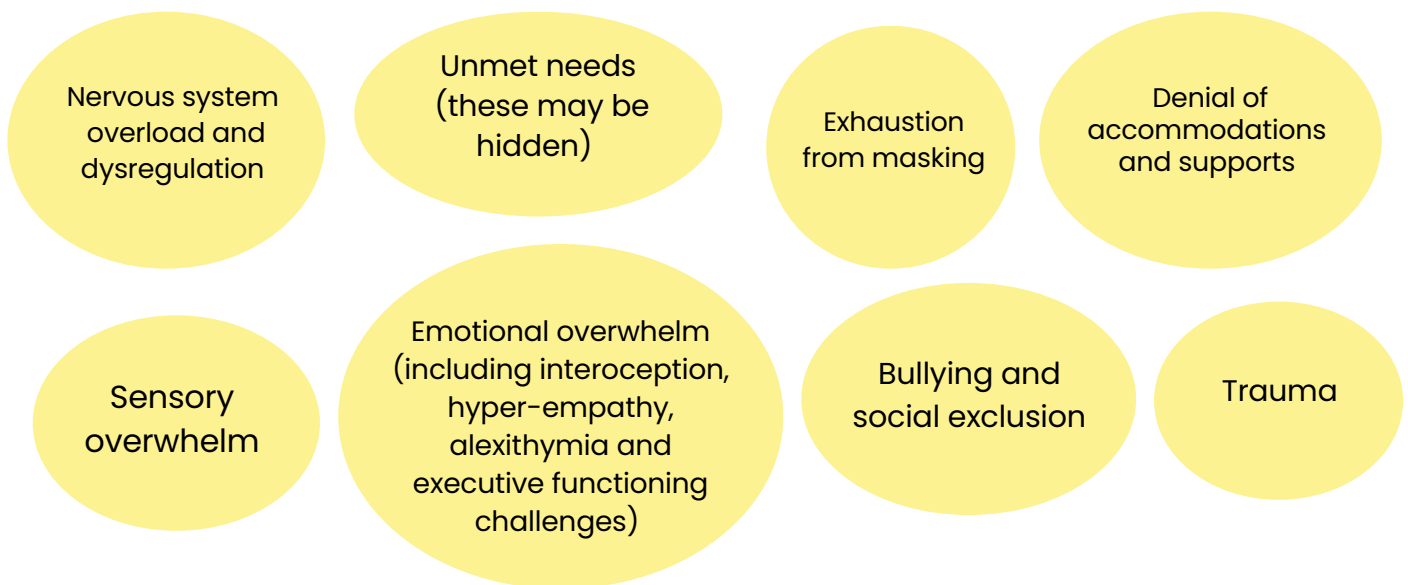


7. Understanding Distressed Behaviour

Spotlight on
Supporting Autistic
Girls and Gender
Diverse Students
at School

*Note: Yellow Ladybugs deliberately uses the term ‘**distressed behaviour**’ rather than more common terminology including ‘challenging behaviour’ or ‘behaviours of concern.’ This allows us to look at behaviour through a more compassionate and affirming lens, and one that is based on an understanding of neuroscience and nervous system dysregulation. We can then reframe behaviour as something not to be managed or stopped, but as a gateway to understanding what our children’s unmet needs are.*

What can Cause Distressed Behaviour in Autistic Young People?



Distressed behaviour can involve both externalised (more visibly disruptive) and internalised (less visible) presentations, and often a mixture of both. While it is important that more externalised distressed behaviour is met without judgment, it is equally important that internalised experiences of distress are not dismissed just because they are less disruptive.

Externalised Presentations of Distressed Behaviour might include:

- Obviously disruptive behaviour or acting out
- Absconding, escaping
- ‘Non-compliance’ and ‘oppositional and defiant’ behaviour
- Risky, impulsive behaviour
- Verbal and/or physical aggression
- Meltdowns



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Internalised presentations of distressed behaviour might include:

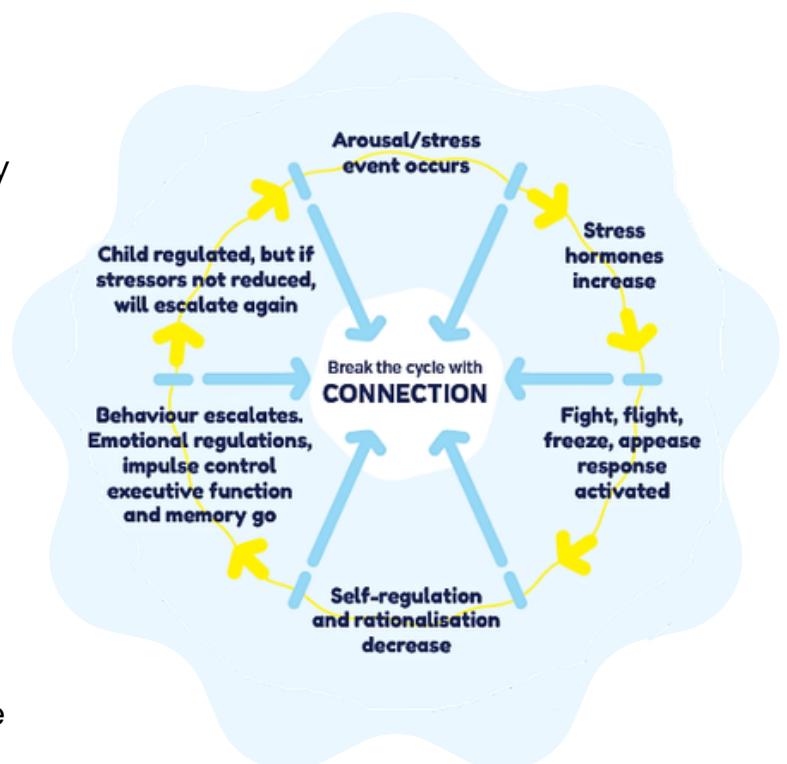
- Increased anxiety
- School can't
- Demand avoidance
- Shutdowns and withdrawal
- Dissociation or diminished engagement
- Situational mutism
- After-school restraint collapse – appearing fine at school, but meltdowns at home
- Autistic burnout
- Complex mental health including self-harm, suicidal ideation and disordered eating



Distressed Behaviour as an Automatic Nervous System Response

The buildup of distressed behaviour tends to follow a cycle which typically becomes noticeable when the nervous system's threat/survival response is activated. Fight and flight responses may be more outwardly visible, while freeze and appease responses can sometimes involve more internal experiences that are harder for others to recognise.

These responses are automatic, not a choice, and can be a clear indicator that the child has unmet needs. When the nervous system's threat response is activated, traditional corrective measures such as punishments or rewards, at best might achieve short-term compliance, but will generally leave the underlying cause of the distress unaddressed, and the cycle of escalation and distress is more likely to continue.





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Connection and its Role in Regulation

Regulation is more likely when our nervous system is feeling safe and connected. Connection, including co-regulation and an emphasis on relational safety, can help a threatened nervous system return to a sense of safety. When connection is introduced, the chances of genuine de-escalation are greater.

Connection strategies might look like:

Supporting distressed students with co-regulation and relational safety as a first step.	Being curious, looking beneath the behaviour and seeking to understand the 'why' behind it.	Reducing immediate demands and expectations (in response to nervous system overload)	Encouraging accommodations, stimming and self-regulating behaviour
Allowing students time to rest (this can include quiet break rooms/library where the student can decompress with dignity)	Reducing the specific demands around communication and social interaction	Empowering students to advocate for their needs and validating this.	Understanding that behaviour is communication and that 'non-compliance' is usually the student self-advocating that they 'can't', not that they 'won't'.
Listening to students and their families and believing them—especially those who tell you they are struggling, even if they appear to be 'fine'.	Being compassionate and understanding that distressed behaviour is not a choice.	Approach distressed students with calmness. Your regulated nervous system will help them to regulate theirs.	

Further reading on this topic: Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Girls and Gender Diverse Young People

[\[Hard Copy Resource: Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Girls and – Yellow Ladybugs\]](#)