

Addiction = Survival:
Trauma, Neurodivergence, and the Path to Recovery
A Clinical Masterclass with
Christiane Sanderson
Video Course

Video Course
CPD hours: 5



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"I need to stop, but I don't know how. The moment I try, the feelings come flooding back. I can't sit with them—I can barely breathe through them."

Whispered across countless therapy rooms, these words illuminate the profound paradox of addiction: a neurobiological attempt to contain what the human psyche experiences as fundamentally uncontainable. The apparent self-destruction masks a desperate — if ultimately unsustainable — system of emotional regulation.

For seasoned clinicians, this moment carries profound recognition. What presents as "substance misuse" or "compulsive behaviour" — under closer examination — reveals itself as a tangled web of survival strategies: clients wielding the only regulatory tools their developmental environment afforded them.

By shifting our clinical gaze, a different narrative comes into view — one where addiction shows up as a protective strategy, designed not for destruction, but for survival and psychological continuity.

The Hidden Architecture of Addiction

Contemporary research and accumulated clinical wisdom now converge on a key truth: addiction represents not moral bankruptcy, but desperate adaptation. Recent studies (O'Sullivan et al., 2023) show that a significant proportion of those in addiction treatment in Ireland also experience trauma or neurodivergence. **Nearly half of Irish adults meet the criteria for at least one mental health disorder.**



Among those accessing Irish addiction services, over 70% carry significant histories of childhood trauma (Health Research Board, 2023). **For neurodivergent individuals, this vulnerability is even more pronounced** — substance and behavioural addictions occur in almost four times as many individuals with ADHD, and nearly three times as many with Autism Spectrum Conditions (Murphy & O'Connor, 2024).

Yet our clinical responses remain frustratingly fragmented, divorcing behaviour from biographical context. We address the manifestation while neglecting the meaning; we treat the symptom while overlooking the trauma, attachment wounds, or undiagnosed neurodivergence it was designed to manage.

This **over-simplified** approach perpetuates cycles of relapse and shame for clients, while leaving practitioners caught between therapeutic ideals and institutional constraints — professionally capable, yet ethically diminished.

Is There Another Way?

- What if we could fundamentally reframe the therapeutic narrative—helping clients recognise their addictions not as evidence of personal deficiency, but as testimony to their remarkable capacity for psychological survival?
- What if we could understand these patterns as destructive yet inescapable early adaptations, while simultaneously creating pathways for their conscious transformation rather than punitive suppression?

What You'll Learn

◆ Understanding the Etiological Landscape

- The Trauma–Addiction Cycle – Contemporary neuroscience on how developmental trauma alters reward and stress systems
- Neurodivergence and Addiction – What we now know about the relationship between ADHD, ASC, and addiction
- Shame and Recovery Resistance – Techniques to reduce internalised shame and foster therapeutic disclosure
- Attachment Disruption as Core Wound – How addiction functions as a relational defence—and what that means for treatment

◆ Clinical Interventions That Work

- Autonomic Nervous System Recalibration – Polyvagal techniques to help clients stay regulated in the face of strong affect
- Trauma-Informed Recovery Protocols – Sequenced interventions designed for traumatised and neurodivergent populations

◆ Embodied Integration Through Case and Practice

“Theoretical understanding without embodied application perpetuates the illusion of treatment.”

- Complex Case Formulation – Walk through a live case illustrating the interwoven layers of trauma, neurodivergence, and addiction
- In-depth clinical exploration of co-regulation and shame-reduction strategies, grounded in real-world cases



A Case That Changed Everything

By age 12, Conor (not his real name) had witnessed two overdoses, been hospitalised for severe anxiety, and learned to numb his night terrors with vodka stolen from the cupboard below the stairs. His Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) score was 8 out of 10.

No one took the time to look beyond the surface and correlate the destructive pattern with the violence in his home, his father's depression, or his own late-diagnosed autism. By 16, Conor had cycled through four addiction services—each focusing on abstinence, none on attachment trauma. His self-harm worsened. Shame solidified. The system labelled him resistant.

It wasn't until a trauma-informed practitioner explored Conor's early environment, recognised his sensory sensitivities, and addressed the relational shame beneath the addiction, that things began to shift. Slowly, through co-regulation and structured relational repair, Conor began to breathe again. Not just abstain—heal.

This is the kind of transformation this masterclass makes possible.

Why This Training, Why Now

This one-day clinical masterclass offers a rare opportunity to learn directly from one of the field's most respected voices. With over three decades of therapeutic practice, teaching, and research, Christiane brings a level of clinical depth and integrative thinking that few in the field can match. Her work has shaped how countless practitioners understand the entanglement of trauma, addiction, and neurodivergence.

► A Framework That Honours Complexity

Drawing on her integrative clinical approach and decades of trauma-focused practice, Christiane offers practical assessment strategies for mapping the intersections of trauma, neurodivergence, and addiction.

► Practical Tools with Immediate Impact

Through interventions grounded in shame resilience and autonomic regulation, you'll learn approaches designed for immediate use that help improve client engagement and reduce treatment dropout in trauma-informed settings.

► Specialisation in High-Demand Areas

As demand grows for clinicians who can hold complexity across addiction, trauma, and neurodevelopmental difference, you'll gain strategies that strengthen your clinical positioning and widen your impact.

► Attachment-Informed Strategies That Create Safety

You'll learn specific relational micro-interventions to transform resistance into connection. These strategies are designed to foster emotional safety and co-regulation—creating the conditions in which recovery can truly begin.

More Than a Training—A Masterclass in Clinical Excellence



Recognising that transformative learning arises not only from content, but from the depth of intellectual communion it enables, this masterclass unfolds within an environment carefully curated for both rigorous learning and collegial exchange. Set in a distinguished Dublin venue, the day incorporates a carefully orchestrated rhythm of intensive learning, reflective integration, and peer consultation—including a gourmet lunch crafted by Michelin-starred Chef Andy McFadden.

These interludes serve a deeper purpose: they create the neurobiological conditions for sustained learning while fostering the kind of professional relationships that extend far beyond the training room. Here, clinical dilemmas can be explored with peers who understand the weight of this work, insights can be tested against diverse perspectives, and lasting connections can be forged with fellow practitioners committed to excellence in trauma-informed care.

Who Should Attend

This intensive is particularly valuable for clinicians seeking to deepen their understanding of addiction's hidden architecture:

- ✓ Psychotherapists and psychologists working at the intersection of trauma, addiction, and neurodevelopmental complexity
- ✓ Addiction specialists ready to integrate trauma-informed methodologies into their clinical repertoire
- ✓ Mental health practitioners addressing the full spectrum of substance use and compulsive coping strategies
- ✓ Clinical supervisors and team leaders supporting staff in addiction, recovery, and trauma contexts
- ✓ Experienced clinicians seeking to refine their capacity for working with treatment-resistant presentations

A Final Reflection

"Our clients deserve more than the mere absence of symptoms—they deserve the recognition of their inherent resilience. True healing emerges not when we pathologise their adaptations, but when we respect the extraordinary strength it required to survive. This recognition transforms both client and clinician—it changes everything."

This represents Christiane's only in-person engagement in Ireland throughout 2025. Given that her London masterclasses consistently reach capacity weeks in advance, and the limited nature of this Dublin offering, **early registration is strongly recommended.**

Secure Your Place Now – and Return to Your Practice Transformed

About the speaker

Christiane Sanderson BSc, MSc. is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Roehampton, of London with 35 years of experience working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and sexual violence. She has delivered consultancy, continuous professional development and professional training for parents, teachers, social workers, nurses, therapists, counsellors, solicitors, the NSPCC, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Committee, the Methodist Church, the Metropolitan Police Service, SOLACE, the Refugee Council, Birmingham City Council Youth Offending Team, and HMP Bronzefield.

She is the author of *Counselling Skills for Working with Shame*, *Counselling Skills for Working with Trauma: Healing from Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence and Domestic Abuse*, *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, 3rd edition, *Counselling Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, *The Seduction of Children: Empowering Parents and Teachers to Protect Children from Child Sexual Abuse*, and *Introduction to Counselling Survivors of Interpersonal Trauma*, all published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. She has also written *The Warrior Within: A One in Four Handbook to Aid Recovery from Sexual Violence*; *The Spirit Within: A One in Four Handbook to Aid Recovery from Religious Sexual Abuse Across All Faiths* and *Responding to Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: A*



pocket guide for professionals, partners, families and friends for the charity One in Four for whom she is a trustee.

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