

COULD THIS BE ADHD?

UNDERSTANDING HOW ADHD OFTEN PRESENTS IN WOMEN



It's increasingly recognized that Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can present very differently in women and AFAB (assigned female at birth) individuals compared to the stereotypical presentation. Often, the signs are internalized, subtle, or masked by societal expectations, leading to many women being diagnosed later in life.

This handout is designed to be a *reflection resource*, not a diagnostic tool. It aims to offer psychoeducation about how ADHD might show up for you. Understanding these patterns can be the first step towards self-compassion and seeking diagnosis.

WHY ADHD LOOKS DIFFERENT IN FEMALES

Women and girls with ADHD often display different characteristics than the stereotypical presentation:

- Girls are more likely to have the inattentive type, which lacks the obvious hyperactivity that typically draws attention
- Female socialization often masks symptoms as girls learn to compensate and appear compliant
- Symptoms may be internalized (anxiety, depression) rather than externalized (disruptive behaviour)
- Higher intelligence in some cases enables masking symptoms through compensatory strategies

COMMON SIGNS OF ADHD IN WOMEN

- Chronic overwhelm and feeling perpetually swamped despite being capable of managing responsibilities
- Difficulty initiating tasks or following projects through to completion
- Forgetfulness, mental clutter, frequent misplacing of items, and internal disorganization
- Inattention, including difficulty maintaining focus on tasks or conversations
- Becoming easily distracted by internal thoughts or external stimuli
- Struggles with organization, planning, and time management
- Time blindness, chronic procrastination, and frequent lateness
- Daydreaming, appearing “spacey,” or mentally drifting away during conversations or tasks
- Internal restlessness or feeling mentally overwhelmed
- Hyperactivity that may appear subtle, such as fidgeting, hair twirling, leg bouncing, excessive talking, or difficulty with turn taking in conversations
- Difficulty relaxing, resting, or “shutting off” thoughts, even when physically tired
- Hyperfocus on areas of interest, sometimes to the exclusion of other responsibilities
- Impulsivity, including interrupting others, blurting out thoughts, making quick decisions, or struggling with patience and waiting
- Emotional impulsivity, mood swings, and intense emotional reactions

- Emotional sensitivity, including heightened reactions to rejection, criticism, or perceived failure (often associated with Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria/RSD)
- Difficulty regulating emotions, stress, and frustration
- Anxiety and depression as common co-occurring experiences
- Masking and people pleasing behaviours, including adapting to meet others' expectations at personal cost
- Internalized symptoms, where struggles are experienced internally rather than appearing outwardly disruptive
- Cycles of burnout, including periods of intense productivity followed by exhaustion and withdrawal
- High achievement academically or professionally, which can sometimes mask underlying ADHD related difficulties

IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

ADHD can significantly affect multiple areas of life for women:

Academic or Work Performance: Difficulty meeting deadlines, maintaining focus during tasks, or staying organized

Relationships: Challenges with communication, time management for social commitments, or emotional regulation

Self-Esteem: Chronic feelings of underachievement, shame, or not living up to potential

Daily Tasks: Struggles with household management, personal organization, or routine maintenance

Mental Health: Higher rates of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and low self-worth

PERCEPTION	UNDERLYING ADHD TRAIT
'Lazy' or Unmotivated	Overwhelm, Executive Dysfunction, Difficulty with Task Initiation
'Too Sensitive' or Emotional	Emotional Dysregulation, Heightened Sensitivity, Rejection Sensitivity
'Disorganized' or Forgetful	Working Memory Difficulties, Executive Function Challenges
'Anxious All the Time'	Chronic Nervous System Overload, Constant State of Alertness
'Bad at Adulting' or Unreliable	Executive Functioning Struggles, Time Blindness, Difficulty with Planning & Organization

WHY WOMEN ARE OFTEN MISSED

Several factors contribute to ADHD being less frequently diagnosed in women:

- **Internalized Symptoms:** Women tend to internalize ADHD symptoms, such as anxiety and rumination, rather than exhibiting external hyperactivity.
- **Masking and Compensating:** Societal expectations often encourage women to mask their difficulties and develop strong coping mechanisms, leading to high achievement that can hide underlying struggles.
- **Social Conditioning:** Women may be conditioned to be more organized, responsible, and people-pleasing, which can mask executive function deficits.
- **Co-occurring Conditions:** ADHD symptoms can often be mistaken for or co-occur with anxiety and depression, leading to misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Consider these questions with kindness and curiosity. There are no right or wrong answers, only opportunities for self-understanding.

- Have you consistently felt like you have to work harder than others to keep up or achieve similar results?
- Do even small, mundane tasks feel disproportionately difficult or overwhelming to start?
- Do you frequently feel exhausted from the sheer effort of managing everyday life and responsibilities?
- Does your mind often feel restless, preventing you from truly relaxing or switching off, even when you want to?
- Have you experienced cycles of intense productivity followed by periods of burnout and depletion?
- Do you find yourself frequently misplacing items, forgetting appointments, or losing track of conversations?
- Do you often feel misunderstood or that people don't see the internal effort you put into managing daily life?

A MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Discovering that your experiences might be related to ADHD can bring a profound sense of relief and validation. It offers an explanation for long standing struggles and opens the door to more effective strategies and support.

You are not lazy, broken, or failing — your brain may simply work differently.