

---Chapter excerpt of a ghostwritten eBook on women and ADHD---

Women and ADHD

Introduction

Think back to grade school, and what do you remember most? Was it the friendships you made or the lessons you learned? Or was it the missing homework assignments and the regularly disorganized and messy backpack? What about the frequently misplaced pencils and books? Do you remember the emotional way you reacted when you were made fun of by a classmate? Or when your teacher called you unfocused and inattentive because you were staring out the window and daydreaming?

Many women with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) have had similar experiences as early as kindergarten, and their experiences stay with them as they grow into adulthood. Now, consider how those same issues --- disorganization, forgetfulness, overwhelm, being easily distracted, struggling with brain fog --- impact your life as an adult woman. Those moments and issues color a woman's perception of herself, cause low self-esteem, and often correlate with emotional and psychological stress. Without a diagnosis to explain these symptoms, many women with ADHD suffer in silence. Many women try to mask the severity of this condition to avoid feelings of rejection and shame.

For years, people have associated ADHD with young boys and hyperactivity. As such, ADHD has been classified as a male disorder or a childhood disorder for decades because many doctors believed this disorder and its symptoms were present only in young boys and not in girls. Unfortunately, gender stereotypes have limited our understanding of this disorder's prevalence among young girls and women. In fact, of the 20 - 25% of adults diagnosed with ADHD, 5% are women over age 30. The three recognized types of ADHD are:

- **Hyperactive and impulsive type:** Those people with hyperactivity and impulsivity symptoms often feel restless or fidgety. These people may be overly talkative, always in motion, and constantly busy with things or activities they find stimulating. Typically, this type of ADHD is diagnosed more in boys than girls.
- **Inattentive type:** The symptoms of inattentive type ADHD can be difficulty starting and completing tasks, persistent forgetfulness, a lack of attention to detail, and being easily

distracted and sidetracked. Girls are more likely than boys to be diagnosed with this inattentive type of ADHD, and adults with late diagnoses also fall into this category.

- Combined type: Someone diagnosed with Combined type ADHD can experience either inattentive or hyperactivity and impulsivity personality traits. Only a doctor can diagnose these behaviors after they have been present for months or years.

We'll discuss these ADHD types in a future chapter and explain why women's ADHD diagnoses have been overlooked for so long. Thankfully, times are changing, and the acceptance of the diagnosis of ADHD in women has skyrocketed, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. It's time to come out of the shadows, understand how ADHD affects our lives, and embrace who we are and how our brains work. You can be a woman with ADHD and have a successful professional and personal life! This book will help you learn and practice proven strategies to manage your ADHD positively and empoweringly.

Chapter 1: Specific Symptoms of ADHD in Women

ADHD in women is often underdiagnosed for a variety of reasons. First, ADHD can present differently in women than in men. While ADHD in men is often characterized by hyperactive and impulsive behavior, ADHD in women is more likely to manifest as inattentive, disorganized, and forgetful. As a result, people often mistake ADHD in women for simple laziness or forgetfulness.

Second, the symptoms of ADHD can vary depending on a woman's age and life stage. For example, ADHD symptoms in teenage girls may be different from ADHD symptoms in middle-aged women. This factor can make it difficult for doctors to diagnose ADHD properly in women.

Finally, many doctors still hold outdated beliefs about ADHD and its causes. They may not be aware of the latest research on ADHD, which suggests that it is a genuine and legitimate condition that affects both men and women equally. As a result of these factors, ADHD in women is often underdiagnosed and undertreated.

However, with new research and studies, more medical professionals and practitioners acknowledge ADHD as a form of neurodiversity. They are now recognizing the signs and symptoms of this condition in women. Here are specific symptoms that many women with ADHD experience:

Inattentiveness

The inattentive symptom covers many signs of cognitive function disorder that make even basic daily activities difficult to accomplish. Inattentiveness includes these components:

- making careless mistakes during activities
- having trouble organizing tasks
- becoming easily distracted or sidetracked

- struggling with procrastination and failing to complete work and personal responsibilities
- experiencing forgetfulness in daily activities
- taking on too many plans or duties at once and experiencing overwhelm

Unlike many men and boys, women who have ADHD often present with subtle symptoms that go unnoticed. This situation occurs because women are not outwardly disruptive to others, so it's harder for them to attract attention or diagnosis from healthcare providers.

Socialization deficits

Women with ADHD are far more likely than men to experience difficulties with social interactions and expectations. These social symptoms often manifest in the following ways:

- **Rejection sensitivity:** It's not unusual for women with ADHD to struggle with rejection sensitivity, an intense emotional response that can make social interaction painful. Rejection ties the emotional reaction to real or perceived feelings.
- **Fewer meaningful relationships:** The demands of relationships can leave women feeling isolated and with fewer friends. They're often too busy taking care of others to care for themselves, which leads them to have trouble maintaining healthy relationships. The process of isolation becomes a defense mechanism to protect the individual from discomfort.
- **Risky sexual behaviors:** Women with ADHD are more likely than other women to engage in risky sexual behaviors. One theory for this behavior is that these women look at sex as a way of feeling accepted by their peers and society, an internalization they are first exposed to as young girls.

Risky sexual behaviors include early sexual activity, intercourse, casual sex, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected sex, which leads to higher levels of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies in this group.

The overwhelm associated with socialization and social interactions often cause women who experience one or more of these signs to feel shame.

Hypersensitivity

Women with ADHD are more likely than men to experience central nervous system hypersensitivities, which disrupt daily activity and duties, making them almost impossible to complete. Here are the hypersensitivities most reported by women with ADHD:

- **physical pain:** women report suffering from migraines, stomach pains, and gastrointestinal upset.

- **sleep difficulties:** as ADHD disrupts a person's natural sleep cycle (circadian rhythm), women often experience insomnia, restlessness and restless legs syndrome, anxiety, shorter sleep time, sleep apnea, and difficulty staying asleep.
- **sensory overload:** Some women with ADHD experience sensory overload. For example, tactile symptoms include a strong reaction to being touched, and auditory signs include an aversion to loud music or sounds. Visual and olfactory overload is often associated with bright lights and smells that are too intense and sharp. Tactile sensory disorders typically involve sensitivity to certain clothing materials or shirt tags.

It is not uncommon for someone with ADHD to experience many hypersensitivity issues. Unfortunately, these hypersensitivities can make everyday tasks far more difficult for neurotypical individuals.

Impulsivity

The signs of ADHD-based impulsivity present themselves in various ways in women. The symptoms of impulsivity can include:

- **addictive behaviors:** many women with ADHD also have substance abuse and gambling addictions.
- **atypical gender behaviors:** Some women exhibit behaviors not traditionally assigned to societal gender norms, such as being easily irritated, controlling, and demanding.
- **acting on negative thoughts:** women with ADHD have a higher chance of acting on negative thoughts and feelings through obsessive thoughts, overthinking, and self-harming actions, such as cutting, burning, skin picking, and other forms of self-mutilation. Some women in this group also have suicidal ideations or attempt suicide.
- **engaging in high-risk activities:** impulsive spending or overspending, speeding or dangerous driving, arguing or starting fights, being involved with extreme sports or events.

Dopamine increases when people engage in risky behaviors, which may be why many people with ADHD engage in these activities. Women with ADHD may arrive late for meetings or engage in other dangerous behaviors, like driving at unsafe speeds. Understanding the connection between this disorder and risky decisions can help you better understand your choices and actions when it comes to impulsivity.

Hormonal disruption

The ovaries are a crucial part of female anatomy, producing hormones that interact with nearly every system in the body. These vital chemicals help maintain physical health and social and emotional stability. Estrogen protects the brain and helps regulate neurotransmitters and improve attention, verbal memory, concentration, sleep, motivation, and cognitive functioning. ADHD affects these areas of the brain.

Estrogen levels are one of the many factors that can affect how someone's ADHD expresses itself. Researchers have found that it impacts women's expression and stability over time. While some think ADHD involves consistent expression throughout one's life, that is not the case for women.

Here are the ways that ADHD disrupts the female hormones:

Estrogen and puberty

Girls with ADHD often experience hormonal changes during puberty, which can lead to problems in mood regulation, such as anxiety and emotional volatility. These symptoms might be misdiagnosed as a mood disorder, anxiety, or depression when they are just an effect of having high estrogen levels and ADHD symptoms expressing themselves simultaneously.

Hormone fluctuation

Estrogenic hormones are responsible for maintaining balance and healthy development in women's bodies and minds. When less estrogen is available to the body, which can happen after ovulation, at any point throughout a cycle, or even just before menstruation starts, ADHD symptoms often increase.

Women with low estrogen and high progesterone levels may experience ADHD symptoms differently each day. Symptoms can fluctuate with the menstrual cycle, which means some women may be more sensitive to fluctuations than others.

Comorbidities

A comorbidity is a person with more than one illness concurrently. Most women with ADHD have at least one comorbidity that affects how ADHD symptoms appear in their lives. The three most common types of comorbid conditions diagnosed with ADHD range from mild symptoms to severe. The most common ADHD comorbidities fall into these three categories:

1. Problems managing emotions

- **mood disorders**
- **Anxiety disorders** (panic attacks)
- **personality disorders** (bipolar, borderline personality disorder)
- **dysregulated eating** (bulimia, anorexia)
- **externalizing disorders** (conduct disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder)
- **obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**
- **depression**

It's important to note that depression can cause a range of symptoms beyond sadness, including irritability, reduced interest in activities that used to be pleasurable, and sleep disturbances, such as sleeping more than usual or difficulty staying awake throughout the day).

2. Brain wiring problems

Cortical wiring problems are structural abnormalities in the cerebral cortex, which produce symptoms that can be both subtle and severe. Cortical wiring is responsible for high-level brain functions, and with ADHD, a person's symptoms may include the following:

- **learning disabilities**
- **executive functioning difficulties**
- **language disabilities**

Medication cannot treat cortical wiring problems. Instead, lifestyle changes and academic accommodations treat them.

3. Tic disorders

A tic disorder is when a person has sudden muscle movements that they cannot control. In some women with ADHD, the following tic disorders may occur:

- **Tourette's syndrome** (multiple verbal and motor tics present for at least one year)
- **motor tics** (head jerking, repeated gestures, involuntary blinking)
- **oral tics** (random noise-making or random blurting out loud)

Comorbidities tied to ADHD happen at a particular time or due to exceptional circumstances. Because a comorbid condition is pervasive and chronic, often first happening in early childhood and then appearing in each life event. Half of all people with ADHD have one or more comorbidities.

There is a lot of debate about whether or not a person can outgrow ADHD. Some studies show that children may grow up to have less severe symptoms, but other research points out how difficult it becomes for people with this condition as they get older because their coping skills don't always work anymore.

Let's examine the different types of ADHD in more depth to understand better how ADHD can impact women's lives.