

NATIONAL WOMEN'S SHOW • LIFE AND LEARNING STAGE

Straight Talk About ADHD in Women

Why We're Diagnosed Later and Where to Go From Here

Julie Principe • Founder, ADHD Roadmap



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Late diagnosed at age 59

Successful Educator raising two sons diagnosed with ADHD.
Soon it became impossible to ignore: I was an ADHDer too.



What is ADHD anyway?

WHAT IT IS . . .

- brain-based
- genetic: 74% to 88% inherited
- three types:
 1. Inattentive
 2. Hyperactive-impulsive
 3. Combined
- Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder

WHAT IT ISN'T . . .

- Not a behavior choice. (Faraone)
- Not a result of poor parenting. (Faraone)
- Not something you grow out of.

PEOPLE MIGHT SEE YOU AS . . .

- “Too anxious”
- “Too much”
- “Too sensitive”
- “Too daydreamy”

What Set An ADHDer Apart From a Neurotypical Person?

- Born with it – even if it hasn't "shown up yet"
- **Significantly** affects daily functioning.
- Persists across lifespan.



Who are the ADHDers?

- *1 in 21 people in Canada live with ADHD.*

25% vs 45%

of women vs. men are diagnosed before age 11

(Martin et al.)

61% vs 40%

of women vs. men are diagnosed in adulthood

(CDC MMWR, 2024)

- *Females are diagnosed an average of 5 years later than males.*
- *Today 1.5 men are diagnosed for every 1 woman.*
As we age, the rate of diagnosis evens out.

Where the Definition Falls Short

The DSM-5 definition...

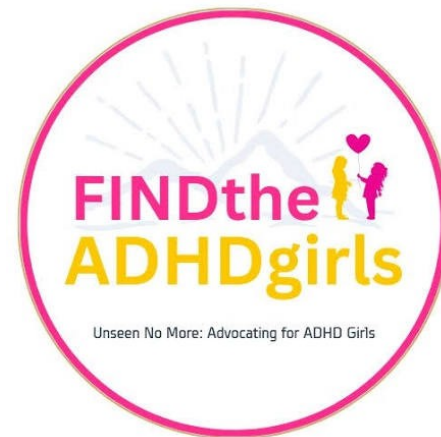
- is built on research that historically excluded women.
- does not name emotional criteria
- does not account for hormonal fluctuation.



The definition isn't wrong. It's incomplete.

The Checklists

- Created by Cynthia Hammer, Dr. Kathleen Nadeau and Dr. Oren Mason includes the topics: anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation.



Written for 7-year-old girls.

The Checklists

“Female ADHD Test: Symptoms in Women and Girls”

By Sari Solden, M.S., LMFT, published by ADDitude

18 short questions covering daily overwhelm, organization, and emotional regulation built for women. Free to take online.

additudemag.com/self-test-adhd-symptoms-women-girls



Scan to take the test

Not for diagnosis, but to get you thinking about your own challenges in these areas.

Attention Regulation

- Trouble focusing even when something is important to them.
- Hyperfocus - oblivious to everything else.
- Women and girls are often diagnosed with Inattentive ADHD
It looks like daydreaming, not disruption. Easy to miss.
- It shows up quietly:
 - trouble staying focused,
 - a fidgeting foot,
 - disorganization,
 - things forgotten or misplaced.



Executive Functions/Skills

ACROSS THE MONTH

Time management - gets harder in the days before your period, as dopamine drops further on an already-thin supply.

Problem solving - low estrogen makes your brain feel stuck. Switching tasks or troubleshooting gets harder right when you need it most.

Same system hit twice.

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ACROSS A LIFETIME:

Puberty, postpartum, and especially perimenopause.

Plan and organize - working memory challenges

Emotion management – emotions that are harder to regulate.

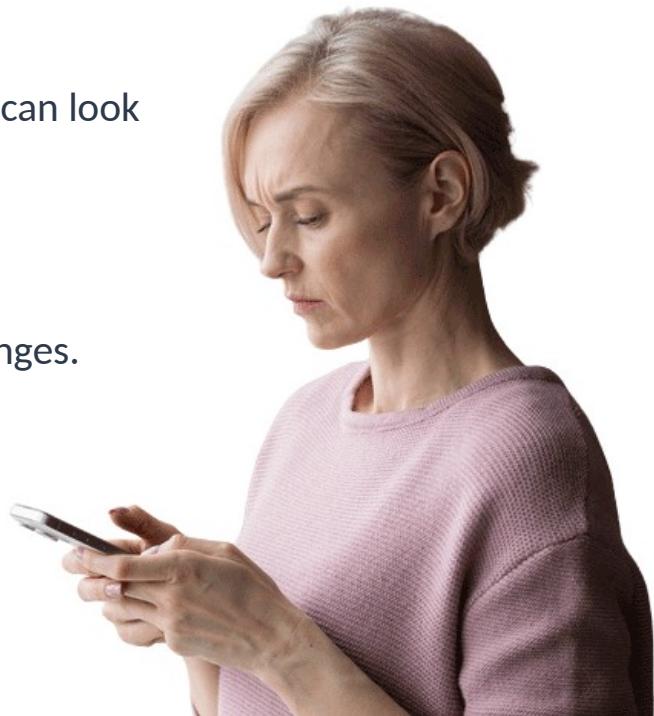


Drop in EF skills dismissed as 'just PMS' or 'just menopause,' or never connected to ADHD at all."

Same system hit twice.

Managing Emotions

- Emotional Regulation is “not counted.” (Khan)
- ADHDers are more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation which can look like anxiety, perfectionism fatigue or even burnout.
- Is it ADHD emotional dysregulation or hormones?
- The emotional toll of masking or hiding our executive skill challenges.
Masking is invisible work.
- Doctors miss the ADHD – because we are trying to hide it!



Misdiagnosis

- Women are already diagnosed with anxiety or depression twice as often as men.
- Some studies show that depression faded once the real cause - ADHD - was finally treated.
- The cost: years, sometimes decades, of treating the wrong root cause.

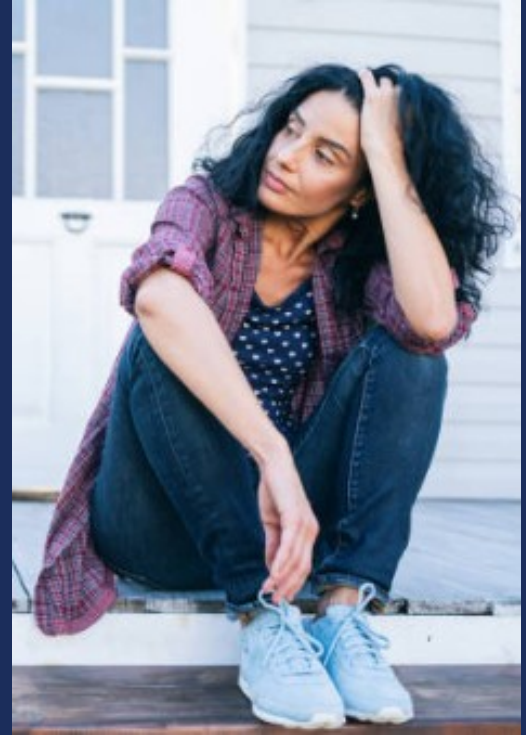


THE COST OF LATE DIAGNOSIS, CONTINUED

Grief

*The cost isn't just delayed treatment,
it's grief:*

- *for the support that would have helped,*
- *for the years spent thinking something was wrong with you,*
- *for opportunities and possibilities that closed before you knew why.*



Where to from here? —

Getting an Accurate Diagnosis

- Use the checklist as a starting point.
- Who can evaluate: family doctor (sometimes), psychiatrist, psychologist, nurse practitioner.
- You will be asked about your experience as a child in school and at home - think about that ahead of time.
- Ask about co-existing conditions if you are wondering about them.



Co-Existing Conditions

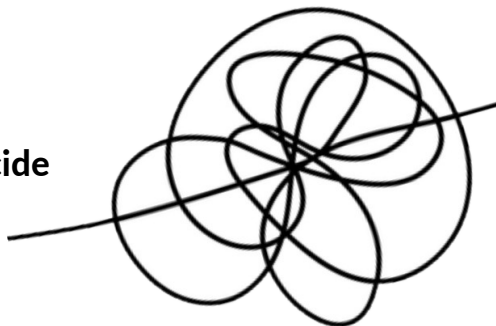
Women with ADHD also have:

36% **generalized anxiety disorder**

31% **major depressive disorder**

39% **substance abuse disorder**

46% have seriously **considered suicide**



Women with ADHD have **triple the rate** of anxiety and suicidal ideation, and **double the rate** of depression and substance abuse, compared to women without ADHD.
(Fuller-Thomson & Agbeyaka, 2016)

Studies show ADHD medication reduces suicide attempts by roughly a third and reduces substance misuse and suicidal behavior significantly.

Now What?



Treatment



Support

Education

**Resource
s**

The Treatment Landscape



Navigating your path. Every route looks different.

- Medication: stimulant and non-stimulant options.
- Therapy: CBT (ADHD-specific patterns), DBT (emotional regulation), general counseling.
- Medication and therapy tend to work best together.
- ADHD/Accountability Coaching can be an important support for treatment.

Please talk to your doctor about what's right for you.

Coaching and Everyday Structure



Coaching is a different kind of support.

Coach as ADHD Expert

- Recognizing your strengths
- Whole health basics
- Understanding of executive function skills
- Identifying goals and possible strategies
- Structures, routines and habits - for the ADHD brain
- How to get back on track when things go sideways

Coach as Partner

- Clarifying and breaking down goals
- Setting up your environment
- Personalizing strategies that work for your brain
- Accountability partner and body doubling

Where to From Here?



Self-Compassion

*Quiet your inner critic.
Offer yourself grace.*

Education

Find out what supports you.
CADDAC:



Self-Advocacy

Get what you need.

The goal isn't to fix yourself. It's to finally be on your own side.

Questions?

Focus on your strengths.

Julie Principe • Founder, ADHD Roadmap

adhdroadmap.coach



Prepare for Your Appointment

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The FINDtheADHDgirls Checklist

Developed with five ADHD specialists, including Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D. and Oren Mason, M.D. Based on the DSM-5 and the DIVA-5. A screening tool, not a diagnostic instrument.

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|----|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Inattentiveness | 2 | Trouble Staying Focused |
| 3 | Poor Listening Skills | 4 | Organization and Forgetfulness |
| 5 | Restlessness and Impulsivity | 6 | Physical and Verbal Energy |
| 7 | Emotional Dysregulation | 8 | Socially Awkward |
| 9 | Anxious and Depressed Behaviors* | 10 | Heightened Sensory Issues* |

** Additional behaviors sometimes observed in girls with ADHD.*