



Information
for women
with ADHD

WOMEN WITH ADHD

EXPERIENCES WITH ADHD FROM
A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE



ADHD de rode draad door je leven

DEAR READER,

Welcome to a booklet about you!

This may be the first booklet you've seen that is specifically written for women with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

ADHD affects children and adults. Women are just as likely as men to have ADHD, however the female experience of ADHD can be quite different to that of males.

ADHD FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Women often experience ADHD quite differently to men. The hyperactivity that people usually associate with ADHD in boys and men can be less of an issue. Whereas, poor concentration and a lack of attention to detail are much more common.

These less 'visible' symptoms can mean that it takes longer for ADHD to be identified and diagnosed in girls and young women.

In this booklet, you'll read about the experiences of ADHD from the female perspective, from a young child through to a woman with a family of her own. You may find that some of the stories reflect your own life experience, and this could give you a better understanding of how you became the woman you are today.

REMEMBER,
ADHD HAS MANY POSITIVES,
SO IT'S IMPORTANT TO LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Adapted from the German version written by Andrea Boreatti, MD & Frank Matthias Rudolph, MD.

Why is an ADHD booklet specifically for women important?	06
How is an ADHD brain different?	08
Women with ADHD and their stories.....	09
From childhood to adulthood.....	10
Changing symptoms.....	11
Is ADHD identical in women and men?	12
When everything is upside down, coping strategies are not enough	14
 6 aspects of life that can present a challenge	16
1. Education and training.....	17
2. Career and professional life.....	23
3. Relationships - living with a woman with ADHD.....	26
4. Family - life in an ADHD home.....	28
5. Friends and friendships.....	30
6. Female health.....	32
 Treatment options.....	36
Problem: anxiety or depression	38
Bringing order to the chaos	40
Make the most of your strengths.....	42
Where to turn for further advice	44



WHY IS AN ADHD BOOKLET SPECIFICALLY FOR WOMEN IMPORTANT?

There remains a distinct difference in the day-to-day lives of men and women in modern society, particularly when children arrive.

Despite improved professional qualifications and opportunities, women often assume the additional responsibilities of managing the family. So, alongside work demands, time has to be found for many challenging tasks such as supervising homework, attending parents' evenings and making social arrangements. The pressure can mount, and women with ADHD may start to feel overwhelmed by what is expected of them.

Everyday things like mixing up arrangements or missing appointments can cause frustration and feelings of guilt which can eventually lead to a loss of self-esteem. Despite their best efforts, it can be very challenging to have ADHD and to keep up with everything that needs to be done at work, at home and for the family.

In adults, the distribution between men and women is equal, but ADHD is still often diagnosed much later in women. In many cases, women only receive the diagnosis after their child is found to have

ADHD and they decide to get tested themselves.

One reason for women being diagnosed later in life is that girls may not display the 'signature' hyperactivity and impulsive ADHD behaviours seen in boys. There's also a lack of clinical research available in girls with ADHD and this creates a blind spot for healthcare professionals; symptoms of poor concentration and organisational skills are either overlooked or not recognised as ADHD. It also seems that girls find ways to control or suppress their ADHD symptoms at a

young age, particularly if this behaviour is seen as disruptive or not 'appropriate' for girls. They are sometimes disciplined more harshly than boys, and at a much younger age, so they learn to internalise their true feelings and to behave the way that school, or society, expects.

It's clear that too few girls and women are aware of their possible ADHD diagnosis. This is why it's important to recognise the particular issues that women with ADHD experience in their day-to-day lives.

A TELLING TALE

"Following the discussions she had with her 8-year-old son's paediatrician, Amy was advised to have an assessment for ADHD herself. Whilst going through the family's history, there were very clear indications to suggest Amy's father could have also had undiagnosed ADHD. Amy said that he was a very impulsive and hot-tempered person who often drank too much alcohol."

HOW IS AN ADHD BRAIN DIFFERENT?

The condition we now know as ADHD has been referred to in medical journals since the early 1900s. These articles mention children displaying signs of inattentiveness, impulsivity and hyperactivity. Since that time, a number of different names have been used, but the name we use today reflects the importance of the inattention aspect.

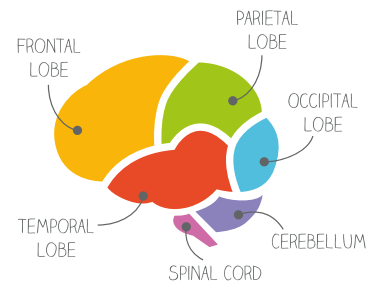
ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects around 10% of school-aged children. While the outward signs of ADHD appear during childhood, over 75% of children with ADHD will continue to experience significant symptoms in adulthood.

ADHD affects both the structure and function of the brain. Changes are seen in the brain,

especially in the frontal lobe section which can affect impulse control, concentration and inhibition.

The brain is made up of many billions of nerve cells organised into units that will perform specific tasks. These units exchange information with each other via 'neuro pathways'. In ADHD, these neuro pathways do not connect in the same way as someone who doesn't have ADHD and this is why some tasks such as concentrating and organising are particularly challenging.

ADHD also affects the chemistry of the brain. People with ADHD may have problems processing dopamine, a chemical linked to movement, sleep, attention and learning.



The exact causes of ADHD have not been identified, however, scientists have discovered that there is a strong genetic link, so it's likely that other members of your family will also have ADHD.

ADHD can significantly impair the quality of your daily life and prevent you from reaching your full potential. If the disorder is recognised, and successfully treated, your life can take a completely different course.



WOMEN WITH ADHD AND THEIR STORIES

DEVELOPED DURING CHILDHOOD, DISCOVERED DURING ADULTHOOD

Looking back, many women with ADHD see their diagnosis as a breakthrough moment in their lives. So many things that have happened in their past are suddenly explained and make sense for the first time. These may be issues they have been struggling with for a long, long time and they now realise they were not 'wrong' or 'more stupid than others'.

You may recognise this description of a typical young girl with ADHD:

"She is a sweet, day-dreamy but chaotic girl who struggles to stay focussed at school. Her moods can change quickly and she doesn't find it easy to make good friends."

For some women, being diagnosed ADHD explains why they were unable to keep up with school work and now find it hard to meet work deadlines. They realise that their disappointing results at school were not down to a lack of effort or ability, especially in their favourite subjects.

They recognise they were not 'rude', 'difficult', or a 'wild child' as they may have been labelled and now know that their actions were beyond their control. Some girls are so ashamed of their boisterous or rash behaviour, they withdraw into themselves, this is one of the key symptoms of ADHD.

In many cases, as the girl grows into a woman, they don't leave behind this sense of being somehow 'different'.



FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

HOW ADHD SYMPTOMS CHANGE OVER TIME

For an ADHD assessment to take place as an adult, there needs to have been signs or indications of ADHD-like behaviour that date back to childhood. Reflecting on how things were during primary school years will be an important part of any discussion with a healthcare professional.

The characteristics associated with ADHD can change as the years go by. The features of day-to-day life differ enormously between children and adults, so it is hardly surprising that concentration and attention problems, restlessness and impatience show themselves in different ways in adults. If present,

hyperactivity often becomes less pronounced and the physical restlessness seen in the

early years may be replaced by an inner drive and feelings of stress.

It is not uncommon, particularly for women, for new symptoms to appear such as eating disorders, mood swings and anxiety. This can lead to problems in relationships.

Adults develop strategies to manage their ADHD traits and control any obvious 'fidgety' behaviour. Extreme exercise regimes are sometimes used to compensate for the inner feeling of restlessness. Women especially are real experts when it comes to self-control and social conformity. They often use their social circle to help them improve their people skills.

However, many women say that they have a lot of stress in their lives, and their heads are full of constantly churning thoughts so they find it difficult to unwind.



CHANGING SYMPTOMS

While children may fidget and are restless, hyperactivity in adults is more subtle and may be less pronounced, yet it is often still there. Impulsiveness becomes easier to control, at least in formal settings.

At school, children interrupt, and even disrupt, lessons whereas adults in the workplace may be able to resist the urge to speak during meetings when it's not appropriate.

Child



Adult

Hyperactivity/impulsiveness

- Squirms around and is fidgety
- Cannot stay seated
- Cannot wait until it is his/her turn
- Runs and climbs a lot
- Cannot play/work calmly
- Always moves
- Talks constantly
- Shouts answers out
- Annoys/interrupts others

- Inefficient at work
- Restless at long meetings
- Unable to queue
- Drives too fast
- Always needs to be active
- Unable to tolerate frustration
- Talks constantly
- Interrupts others
- Makes inappropriate comments

Attention

- Finds it hard to stay attentive
- Can be absent-minded
- Does not listen
- Unable to finish tasks
- Unable to plan
- Loses important things

- Lacks motivation
- Finds it difficult to stay attentive (meetings, office work, while reading)
- Crippling "procrastinitis"
- Works slowly and inefficiently
- Poor time management
- Disorganised

IS ADHD IDENTICAL IN MEN AND WOMEN?

≡ YES AND NO! ≡

THE DIFFERENCES

While there is no one ADHD stereotype that everyone conforms to, the key characteristics of inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness are usually present to some degree in both sexes, irrespective of age.

In order to receive the maximum benefit from the support provided by healthcare professionals it is important that female-specific ADHD symptoms are recognised.

Women tend to seek help from healthcare professionals at a far later stage in life than men. We

know that girls cope with early childhood symptoms differently to boys and find ways to adapt their behaviour in order to fit in. However, when they do speak to their doctor, the true cause of their concerns is often not diagnosed. For example, while they may experience anxiety, this may not be recognised as a result of ADHD, so it stays undiagnosed.

Women are more likely to visit their doctor with exhaustion or depression than men; they may be unaware that these symptoms could be due to ADHD. An experienced specialist would be able to determine

whether this exhaustion or depression is connected with constant conflicts in social relationships or at work, or the extra effort and energy required to cope with the personal or internal chaos. It seems that mood swings are seen more often in women than men. ADHD-induced mood swings are normally a reaction to external influences which are experienced intensely and can throw them completely off course. These emotional responses are usually only short-term.



Women with ADHD can be rapidly distracted by new feelings or thoughts. Things that would be considered as 'normal' by others are experienced more intensely and trigger higher levels of stress. Even everyday situations can leave women with ADHD feeling unable to cope, something that is difficult for others to understand. When someone is overwhelmed by too many things coming at them at once, it becomes impossible for them to prioritise their thoughts and actions.

Suddenly the smallest task, such as buying school books or cutting their nails, can seem like a major challenge. This feeling of being overwhelmed results in highly emotionally charged behaviour which can

sometimes be misdiagnosed as a personality disorder, since challenging and upsetting interactions with others are a common symptom.

Women often feel they receive less support than men in their daily lives and in their careers, this may be what encourages the development of coping strategies. At a first glance, their daily routine appears well structured and they appear to be on top of things, so internal chaos is not always obvious. This may not be a conscious strategy but it can be very effective.

It can take the form of strictly observed habits, such as ensuring that items that are used daily (mobile phone, keys, glasses, handbag) are always

put in the exact same place and creating precise schedules for the day so that nothing is missed. Tasks that have been completed are checked and re-checked, similar to someone with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Whilst such strategies can work well initially, in the longer term they are emotionally and physically draining and can lead to burnout. All it takes is just one small mishap and everything comes crashing down, often ending in tears or a fit of anger. Although, at first, it may seem impossible to continue after failure, somehow these women usually find the resolve to keep going.



WHEN EVERYTHING IS UPSIDE DOWN, COPING STRATEGIES ARE NOT ENOUGH

INCREASING DEMANDS, OVERLOAD AND SYMPTOMS OF EXHAUSTION

Since the symptoms of ADHD are genetically linked, they will be present throughout life. Equally, ADHD doesn't just appear out of the blue. Even if a diagnosis isn't received until adulthood, there will have been indications of corresponding

behaviour present in childhood, it's just that they were not picked up on.

How the symptoms presented themselves, and whether they had a mild or very disruptive impact could depend on the level of support and protection they received and the stress they were under during childhood.

With good support or particular aptitude, it is possible that ADHD can go unrecognised for a long time. If, for example, a gifted child with a particular interest in learning is encouraged by their parents, possible issues may go unnoticed in the first years of school.

Practical support, such as checking the child's homework, packing their school bag and making sure they get to school on time helps to avoid potential problems. However, when girls with ADHD reach adolescence, the expectation is that they will be more self-sufficient and the organisational issues can become more challenging.

As the years pass, they may move out of the family home, progress with their career and may become parents themselves. The coping strategies that have got them this far may no longer be sufficient. Extreme exercise regimes or precise schedules that have helped in the past can start to become ineffective.

In many cases, the symptoms of ADHD become more apparent

- **Impatience**
- **Irritability**
- **"Procrastinitis"**
- **Increasing forgetfulness**
- **More frequent careless mistakes**

Severe exhaustion and signs of depression due to stress can become evident for the first time.



6

ASPECTS OF LIFE

THAT CAN PRESENT A CHALLENGE

Emma, 6 years of age



1

Education and training

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Most teaching staff have a stereotypical picture of ADHD in their head:

"The class clown or restless, fidgety boy is hyperactive."

"The problem could be ADHD."

If a teacher sees that a girl lacks focus and often daydreams, they are unlikely to consider ADHD. She doesn't interrupt lessons, rarely draws any attention to herself and is not a 'wild child' like girls with

hyperactivity symptoms. The lack of awareness that this could be ADHD is why these girls are rarely diagnosed and supported.

If teachers were aware of the ADHD symptoms often seen in girls, they would recognise them from this typical school report:

"Emma is a quiet pupil who is very easily distracted, she spends a lot of time daydreaming and lost in her thoughts. She often forgets her books and equipment and doesn't listen properly when homework is given."

It can be difficult for a teacher to spot the signs of ADHD if the family is doing a lot to help the child. They believe they are helping by packing their school bag or providing a lot of support with homework, but actually they could be masking the ADHD symptoms that may otherwise be noticed by the teacher.

1

Education and training

Sophie, 12 years of age

SECONDARY SCHOOL

Moving up to secondary school can be a challenging time for all young girls, but it can be especially difficult for those with ADHD. They understand the importance of making new friends, however, it's hard to maintain these friendships if they give the impression of not being interested in conversations or forgetting arrangements to meet up. Friends won't understand the reason they are behaving this way and can soon drift away.

Maintaining strong friendships is a priority at this age, but it doesn't always come easily to girls with ADHD. When they reach puberty, things change again.

At the best of times ADHD can feel like an emotional roller-coaster, but it becomes even more so when puberty hits. It can be a time full of arguments and disagreements with parents or greater social withdrawal. Confrontations, often with mothers, that rapidly escalate are often triggered by simple things like not doing homework.

A TELLING TALE

"Her school grades are gradually getting worse, to the point where she may have to resit exams or be asked to repeat the academic year.

She stays out late, hanging around with friends after school. Recently she had an emotional outburst after reading some comments criticising her on social media. To make herself feel better she 'impulse buys' while out with friends, wasting her money on silly things.

She doesn't respect the rules set by her parents, especially curfews, and when confronted she becomes angry at first, then highly emotional. She runs up to her bedroom and shuts herself away."

1

Education and training

HOW THINGS CAN TAKE A POSITIVE TURN

Whether by intuition or coincidence, the parents of hyperactive girls often realise that exercise has a positive influence on their daughters. It allows them to burn off excess energy, leaving them calmer and more focused. Intense exercise, often at a competitive level, can help to compensate for the effects ADHD has on their lives.

However, this can make an early diagnosis more difficult and it is not until an injury occurs and they have to take a break from their exercise regime that the ADHD symptoms become apparent and more of a problem.

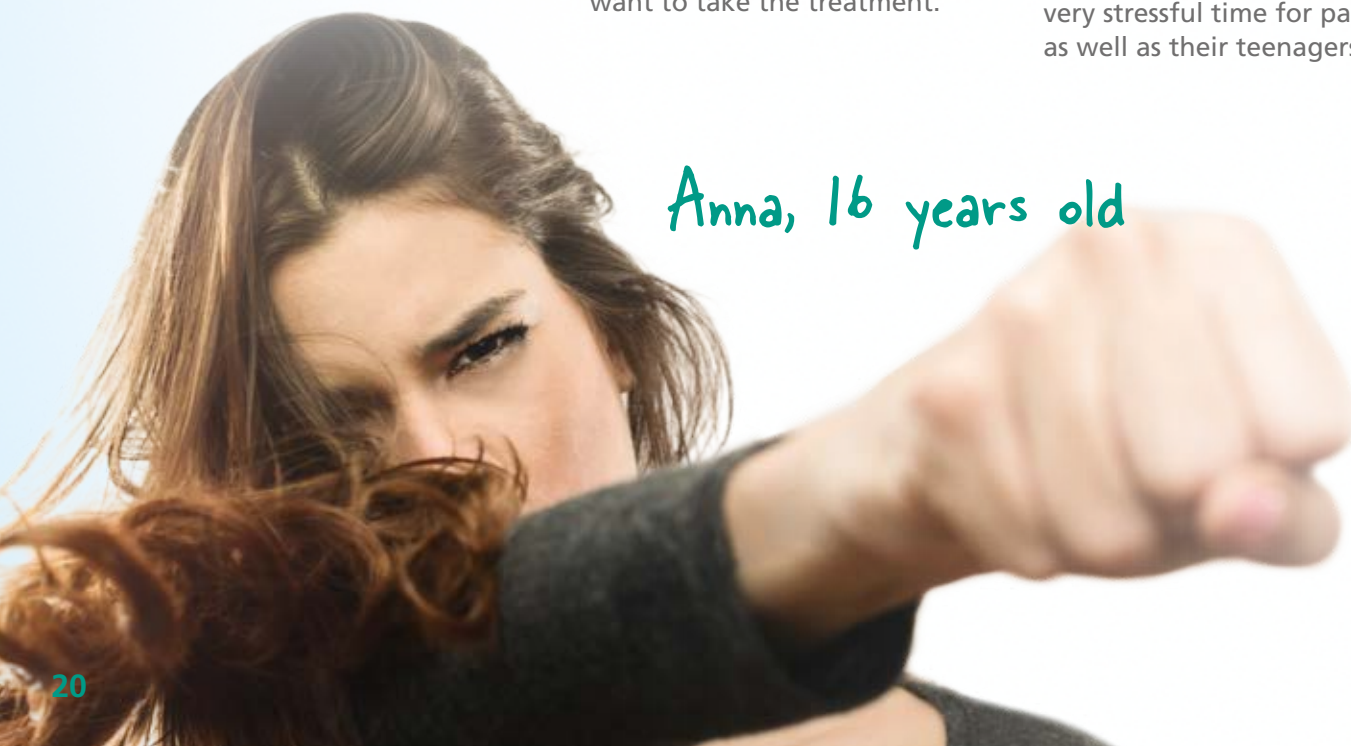
The issue of medication at secondary school

If ADHD has been diagnosed in childhood, and managed with medication, teenagers may suddenly decide they no longer want to take the treatment.

They may even reject the fact that they have ADHD. Adolescents may not want to be labelled as having any kind of disorder and may not want to take medication which they feel alters their personality.

As they get older and start to drink alcohol, it can get harder to convince them to take their medication. Discontinuing treatment and the deterioration in concentration and attention that follows can mean that their education suffers. This can be a very stressful time for parents, as well as their teenagers!

Anna, 16 years old



1

Education and training

FURTHER TRAINING

This stage of life brings new challenges as it's a time when important decisions have to be made and young women with ADHD don't always find this easy.

"Should I apply to college or try to find an apprenticeship?"

"Could I get to university?"

"If I apply for a training position within a company, do I need to wait for my exam results?"

"What are my strengths and weaknesses?"

A lack of motivation and a tendency to put off difficult tasks (procrastinitis) means that by the time they finally get around to applying for a place on a course or a job, it's often

too late. If they then have to accept a place or job that wasn't their first choice, they may feel disappointed.

They can struggle to complete application forms, making mistakes or leaving out key information. If they receive numerous rejections, they may feel a sense of frustration and disappointment which could lead to depression.

A TELLING TALE

"Anna is about to take her exams but still has no clue about her future. Her parents want her to find an apprenticeship but she can't decide what career she wants.

Whenever she goes online to get more information, she ends up on shopping or gaming websites or watching YouTube videos. The applications that she did manage to send were all rejected - either she had missed the deadline or her application was incomplete.

When she took part in a vocational training workshop at school designed to help her find a career path, she quickly became distracted and switched off."

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY

The increasing independence that college or university brings can highlight problems around attentiveness, poor organisational skills and a lack of motivation. However, these may be overcome as studies are now focussed on a subject of particular interest and one in which you obviously excel.

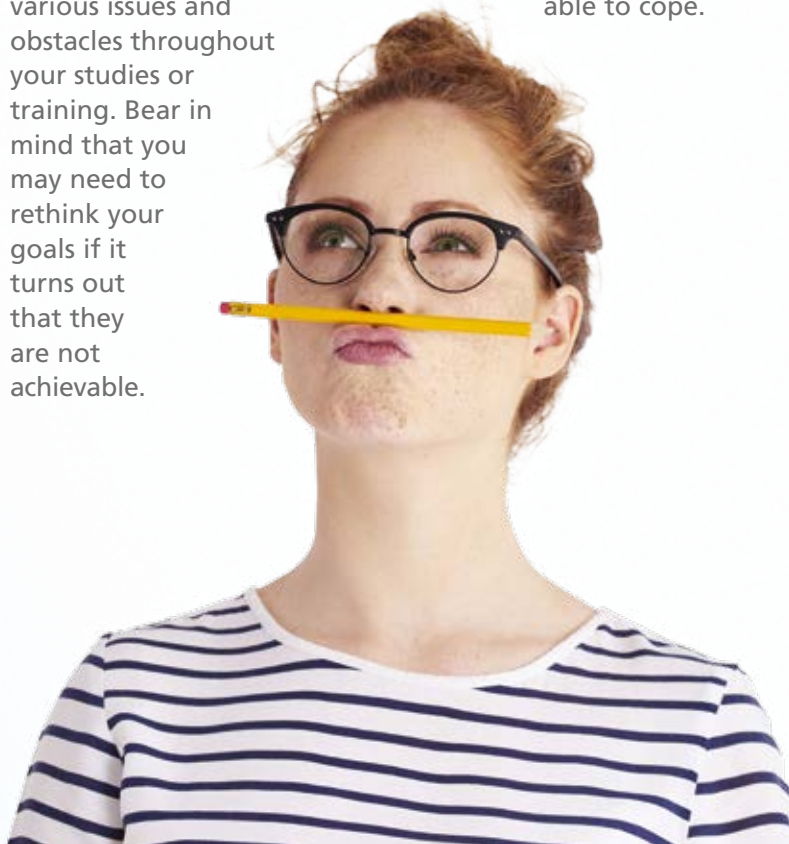
There will be initial challenges around establishing a new social network but plenty of other students will have the same concerns. You will no longer be able to rely on the clear timetabling and support structures of school but, with practice, you can develop good self-management skills. All students need to attend classes and lectures regularly but you may need to overcome your inner procrastination tendencies to avoid last minute, late night revision sessions or missing essay deadlines.

Moving to a new area or city could mean registering with a new doctor. You may find this difficult as this is around the time in your life that medical professionals refer to as the 'transition' period, describing the move from adolescent to adult ADHD.

In order to follow your dreams, you may need to overcome various issues and obstacles throughout your studies or training. Bear in mind that you may need to rethink your goals if it turns out that they are not achievable.

Compromises regarding careers and earning potential may also be necessary.

Women are good at blaming themselves if they don't achieve what they wanted to, rather than seeking professional advice. They feel they should be able to do everything on their own – after all their mother, best friend and neighbour are able to cope.



2

Career and professional life

Work can be even more important for women who have ADHD compared to those not affected by this condition.

Employment can bring the following benefits:

- **Daily structure**
- **Feelings of achievement and affirmation**
- **Positive social interactions**
- **Improved social skills**
- **A sense of purpose**
- **Self-reliance - not being dependant on anyone else for financial support**

The difficulties that we know are features of ADHD around concentrating for long periods of time, forgetfulness, being easily distracted, poor time management etc. may still be there, however new ways can be found to work around these in a positive work environment.

It will be important to pick up on the signals of when it's not appropriate to be too chatty, and stop short of getting into heated conversations with colleagues, managers or customers.

Work can inevitably bring additional stress and this can be difficult to cope with at times. Watch out for the warning signs of burnout - feeling mentally exhausted, higher than usual anxiety levels and low mood.



2

Career and professional life

There are two key moments in working life where problems can occur.

A: Professional life gets off on the wrong foot

A TELLING TALE

"Following her A levels, Lisa secured her dream apprenticeship as a designer at a marketing company. She welcomed the opportunity to show off her creative talents and use her imagination to the full.

Unfortunately, she was often in trouble for arriving late to work. Late nights getting lost in the depths of the internet made it a struggle for Lisa to get up in the morning, even when she set 3 alarms!

Once, when she felt too ill to go to work, she forgot to call her line manager and sent a WhatsApp message to a colleague instead. She was given a warning and told not to do it again.

In order to prove herself she asked to take on additional smaller tasks and projects, but she rarely completed them. She was upset when she didn't receive praise for the quality of the 95% of the work she had done, but was criticised for the missing 5%. She felt stupid and worthless and made a spur of the moment decision to quit her apprenticeship."



B: Changes at work that are outside of your control

A TELLING TALE

"Maria works in a large car dealership processing warranty claims. She had enjoyed working at the dealership part time for many years, but decided to go full time after her children left home.

As a part time worker she was able to work in an empty office, but she now needed to share an office with two colleagues. Being unable to filter out the constant background noise meant that she often made mistakes. The sensory overload made her anxious and aggressive, so she was often cautioned by her boss.

One of her errors led to the dealership suffering a considerable financial loss and several customers made complaints about her, so she was given a written warning. This led to Maria becoming depressed.

She tried antidepressant medication and psychotherapy but it was only during rehabilitation that her ADHD diagnosis became clear. After consultation with her psychiatrist and line manager, she now has a single office and is much happier, her performance has also improved."

Tom's perspective:

THE RELATIONSHIP I HAVE
WITH MY WIFE TINA IS

"GREAT BUT FAR FROM EASY"

"Tina is a very lively, spontaneous, attractive and exciting woman. She is curious and has a high sex drive. She can be really sociable, funny and often impulsive. One thing's for sure, it's never dull!"

Yet, at the same time, life with Tina is stressful, as she never stops. Even at the weekend, she has lots of things to do or activities planned for the family. It's like she is afraid of missing out, which means that even Sundays start early. We barely have a chance to rest and relax.

We have been arguing a lot recently as Tina is really moody and unpredictable. Her mood

can turn from one moment to the next, she becomes sulky and I have no idea what has happened.

What was good yesterday, can annoy her today and make her quick-tempered and dismissive. She then withdraws entirely, barely speaks and just wants to be left alone. It's difficult to know where I fit in and how I can make things right again.

Although she normally calms down quickly, apologises and is affectionate, the nice moment is then already gone. Our marriage is like a roller-coaster..."

Relationships with a partner with ADHD (especially if both partners have the same condition) are often very close but also turbulent, which causes stress in the longer term. Where one partner doesn't have ADHD, they need to be aware of the impact ADHD can have on daily life, so that they are able to offer support and understanding. Counselling can help to cope with recurring tensions and problematic behaviour.



ADVISORY SERVICES

It may be helpful to seek relationship counselling in order to gain a better understanding of what each partner is feeling and to discover ways you can support each other. If you are unable to find a suitable relationship counselling service by looking online, your doctor should be able to give you some information.



4

Family - life in an ADHD home

Tina's perspective:

TODAY WAS CHAOTIC AGAIN!



"Despite only achieving only half the jobs I wanted to, I was already exhausted when our daughter Julie came home from school. I just can't seem to get to grips with the chaos at home. I don't mean to, but somehow I always get distracted.

As I was preparing lunch, Julie wouldn't stop talking. I couldn't follow the news on the radio, and I overcooked the pasta when I tried to quickly empty the dishwasher. Julie's friend called to tell her about some homework - Julie had forgotten to write it down (yet again!).

All of this was running around in my head and I could feel my irritation and anger building up inside me as Julie started her homework. It suddenly got too much. I screamed at her for not using a capital letter at the start of the sentence. How many times does she need to be told? Is she doing this on purpose to annoy me? I wanted to take her swimming and it was her fault that we now didn't have time.

Being exhausted is no excuse, I overreacted and it was wrong to shout at Julie. I ended up doing most of her homework, just to

get it done. I was left feeling exasperated, and very sorry about how I handled things.

Julie had arrived home in a good mood but I ruined it. I fear that my anger will eventually destroy our relationship too. Tom says that I'm too hot-headed. I can't seem to do anything right! Growing up I often felt unfairly treated, my Mum and Grandmother were very patronising and loud, our home was hectic. I'm worried that I am making the same mistakes."



Despite their best intentions, women with ADHD often try to achieve unrealistic amounts in their daily lives. They are often unable to meet their own high standards as they not only take on too much, but they also struggle to prioritise tasks and break them down into smaller steps. They start lots of jobs at the same time and it then all becomes too much.

As their levels of stress, impatience and frustration increase, in addition to emotional outbursts, they start to blame themselves and feel guilty. While they may recognise the problems, and can understand them during counselling, without the appropriate support they are usually unable to change their patterns of behaviour.



5

Friends and friendships

Women with ADHD usually have good social connections and are popular. As well as close friendships, they have many acquaintances and friendships with neighbours, colleagues, club members, and parents of their children's friends.

They like to be helpful and frequently say 'yes' too quickly and take on jobs or do favours for others. They try to achieve too much, in too little time, and rush from one appointment to the next. Their constant stress can be perceived by others as restlessness. They often double-book themselves and find it very awkward when they have no choice but to cancel a commitment.

By putting it off until the last minute, they cause themselves more stress.

It's important to appear 'normal', rather than reveal any tell-tale signs of ADHD. As an example, rather than admit a small oversight of forgetting a cake for the school party, they would stay up late to bake one.

Women with ADHD are regarded as sociable and fun. They are acknowledged by their peers as being confident, direct and highly socially adept. They tend to talk a lot, often disclosing more personal information than they had intended. When they look back, they find this awkward, almost embarrassing, and resolve to be more discreet. However, these good intentions are quickly forgotten when they, once again, become the centre of attention. They are easily drawn into discussions, some of which can turn into heated debates.

On the other hand, women who struggle to concentrate can find conversations hard to follow. They may feel socially inadequate and self-conscious, and prefer to blend into the background. They feel misunderstood and yet unable to explain how they feel, as they believe their behaviour is unusual and doesn't make any sense. It can be difficult for them to concentrate as part of a large group in a busy environment such as a café, all the stimuli can cause them to appear distracted, or even indifferent to others in the group.

BEST FRIENDS



ADHD AND HORMONES

People with ADHD live with a rollercoaster of emotions but, to compound this, women also experience the natural fluctuations in hormones that occur on a monthly basis with their periods and during pregnancy and menopause.

Oestrogen is one of the main hormones that regulates the female reproductive system, but it also plays an important role in concentration levels, mood, and memory. Levels of estrogen / estradiol levels vary considerably over the entire menstrual cycle, i.e. 28 days, and during perimenopause and menopause. Women with ADHD tend to be particularly sensitive to lower levels of oestrogen.

Low oestrogen levels can cause:

- Problems with concentration
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Fatigue (extreme tiredness)

The hormone balance in women with ADHD has a major impact on attention and restlessness and also on activity, sexuality and hypersensitivity.





SEXUALITY AND PREGNANCY

It is well known that adolescents with ADHD, both boys and girls, become sexually active at a younger age. As well as heightened impulsiveness and curiosity during puberty, the physical changes are more intense in these young adults.

Parents should have an open discussion early on, well ahead of the time they think their child could be sexually active. It's important to provide straightforward information and discuss sexuality and contraception. Ideally, the young person should also speak to their doctor or make an appointment with a sexual health clinic. There is a higher rate of unwanted pregnancies in young girls and women with ADHD.

DURING PREGNANCY

During pregnancy, the symptoms of ADHD can be significantly improved; some women even find that they have nearly no symptoms at all. Soon after the birth, however, the familiar symptoms return, especially the forgetfulness and organisation issues.

Some women feel very stressed throughout their pregnancy, and are overwhelmed by thoughts around preparing for the birth and getting everything ready for when the baby arrives. Becoming a new parent is life-changing for everyone, but it can bring additional chaos and confusion for those with ADHD.

In general, ADHD medication is not recommended for use during pregnancy. However, in exceptional circumstances, a doctor may decide that stopping treatment could pose a greater risk to the pregnancy than allowing its continued use. Medical advice from the doctor should always be followed.





PREMENSTRUAL SYNDROME (PMS)

Women with ADHD often suffer from more severe PMS. They are likely to experience pain and a number of other physical symptoms, including feelings of discomfort and general unease, just before their period.

During these few days, the women may be seen by others as 'very moody', and there is some truth in this as they are likely to be feeling more irritable and may be particularly sensitive, they may have low moods, and trouble sleeping. When PMS symptoms are extreme, a doctor may decide prescribe to a low-dose antidepressant to provide some relief.

For women who are already taking ADHD medication, their doctor could increase the dosage for a short time just before, and just after their period every month. This should only be done on the advice of the doctor who usually prescribes the medication.

THE MENOPAUSE

On average, the menopause lasts for around 4 years from the point of the woman's final period, but for approximately 10% of women, this can be up to 12 years. There is not a lot of research available that covers the experiences of women with ADHD as they go through the menopause, but we do know that their ADHD symptoms usually increase during this time.

Their behaviour may become considerably more impulsive and mood swings more pronounced. Attention to detail and work performance could be affected; there could be a noticeable difference in concentration levels.

After menopause, oestrogen levels fall by around 65%. With or without ADHD, this drop in oestrogen causes women to experience problems with concentration

and memory. If these issues are already present due to ADHD, it can make them worse, and new symptoms can also appear. When combined with the other well-known physical symptoms of the menopause (e.g. hot flushes and insomnia), this can be a very challenging time!

As with every woman going through the menopause, it can be a highly emotional time as they come to terms with their child-bearing days coming to an end and entering a new phase of their life. They may worry that they will no longer be attractive to their partners, so it's important to have open discussions about how they are feeling.



TREATMENT OPTIONS

TREATMENT REQUIRES A DIAGNOSIS

ADHD should be diagnosed by a an expert in behavioral disorders (e.g. psychiatrist or psychologist) who is trained in recognising the condition, who should then recommend an individual treatment plan. The need for treatment is not due to the diagnosis itself but to help with some of the symptoms you may experience as a result of having ADHD. The doctor will explain some of the difficulties that may affect your daily life and areas where you may struggle.

If treatment has been requested by parents, or pressure put on the parent by their child's school, it's important to understand what behaviour has prompted this request before any course of treatment is recommended.

Particularly when ADHD is diagnosed in adulthood, other psychological issues may also be identified. Further assessments should be made if there are signs of depression or anxiety disorders. Substance abuse (alcohol and pills) as well as shopping addiction and eating disorders are frequently seen in adults diagnosed with ADHD.

The next step is to agree on treatment goals; if possible no more than three and a maximum of five. It's important to understand your expectations of

any treatment, and explain to the doctor the changes you are hoping this treatment will make to how you feel or behave. They will take into account any other conditions for which you are currently receiving medication and will let you know any additional information about your recommended treatment.

Whatever the treatment, the goal is always to reach your full potential and to gain control in your daily life.



MEDICATION AND MORE

Treatment plans for ADHD should be tailored to the individual's requirements. A wide range of different treatment approaches are available, but 'psychoeducation' is an important first step. It provides information and support, not only to the person with ADHD, but also those close to them.

The three measures / treatments highlighted at the top of the list on the right are key to comprehensive therapy management for adults with ADHD. Information and advice always form the foundation of any approach; ideally close family members would also be part of these discussions. Medication also frequently needs to be prescribed in order to get the most from any additional treatment measures.

Recommended treatments may include:

- **Psychoeducation (information and advice)**
- **Involvement of relatives**
- **Medication**
- **Attending a self-help group**
- **Behavioural therapy**
- **Endurance sport**
- **Skills training**
- **Occupational therapy**
- **Gynaecology referral (menstrual cycle-related symptom changes, hormone treatment)**
- **Social and emotional skills training**
- **Coaching**
- **Debt counselling**
- **Educational counselling**
- **Relationship counselling/ couples therapy**
- **Movement-orientated relaxation (yoga, tai chi)**
- **Mindfulness therapy**
- **Psychotherapy/systemic therapy**

Medication generally reduces the sense of inner unrest and may increase the ability to concentrate. Other aspects, such as attentiveness and memory retention also improve in many patients as well as, in part, their tendency to procrastinate.

People living with conditions like ADHD can sometimes feel isolated. There are many benefits to joining a self-help group, so this is definitely something to consider. Also, there is evidence that taking part in an endurance sport can help to reduce ADHD symptoms and has a positive effect on people's lives.

Especially when ADHD is diagnosed in adulthood, behavioural therapy can be helpful in order to work through any negative thoughts or issues with work or relationships.

PROBLEM: ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION

Many women consult their doctor as they are experiencing anxiety or depression. They may be surprised to be told that their symptoms may, in fact, be due to undiagnosed ADHD. At this point the focus will be to carry out an assessment in order to achieve an accurate diagnosis.

People with ADHD have an increased risk of developing further psychological disorders. As many as 80% of adults with ADHD have at least one other diagnosed psychiatric condition, including mood and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, personality disorders. The doctor needs to establish if the ADHD has caused these other disorders, or whether they are due to other factors.

Depression will certainly not just disappear automatically once the ADHD has been treated successfully. And, vice versa, depression must be treated in order to ensure the success of ADHD treatment, or at least not to hinder it.



BRINGING ORDER TO THE

CHAOS

"Procrastinitis" is common in ADHD, along with forgetfulness, unreliability and the inability to plan. This means that life becomes increasingly chaotic and creates an enormous amount of stress.

This chaos increases disproportionately as the family grows, especially if there are several children in the household, some of whom may also have ADHD. This is referred to by specialists as an 'executive function deficit' but the example here illustrates what this looks like in reality.

A TELLING TALE

"A married couple in their 20s came for a consultation. The husband worked full-time, his wife has ADHD and had taken a break from her job to care for their two young children (aged 3 and 6).

The husband could not understand how, when he arrived home from work, the house resembled a bomb site. Sometimes even the breakfast dishes

hadn't been cleared away and he was concerned that their eldest son hadn't done his homework even though it was 6pm.

His wife tearfully explained that she felt like a complete failure and did not understand why things were sinking into chaos.

In the mornings, after her husband leaves for work, she takes their daughter to nursery and their son to school. Most days, one of the children would arrive late and the other would not have their school bag or something else they needed to take as she just couldn't get everything organised in time.

She explains that she drives straight home and her first job is to clear the table. But when she puts something in the fridge, she notices that she needs to go shopping, she then needs to write a list or she might forget something. On the way to find a pad and pen, she remembers that she should switch the dishwasher on first so that the cycle could run whilst she is getting on with the other household chores.

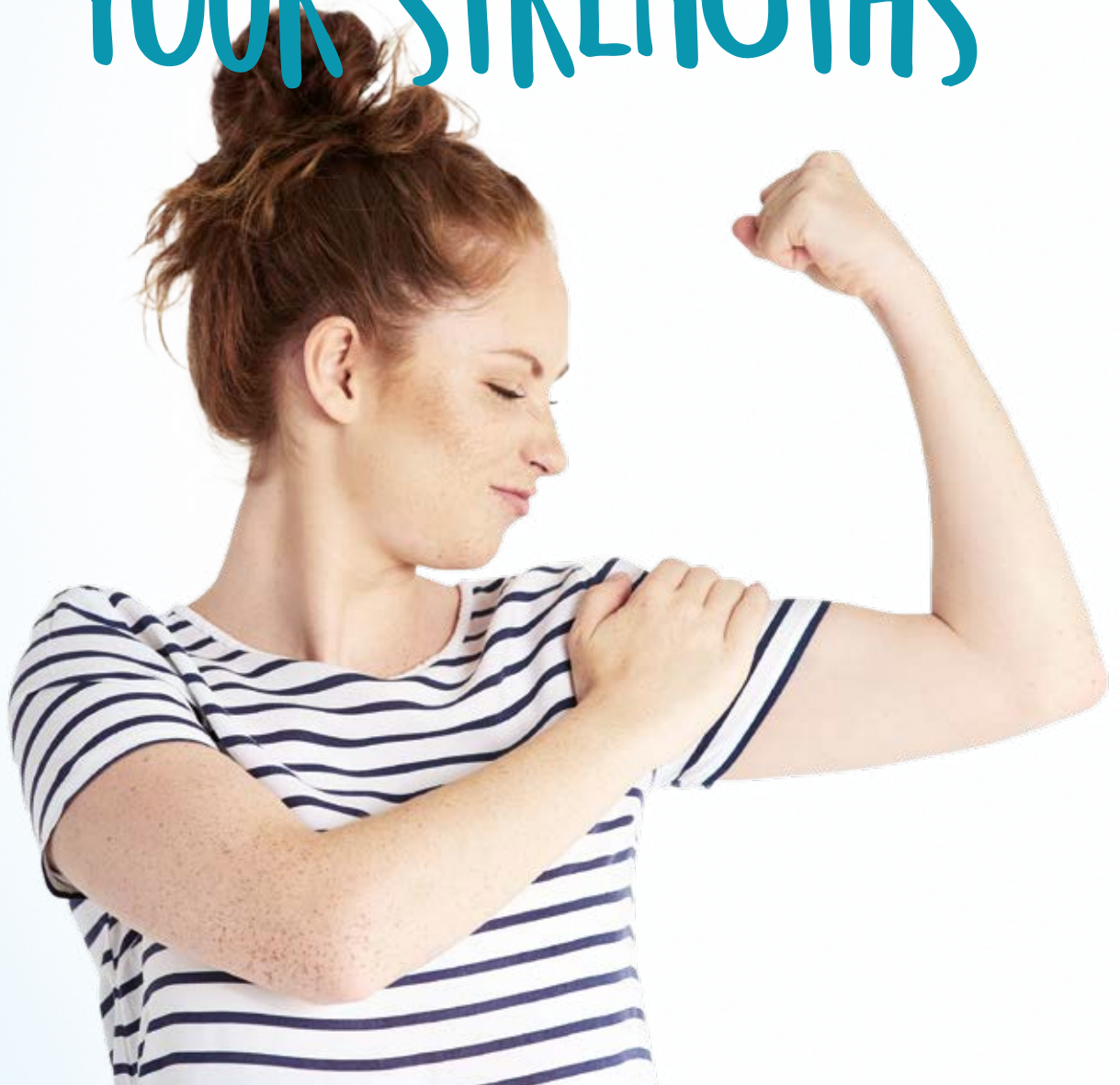
And that is how she spends the whole day. She doesn't sit down, not even for five minutes, feels utterly exhausted and keeps starting new things yet ultimately manages to get nothing done."



This situation is one where an ADHD coach or a home visit from an occupational therapist specialising in ADHD could make a big difference.

A range of different support options could help, your doctor will be able to advise what is available in your area and make the appropriate referral. Very specific strategies can then be jointly developed, such as how to structure certain processes and also plan everyday life and housework. It helps, for example, to break down complex tasks into sub-tasks, to set priorities and deadlines. It's also essential to schedule in breaks to avoid exhaustion.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR STRENGTHS



ADHD HAS ITS BENEFITS!

The term 'attention deficit' suggests that those with ADHD are unable to concentrate but this isn't the case. If something is of interest, then people with ADHD are able to concentrate more intensely, and for a longer period, than those who do not have ADHD. This ability is known as 'hyperfocus'.

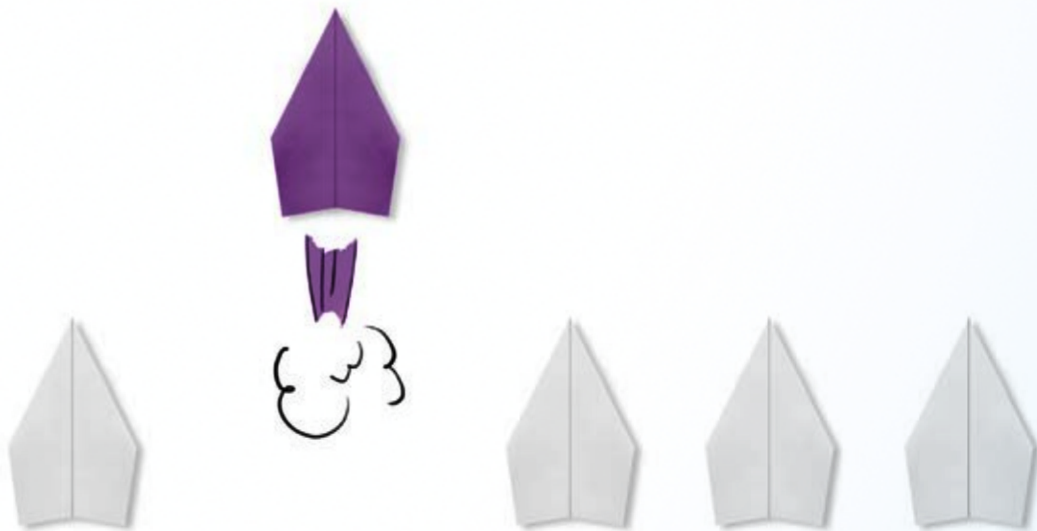
For women, there are many positive aspects to having ADHD, here are just a few examples but you could probably add many more.

The typical strengths of women with ADHD:

- You are flexible
- You can change strategies quickly when needed
- You won't give up if you are convinced of something
- You are goal-oriented
- You have a visual, specific way of thinking
- You are independent
- You are eloquent
- You are innovative
- You find solutions where others can't see a way forward

Make a list of the things you consider to be your particular strengths and share it with your doctor. Being aware of the characteristics you identify as being positive is helpful to the doctor and can be useful guidance for some of the support elements within your overall treatment plan.

Medication can be paused or adjusted if any of these positive aspects to your character are diminished or disappear completely, so it's important for your doctor to have a good idea of what you consider to be your individual strengths.



WHERE TO TURN FOR FURTHER ADVICE

Information about ADHD

Association for and by people with ADHD,
ADD, Dyslexia and Dyscalculia
www.impulsenwoortblind.nl

Coaching and training for women with ADHD
www.adhdbijvrouwen.nl

National parent association
www.balansdigitaal.nl

Relationship therapy

Looking for a relationship therapist in your area
www.relatietherapeuten.net

Sexual health and contraception

GGD sexual health centre in your area
www.ggd.nl

Pregnancy

Specialist in unplanned pregnancy
www.siriz.nl



INFORMATION, INSPIRATION AND TIPS ABOUT ADHD

ADHDGIDS.NL

This website offers a source of information, inspiration and practical tips, for both adults and children. Every quarter new interviews and the latest news, in an online magazine. In addition, the podcast series "Work and ADHD".



NOTES:

NOTES:



ADHD de rode draad door je leven

NOW THAT YOU HAVE EVERYTHING CLEARLY LISTED,
IT TURNS OUT THAT THERE IS A SURPRISING AMOUNT
OF CHOICE IN THE APPROACH TO ADHD!

Information
for women
with ADHD

