

# ADHD in Girls & Women

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# Introductions



# Session Plan

- Introductions
- Please ask questions as we go
- Introduction - overview of context & ADHD
- Misunderstood, missed and misdiagnosed
- Resources



# What is ADHD?

- Neurodevelopmental disorder
- Significant difficulties with attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity that impact on functioning and are present before the age of 12 years
- ADHD (Combined Type)
- ADHD (Inattentive Type) or ADHD (Hyperactive Type)
- Inattention symptoms – difficulties regulating attention, distractable, difficulties following instructions, organisational difficulties, losing things, forgetfulness, makes careless mistakes
- Hyperactivity – fidgety, can't stay seated, constantly on the go (physical or mental), talks excessively
- Impulsivity – challenges with waiting, interrupting others, dangerous activities
- PLUS - emotional regulation difficulties & rejection sensitivity





# ADHD and the brain

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- People with ADHD have lower levels of two neurotransmitters; dopamine & noradrenaline
- Neurotransmitters are chemicals that travel around the brain passing messages to the nervous system
- Noradrenaline – helps start up and maintain attention
- Dopamine – gives a sense of reward from a task or even anticipated reward (motivating)



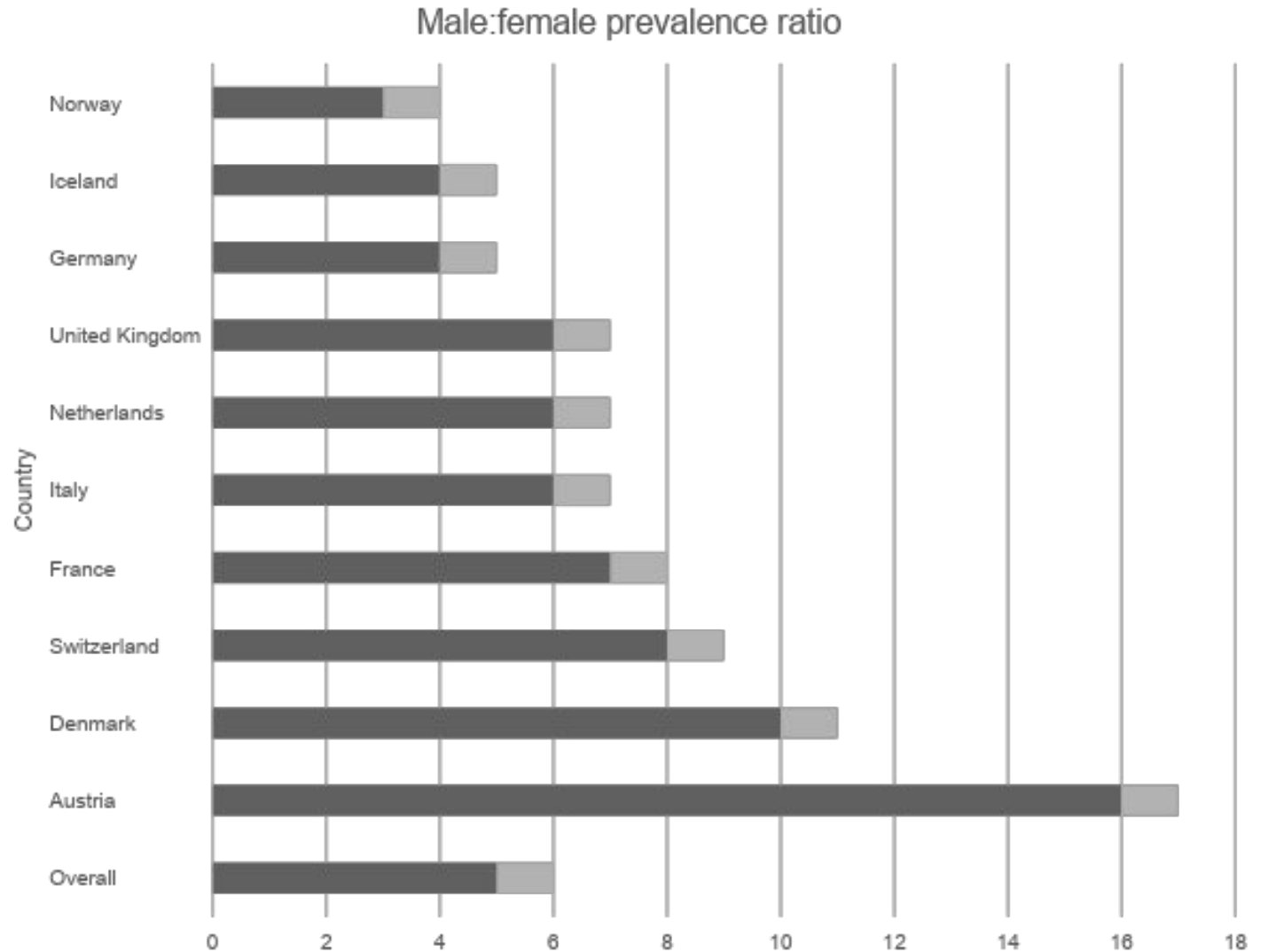
# A day with Hannah & Doodle

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_iORPapCOIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iORPapCOIQ)



# The Context

- In the UK for every 1 female diagnosed with ADHD there are 6 males diagnosed with ADHD
- In other neighbouring countries, the ratio ranges from 1:3 to 1:16
- True representation?



# Girls with ADHD are flying under the radar



- In adulthood there is a shift to a ratio of 1:1, suggesting underdiagnosis in childhood for girls
- Girls:
  - Less likely to be referred for assessment,
  - more likely to have undiagnosed ADHD
  - more likely to receive incorrect diagnoses of a mental health condition.
  - more likely to be diagnosed during life transitions
- In 2021: **3200% increase** in the number of women taking to an online test to see if they've ADHD, compared to 2019.



# Conversations with women with ADHD and specialists

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

## ADHD Crisis In The UK: Under Diagnosed, Lacking Support And Stigmatized

Nancy Doyle Contributor @  
I am an organizational psychologist specializing in neurodiversity.

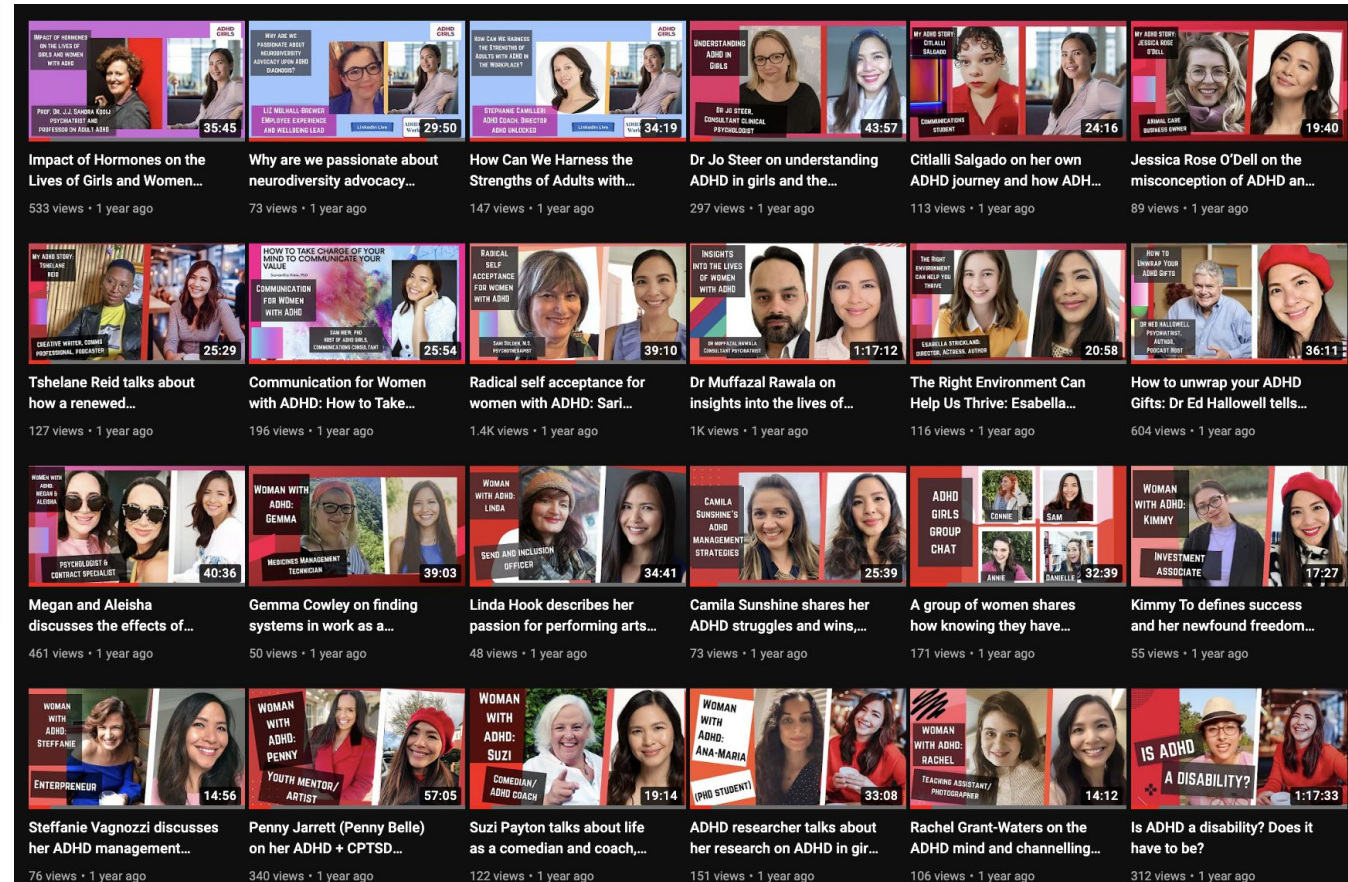
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Jan 14, 2022, 12:06pm EST

Listen to article 8 minutes



Dr Samantha Hiew, Director of ADHD Girls Ltd @ADHD\_GIRLS



## Questions for late diagnosed women with ADHD:

- 1) What led you to pursue a diagnosis?
- 2) What is the biggest stigma affecting women with ADHD?
- 3) How do you manage living with ADHD (apart from meds)?
- 4) What strengths do you possess that has led to your success?

# A collection of voices

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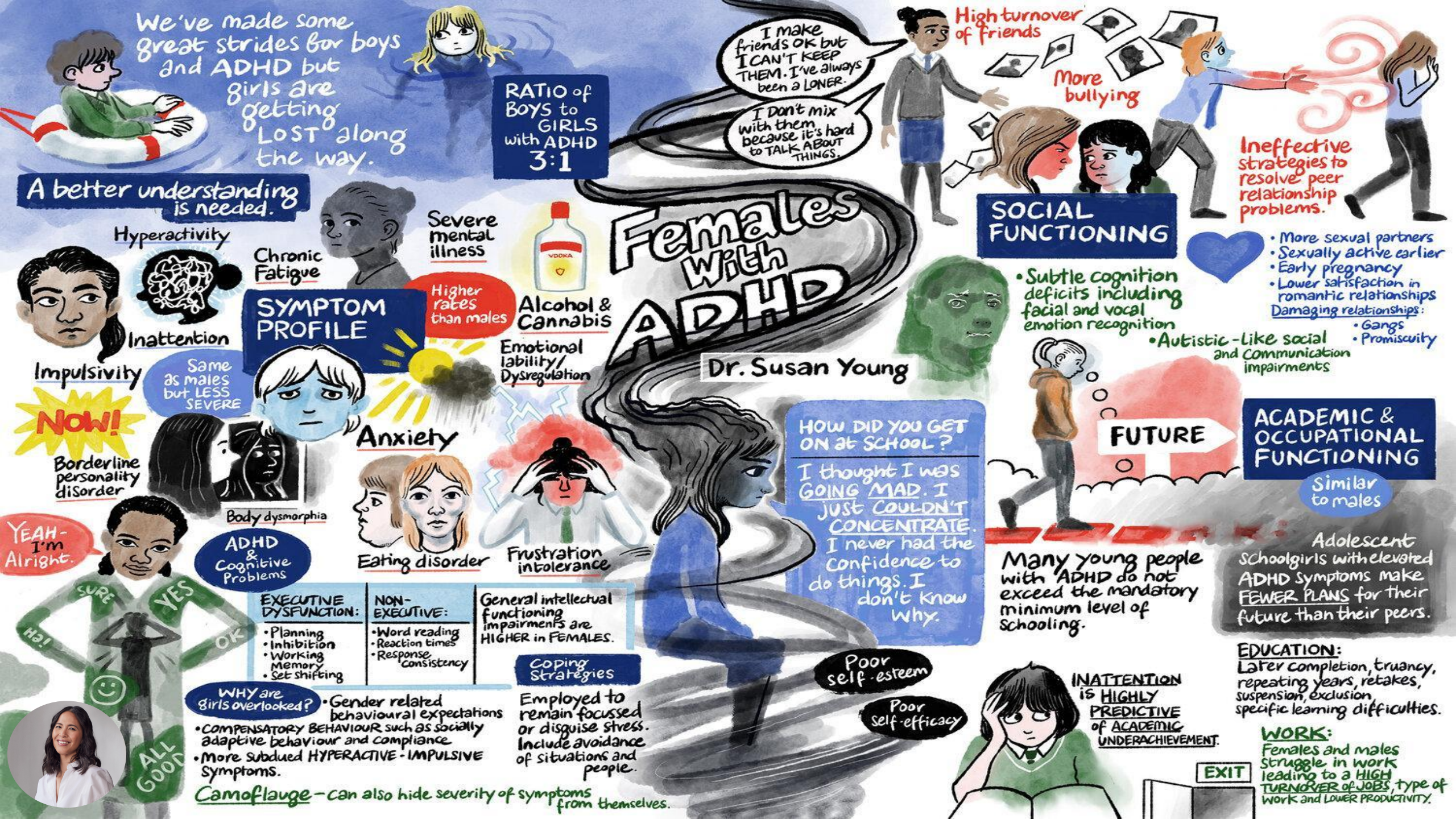
“I have learnt over time that there is a time and a place for daydreaming and, apparently, it’s not school. ADHD has not exactly been my friend in a classroom setting. Zoning out often translated to ‘not listening’ to my less than knowledgeable teachers, who often thought that I didn’t care. I was labelled as the ‘misbehaved troublesome one’ from the get-go.” (Jessie)

“Before I was diagnosed, I remember going to school, being told off by every teacher, being excluded by the other kids...Looking back, I think some people actually wanted to be my friend but I wasn’t paying attention! I would lose my coat, my hat, gloves or all three and then coming home, to be told off again for having forgotten however many things I had forgotten on any given day.” (Anna)

“One of the first things I learnt in my Reception class aged five years was that if I asked to go to the toilet, I was able to give myself a five minute break from the perils of concentration...until the concerned head teacher asked my mother if I had a bladder condition” (Brooke)









# Missed

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# Why might they be missed?

- Symptoms in females are often explained as character traits rather than ADHD

Spacey

Lazy

Chatty

Messy

Forgetful

Clumsy





# Why might they be missed?

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- These girls aren't disruptive, go "under the radar" & present differently creating an identification challenge
- Parents & teachers are more likely to look to a dyslexia explanation – there is a 30% chance it's both!
- A lot of time and effort can be put into hiding the symptoms to look "normal" (masking)





# Masking

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- Camouflaging / covering up symptoms
- Occurs in about one third of cases with ADHD, more common than we know
- Fitting in socially, avoiding the stigma, feeling accepted
- Particular issue in girls and women
- Trouble listening / daydreaming -> find questions to ask that show you are interested and hide the not listening!
- Forgetting to do things and not being able to explain -> shifting the blame
- Being too loud & interrupting -> trying not to say anything



# Impact of masking

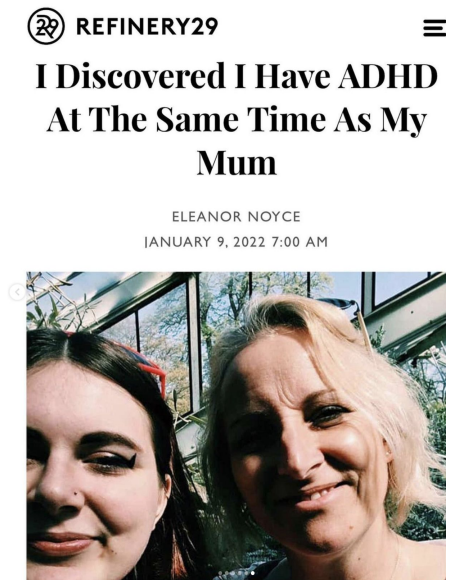
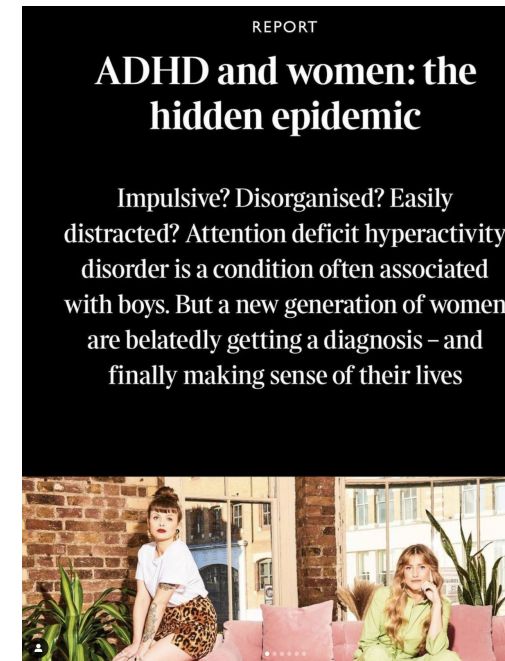
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- Delay in diagnosis
- Disbelief in families and friends
- Increase in stress and anxiety
- Masking symptoms can often be in place over years

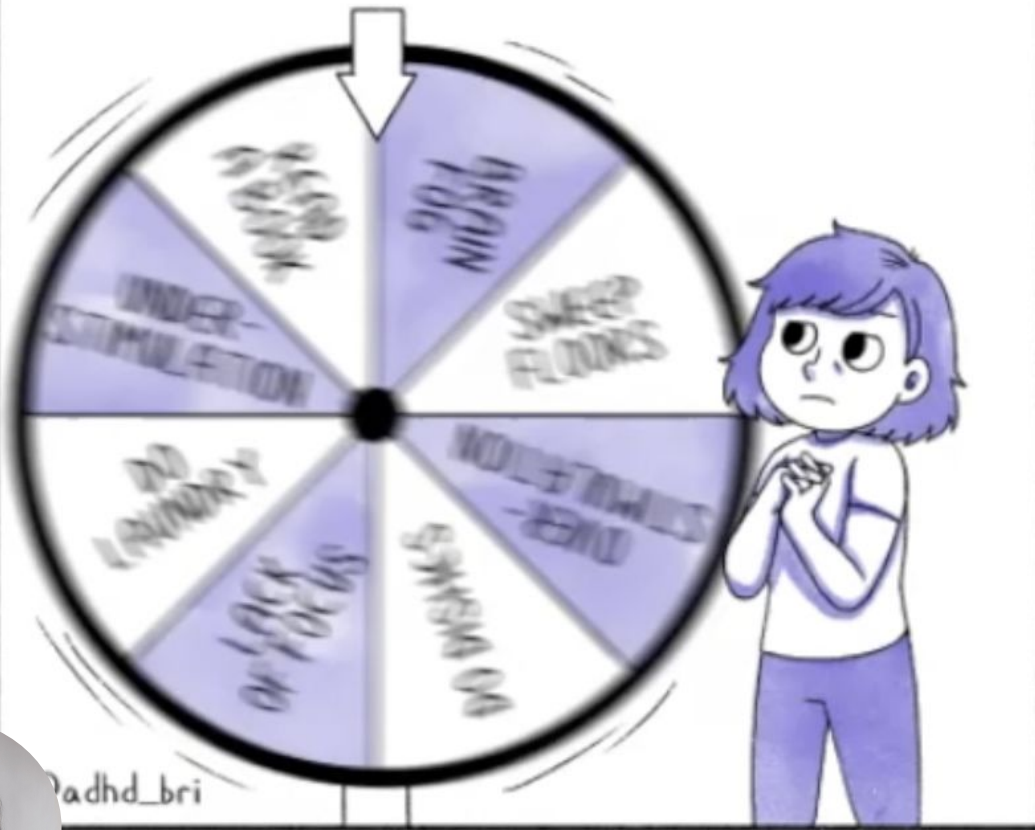


# Why might girls be missed?

- Stigma perpetuated by media “naughty white Boy image”
- Pre-assessment rating scales based on research done in boys: female specific traits not represented
- Socialisation: Conditioning girls to be nice & compliant
  - Parents and teacher’s judgements are biased comparing ADHD traits in girls vs boys.
- Screening tools are completed by parents and teachers who have ADHD stereotypes in mind
  - Subjective opinions
  - “I hated primary school because the teachers’ perspective was that I am just fidgety and attention seeking.” (Beth)
- Clinician bias
  - Study by Bruchmuller et al in 2011 using identical case vignettes found gender was a significant predictor of ADHD diagnosis



# ADHD is like...



## Different presentation?

- As girls mature, they tend to INTERNALISE the hyperactivity to become socially acceptable, so less overt symptoms.
- Even in cases where the girls are hyperactive and impulsive, teachers aren't able to spot their ADHD compared to in boys.
- Co-occurrences (autism, Tourette's, etc): This complicates the picture.
- By the time a girl is 12, she would have heard 20,000 negative messaging.
- Have more mental health challenges & self doubt as a result.

# Different presentation?



- Masking with intelligence, people pleasing to fit in, perfectionist tendencies
- Working late through the night before exams
- Hyperactivity and impulsivity is often present but expressed in a different way
  - Her mind might be constantly on the go rather than physical restlessness
  - “Hyper-social”, “hyper-emotional”, “hyper-talkative”, “hyper-reactive” rather than hyperactive
  - Interrupting others, speaking without thinking first, acting on impulse when making decisions as signs of impulsivity rather than physical fights or swearing
- Inattentive symptoms in girls include daydreaming, disorganisation, forgetfulness
- Less talked about issue especially in women: Emotional dysregulation, especially when difficulties with friendships and relationships occur

# But they can concentrate!

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- ADHDers DO NOT have a deficit in attention, but problems REGULATING attention
  - mundane tasks very difficult to focus on
  - tasks they love can induce hyperfocus, difficulty in shifting gears
- Reports of varying concentration abilities in a child are very common, but should not shut down ADHD as a hypothesis
- Hyperfocus – deep and intense concentration, fixation on one thing. Likely to be on things that provide stimulation or instant feedback.
- ADHDers have an interest-based nervous system: Often stimulated by interest, challenge, novelty, urgency, and passion.
- Perhaps accounts for some of the famous faces with ADHD, who built a thriving career based on what they're passionate about!



# Misdiagnosed

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# Why might they be misdiagnosed?

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- Reports from home and school can vary significantly; direct impact on evidence to meet diagnostic criteria
  - Challenging scenario to manage
  - Importance of rating measures being completed by staff who know a child/young person well
  - It is not uncommon to see girls who are performing well academically
  - Emphasis on impact of symptoms rather than academic achievement
  - Supportive and nurturing primary schools can unintentionally hide ADHD through their support



# Why might they be misdiagnosed?

Symptoms are put down to anxiety or depression

High co-morbidity rate in ADHD, which increases the complexity of assessment and diagnosis

Often ADHD and other mental health difficulties present TOGETHER. It does not have to be one or the other! Anxiety affects 1/3 of young women with ADHD



# Why might they be misdiagnosed?

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- Later presentation to services, often on secondary or college transfer
- Common to find parent and primary school scaffolding which hides the difficulties
  - Parents supporting with organisation of school uniform and equipment
  - Parents helping with homework
  - Parents driving children to school to ensure they are there and on time
  - Enrolment in lots of activities to give an energy outlet
- Later diagnoses means more years of untreated ADHD and so greater impact on self esteem and mental health





# What can we do?



Increase	Increase understanding in schools, clinicians and the general public (great start today!)
Ensure	Ensure girls are given self report screening tools, alongside teacher and parent reports
Remain	Remain curious about disparate reports from home and school
Expand	Expand research on girls (and women) with ADHD
Be clear	During assessment be clear about what support is already in place
Implement	Implement strategies based on needs and presentation rather than diagnosis
Tailor	Individually tailor strategies



# Resources

ADHD Girls <https://adhdgirls.co.uk/>

Raising Girls with ADHD: Parents & Carers Guide video course:  
<https://www.utopia.adhdgirls.co.uk/programs>

Understanding ADHD in Girls & Women by Joanne Steer (Audiobook also available)

The Teenage Girl's Guide to living well with ADHD by Sonia Ali

ADHD Foundation <https://adhdfoundation.org.uk/>

ADDISS <http://www.addiss.co.uk/>

ADHD Embrace <https://adhdembrace.org/>

Instagram @gracetimothy @adhdunlocked @adhd\_girls @howtoadhd

Youtube ADHD Girls : <https://www.youtube.com/c/adhdgirls>

Youtube How To ADHD (Jessica McCabe)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/samanthahiew/>

# Questions

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