



IT'S A LOT

The Stories and Experiences
of Women with ADHD

By Sammi Fisher

welcome to the ADHD mind



Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a big complicated thing that some days feels huge and others days can shrink away and disappear into the background. Some days I forget I have it. Other days it feels like my brain is a cracked egg, leaking out focus. I'm staring into space, just thinking. About what? I don't remember.

My experience with ADHD is something that unbeknownst to me started way back in my childhood. I didn't know it affected me until I was 19. It will continue on, as it's just the way my brain is wired.

ADHD diagnoses among adults are growing four times faster than ADHD diagnoses among children in

the United States (a 26.4% increase among children, compared to 123.3 percent among adults)

ADHD comes in all shapes and sizes and affects all ages and genders. But the stereotype of a person with ADHD is a 7-year-old white boy bouncing off the walls. This misconception began because at one point it was believed only boys and men could have ADHD.

ADHD in women often manifests differently, which leads to many women being undiagnosed, or diagnosed later in life. Women tend to have less socially-disruptive or obvious symptoms than men. I want to bring awareness, to begin to disassemble the stigma that

exists around mental health and ADHD. I talked to nine different women about their stories and experiences with ADHD. I learned about their different diagnoses, successes, and trials. Each of their stories was so different, but some themes became clear.

Adult ADHD frequently co-occurs with other, comorbid conditions. Almost all the women I talked to have other mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, or OCD. Others have dyslexia or autism. This makes treatment more complicated.

All of the women I talked to have the privilege of access to medical providers and mental health professionals. Access to medical services provided the women in this zine with options that not everybody has.

"I'm a little jealous of people that are younger than me that they're like, oh, I didn't get diagnosed until my 20s or 30s or 40s. I said, Oh, you guys are so lucky. So it validated that, who how I was created, is okay. And how I act and how I do things is okay."
-Katrina Katz, 51

"That's a big thing with ADHD. I'm sure you've heard of executive dysfunction. I've been laying in bed. And I want to get up, I have things to do. My body physically, I just cannot get myself to do it. Because I don't know where to start. To have to write in my planner first, or is it more important to just start my assignments? It's just this constant loop of, but what do I do first?"
-Hannah Cusick, 21

"I have a really hard time remembering things if I don't take my medication. So it became like a problem, mainly in romantic relationships, where someone would be talking to me and would tell me something, and then a couple of days later be like, 'oh, remember, when I told you that?' I'd be like, 'no, I have no recollection of that conversation at all whatsoever.' And so I think, to a lot of people who don't understand that, that's a symptom of ADHD, it sort of looks like I'm being a bad partner, or a bad friend or whatever,"
-Stephanie Zamarippa, 25

What's it like to have ADHD?

"Yeah, so while hyper-focusing is the enemy, it is also fun because I have these little pockets of knowledge on really strange things. So I do like that about myself. I like that I'm able to sort of throw myself into a topic and learn everything there is to know about it. And then I think also like the creative part of it, the fact that I wanted to learn how to reupholster chairs and I did it and successfully and sort of like well, semi-successfully, once I finished doing it, it'll be a successful thing. But yeah, that is like a weird cool thing that I now know how to do. And so I enjoy that about myself. And I think also maybe it, within the same vein of hyper-focusing, like the passion that comes along with that, sort of like getting really excited about something that's really interesting. That may not be interesting to other people."
-Stephanie Zamarippa, 25

I'll see something like, 'ADHD, it's not a flaw. It's just you're built differently. And if it weren't for capitalism, it would be fine. You only need to operate differently because of capitalism.' I'm like, even if I didn't have to work a day in my life, I'd want to be a good friend. I want to be able to pay attention to things that my friends are saying. And that's not capitalism, that's just wanting to be a decent person."
-Anna Del Savio, 24

"I think a lot of times with ADHD, that kind of structure of tasks, it can be really hard. The breaking things down or, if your brain is thinking about a lot of things, even if you're interested and smart and can cope, it just takes longer, or it feels exhausting to do things because you are having to work really hard to keep refocusing your brain and trying to fight against all these, natural impulses to get distracted, feel disorganized, because your brain is jumping around all over the place, at least that's how it feels for me."
-Else Ratzliff, 22

"I think it was validating. Because I had struggled in high school so much. Not even just high school. I remember, being eight or nine years old. And teachers saying to my parents, 'Stephanie is not a C student, but she gets Cs. And you know, but when she does do the work, and when she does present something, it's A work. And so it doesn't make sense that she's getting Cs across the board.' And that was elementary school. Middle school, that was the constant narrative.

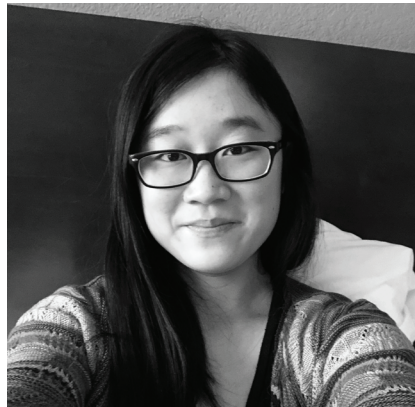
And then, in high school, my grades dropped even more. I would be getting Fs and Ds in classes, but then turn in a paper one time and get an A on the paper. And so teachers were always like, 'this doesn't make any sense what you're doing.'

So finally, getting that diagnosis was validation. For my own understanding of my body and my brain. And finally having someone say, 'there's something different about your brain, not wrong. And here's the way that we can correct it.' And then finally, being able to have that correction and be able to then go on and go from like, I dropped out of high school. So going from a high school dropout to applying to PhD programs. Amazing medication. Yeah, it works." ▫

-Stephanie Zamarripa, 25



These are the women I interviewed at the ages when they were diagnosed with ADHD. They range from kindergarten to age 50.



Top row left to right: Jessie Diaz-Herrea in kindergarten, Hannah Cusick at 10, Anna Blank in second grade. Middle row: Me at 19, Emily Chen at 23, Stephanie Zamarripa at 17, Phoebe Lopez at 18. Bottom row: Else Ratzliff at 16, Katrina Katz at 50, Anna Del Savio at 17.



The Ups and Downs of Medication

Anna Blank, 22, was diagnosed with ADHD when she was in second grade due to her clear hyperactivity. Her parents decided to medicate her soon after her diagnosis. "Starting off, I was put on 72 milligrams of Adderall. As a child, it was incredibly unhealthy. And I stayed at 72 milligrams for probably three or four years."

"Then I went down to 56. For the majority and the rest of the time that I was on Adderall [I was on] 56 milligrams, and I was on it until I started weaning off as a freshman in college. But a big part of my daily routine was taking my meds and not only that, but it obviously had an impact on my mental well-being and how I reflected upon myself and how I felt."

Based on U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved product labeling, only in rare cases is it necessary to exceed a total of 40 mg of Adderall per day for adults. 30 mg for children.

"I just remember not eating. I remember sitting at my computer as a kid playing Sims. And my mom would come down and be like, Okay, it's time to eat and I didn't want to eat. And I lost an incredible amount of weight," said Anna. "I basically

had a prescribed eating disorder from a very early age." Anna's eating habits drew concerns from other family members and those around her, but her parents saw it as no reason to stop the medication. In fact, her parents were very strict with her medication.

Anna's parents wouldn't talk to her in the morning unless she took her medication. "I would try taking them once I was leaving to go to school so that I would have an appetite in the morning to eat. They would be like, 'did you take it?' And I'd be like, 'not yet. I want to eat first.' And they'd be like, 'we're not talking to you.'"

During her many years taking Adderall she experienced really bad anxiety, psychosis, and depression due to her inconsistent use of the drug. "I remember I would start taking it again after a few days and I'm like, 'Oh my god, I am so empty inside like so I'm not myself, feel no joy.' And then I'd go off of it and I'd feel good again, I'd eat whatever it was."

When she moved out of her parent's house, Anna knew she didn't want to be on medication anymore. "Without it, I feel like myself, which is really nice. Once I stopped taking it, took about six months until I felt clear of it. It was a very happy thing to do. And I very much identify with having ADHD."

"I am a hyper child, I'm a hyper adult. I will dance and be talkative and fun and that's my joy."

Frequently Anna thinks of going back on Adderall, but a much smaller dose. Her relationship with food and eating is an outstanding side effect that she experiences

Finding Stability

Else Ratzliff, 22, has found a stable relationship with her ADHD medication, Vyvanse. She's been on it since her diagnosis at 16. Vyvanse is a time-release medication that works over 12 hours. It slowly releases medication throughout the whole day. It has a smooth come-on to the medication and come-off of it, unlike Adderall. This was important to Else.

She was prescribed it because Vyvanse worked for her brother, who had been diagnosed years before her.

"I've now been on it for a long time and I feel I have a very good relationship with it and that I know how it'll affect me and what it's like. There are side effects to it that I learned and had to be aware of, part of Vyvanse is an appetite suppressant."

Else remembers in high school struggling with this and finding herself not getting hungry at lunch. "All foods sounded gross, and I didn't want to eat anything. Once it wears off after 12 hours, like you don't eat, you can get really bad headaches, and then get super hungry." Today she has learned to try to trick her brain to outsmart the

medication and eating something even if she doesn't feel that hungry.

ADHD medications have plenty of positives and negatives that come with taking the prescription. Even though Else has found a medication that she likes and has been on for years, she recognizes its faults.

"Personally for me, it dampened a lot of my personality. I was able to sit and focus and not feel overwhelmed by the amount of things and not know where to start. I was able to start actually systematically going through and getting things done and not jumping from thing to thing to thing even though I would eventually get everything done. It just was a much easier process but there's a trade-off in the sense that a lot of times I would feel more muted and not as creative."

Vyvanse is the most expensive ADHD medication, it costs over \$300 a month without insurance. Else feels lucky to have really good insurance through her parents. "That is a significant amount of money. I think there is a burden and factor to it, but I don't personally feel like I'm often affected by that burden." Her prescription costs her \$30 a month. ▢



Adderall: amphetamine and dextroamphetamine, 20 mg
Vyvanse: lisdexamfetamine, 50 mg

what the hell!! peace exists people

"I totally believed that ADHD was a hyperactive, white boy."

Emily Chen, a 25-year-old Asian American mental health advocate, was diagnosed with ADHD after she graduated college. Her diagnosis gave her so many answers about herself that she was empowered to share the knowledge she had obtained with others, especially those in the Asian American community.

She attended music school and found herself in a deep struggle. "I had no idea that I was horrendously over scheduled, zero time awareness. And I was trying so hard to stay organized. So people thought I was organized and all that. And so it looked like I was doing great, but I had no time for social stuff, no time for self care," said Emily. She started

counseling for anxiety, which jump-started her on a mental health journey that resulted in an ADHD diagnosis and later a YouTube Channel dedicated to spreading awareness and education.

When Emily was trying to get her official diagnosis, the first neuropsychologist she went to said she didn't have it because she appeared to not have academic problems and she couldn't remember enough from her life and childhood. Childhood history is often required in ADHD diagnoses. This news destroyed Emily, but she didn't give up.

Then, Emily realized she had kept journals since the third grade. "I went back to these journals and looked at them to see if there are symptoms of ADHD in there. I looked at it through that lens, and it was just rampant," she said. She made a list from her

journals and took it to a different neuropsychologist, a woman. Through interviews and testing, she secured an official diagnosis.

Emily described her medication experience as an affirming epiphany. "I remember I was in my room, I took the Concerta and then it started kicking in and then, all this craziness, the storm just went completely peaceful and I'm like what the hell, peace is real. It's been real this whole time, I didn't believe that peace and calm and not having constant complete chaos was real."

Her medication process with Concerta has been relatively seamless. "Having medication that can help me get stuff done so much more easily than without, it's like walking through a doorway versus having to punch and kick the doorway open every single time," said Emily.

Her diagnosis led her to find not only a mental health community but an Asian American mental health community. "This is something I know more about myself now and who I am. And you know, maybe there are places that will take me for and accept me for who I am."

"I think the biggest thing about the Asian American community and ADHD is a lack of awareness that it exists. I think the broader American community has a lot of misunderstanding and stigma towards it. But I think the Asian American community just straight up doesn't even know it exists."

"It's asking those who have very traditional Asian mindsets about childbearing and education and values to, you know, open up a bit and see that life isn't a one-track race to success. Help exists and people are different, and we don't all have to be good at the same thing."

She was advised from within her community to start sharing her knowledge with others. Emily was made aware that there was a need for very basic information. Which led to the birth of her YouTube channel, DisOrient.

"I wanted something that incorporates my own story and acknowledges common Asian values and worries and concerns and really just presents everything you'd need to understand what might be going on to help yourself or help someone else. And, and just put it in one place and have it be engaging and accessible."

"I wanted to promote that I had that awareness and education that that depth of content that I haven't really found exists in the Asian American community yet. I want to shout at the world, and I want the world to know. I don't care so much how many views it gets. I think I care more about if there are people in my life who could benefit from this material, that I have an accessible resource that I can easily send to them." ▢

Dancing Through the Diagnosis

Jessie Diaz-Herrea is a 34-year-old body-positive dance instructor and mom in NYC. She uses her Tik Tok and Instagram @curveswithmoves to share the ups and downs of having ADHD, as well as her passion for fitness.

"I think finding a community like the ADHD Tik Tok community has been really helpful in getting resources, especially I think that's where, I've always had ADHD but I've been scared to talk about it because there wasn't a lot of women doing that," said Jessie.

As a Latinx woman, Jessie noted the lack of diversity in the ADHD online community.

"I feel like when it comes to the demographics of moms with ADHD, like I've seen that more and more and on Tik Tok and Instagram, but I do think it's still saturated with cis white women. I don't think that's the majority, I don't think that's the only group of women who have ADHD. So it's either we're not making the content or content is not being pushed out enough. But

I would like to see more people of color talk about ADHD. I think it's the stigma of wanting to get diagnosed from a doctor. Having that experience can be daunting, especially if you're a fat person as well."

Jessie discussed the importance of finding the right doctor. "I think it's just, now, knowing all the information that's out there, and then finding a doctor that you trust, as I have, I interview doctors. Because I know that like, one, I'm a fat woman, I'm a Latinx woman. I'm a woman with ADHD. There's just so many things that I need to make sure that when I have a primary doctor or a doctor that cares for me, that's not going to judge me based on my appearance, it's going to look at my charts and say, like, you're actually very healthy. Because I am," said Jessie.

"I think especially in Latina households, I feel like it's a very big Black and Latino thing. We don't trust the medical industry, and rightfully so, sometimes because there is a lot of discrimination there," said Jessie.

Jessie has a daughter who also has ADHD as well as autism. Jessie has found tools and strategies that work for herself with ADHD. She's working on providing tools that will be helpful for her daughter. "It's a learning process, because there are some times, I also feel like, she teaches me. We have very interesting ways of communicating. So like, if she has called my name three times, and I have just not, I'm just super hyper focused on something, she'll like, clap three times, and I'm like, 'oh, yeah, sorry. Like, what's up babe?' And it's funny, she does it every single time and it works, we do it to each other."

Fitness and dancing is how Jessie finds her zen. "I talk a lot about like, where's their strength in ADHD? Because I think sometimes people think it's just a neurodivergency, and it's bad. But I don't think all of it is bad. I think we have the capacity to process things super fast. And that can be used as a gift. At the same thing with the hyper focus. I think if you're able to give that energy in a fitness setting, or in a setting that needs that type of energy, it's a huge advantage." ▢

"I would love to see more BIPOC people talk about it in a safe space. I think maybe it's just something that we don't want to diagnose ourselves. We don't want to be seen as unhealthy. Mental health is still very stigmatized."

The Relationship With My Brain, and My ADHD Continues...

I was officially diagnosed with Inattentive ADHD the summer after my freshman year of college. I loved all my classes, but it was so hard for me to focus. Short simple tasks didn't get finished, emails were never sent, and I'd forget things easily. Completing homework took way too many hours and was really hard, even if it wasn't a long assignment.

My whole life, I'd struggle with certain things, but I never had a name for it. My mom would find six-year-old me staring at myself in the mirror twenty minutes after she told me to get dressed to get ready to go. I would leave cabinets open and I had zero directional skills, just to name a few of my symptoms. I sometimes felt lonely and isolated and different.

When I was diagnosed, it made sense, I'd been expecting it coming into the appointment having done my research. But ADHD doesn't have a cure, only different treatment options, whether it be medication, therapy, or coaching. My journey with ADHD medication has been difficult. I'm envious of those who tried Adderall years ago and haven't had to look back. Due to other mental health issues I have, I also take other medications. There's a lot going on in my brain and it's hard to find the best way to treat all of it.

After I was diagnosed with ADHD, I was prescribed Concerta, which ended up being a nightmare. I couldn't sleep, I had a decreased appetite, but the anxiety was the worst part. In the recent years I've tried focalin and currently I have an Adderall prescription. I don't take it every day and I don't love how it makes me feel. It has gained a nickname of "sadderall" for a reason. I wanted to try to Vyvanse as I've heard mostly great things about it, but I currently don't have medication insurance and the \$300+ price pushes it out of the question.

Finishing up college as someone who is mostly unmedicated for ADHD has been hard, but not impossible. This semester I started using a time-management tutor which has been a game changer. I have an amazing psychiatrist who I'm incredibly grateful for.

But doing a semester-long, in-depth reporting project on ADHD while I myself have ADHD has been truly challenging. ADHD has been on my mind at least in some way for the past three months. I've felt extremely overwhelmed, and at times it's felt impossible. My symptoms felt extremely noticeable and prevalent. But I had amazing support and resources. It's also been a rewarding and fruitful endeavor. Talking to other women, hearing their stories and seeing the clear similarities. The shared struggles. I am not alone in my ADHD, and neither are you.

If any of what you read sounds familiar, I encourage you to seek out a health care professional for a potential diagnosis. But if that seems too hard or complicated, check out some of these resources as places to start...

ADHD RESOURCES

CHADD is an organization dedicated to providing support, information and advocacy to children and adults with ADHD. Visit chadd.org

Online video ADHD assessment to start the ADHD diagnosis process virtually: bit.ly/virtual-diagnosis

Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale: Grade yourself on your symptoms. See the first steps: bit.ly/self-report-scale

Find a psychiatrist finder.psychiatry.org

The New School Student Health Services: newschool.edu/health-services

ADHD Centers & Clinics: bit.ly/ADHD-centers

ADHD Magazine: additudemag.com



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