awesome

/ˈösəm/ 
adjective 
extremely impressive or daunting; inspiring great admiration, apprehension, or fear.
Hi, friend. Welcome to the ADHD club.

You have joined a tribe of massively creative, fun-loving, funny innovators and nonlinear thinkers who aren’t easily discouraged. We’re often the life of the party and the first ones to take a risk. Yeah, we lose things—like, a lot of things—and we occasionally drive other people up a wall with our energy and interruptions. However, we are also some of the most curious, quick-thinking, shoot-for-the-stars types of people on the planet. We’re glad to have you on the team.

(And if you are reading this because someone you love has ADHD, a special welcome. Thanks for taking the time to learn more about us. That’s true love.)

It can be super annoying to live in a world that wasn’t really designed for us. Distractions hurtle at us like a hailstorm. Between video meetings, calendar reminders, social media notifications, and a steady stream of obligations and expectations, life can be overwhelming—especially for our ADHD brains. We live in a society that values multitasking, office work, and the ability to stick to a carefully planned schedule—all things that cause the ADHD brain to short out. It can feel blazingly unfair. If there were a switch we could flip to make everything and everyone ADHD-friendly, we would flip that baby in an instant. But until the world catches up with ADHD, we’re going to have to live in the world we’ve got.
I’m Penn Holderness, and I have ADHD.

I was diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder more than twenty years ago, and my wife, Kim, has learned how to support me with grace and good humor while enjoying the ride of living with someone who is basically the human equivalent of a golden retriever (who occasionally forgets to put his mug under the coffee-maker in the morning). Kim and I are not doctors or clinicians, but we know intimately the frustrations and joys that come with ADHD. We don’t study ADHD. We live it. We live the hassle of keys locked in cars, schedules upended, and endless lost headphones. (Why do those things have to be so expensive?) We live a creative life, full of surprises—a life that doesn’t always go as planned.

I use my ADHD brain to create and produce videos that have generated over a billion views online. I once channeled the power of ADHD to help Kim and me win The Amazing Race. I somehow still remember the phone numbers of all the pizza delivery places I used to call in college. I also recently didn’t remember to turn off the stove in my kitchen, and I almost lost my dog, burned down the house, and put my neighbor in the emergency room (more on that story later). I am a living example of how ADHD can be great, but also how it can be downright terrifying.

My wife is the biggest reason my ADHD has largely enriched my life. You will hear from her quite a bit.
Hey, friends. If you're reading this because you partner with or parent someone with ADHD, I’m sending you a big, awkward hug. One minute, Penn’s ADHD brain has me rolling on the floor with laughter, and the next, he’s locked himself out of the house. Again. It isn’t easy to be in our shoes, is it? Being the finders of keys and the rememberers (yes, rememberers is a word!) of all the things can be exhausting. But I’m here to remind you of all the uniquely awesome parts of our favorite people. We’ve got this.

Throughout the book, you’ll hear about my personal experiences dancing with ADHD and from Kim about what it’s like to live with and love someone with ADHD. Keep in mind that our experiences are just that: our experiences. Yours may look entirely different. One of the glories of ADHD is that its presentation is as unique as the people who have it.

Kim and I are lucky enough to be able to share our hard-won wisdom and funny videos about modern family life through The Holderness Family platforms. We also host a podcast where we talk through topics that matter to us, including ADHD. I’ve been moved to tears by the response to our ADHD-related content. We have had thousands of people message us to say “Me too!” in reply to our ADHD videos. It feels great when parents tell us they have shown our silly songs to their kids, saying, “See? It’s not all bad.” Because it’s not all bad.
I know enough to know what I don’t know, so in the process of writing this book, Kim and I have called in ADHD experts to contribute their expertise. We talked to doctors, psychologists, and coaches. All of them acknowledge that ADHD is a huge challenge, but they also emphasize how manageable the symptoms are and how much potential every person with ADHD has. This book takes a strengths-based approach (fun fact from my ADHD brain: strengths is one of the longest single-syllable words in the English language, second only to scrunched), and we are determined to help you become ADHD strong.

I know I have it easy compared to some. I’ve found a partner who supports me and a job that harmonizes with my brain. But ADHD is a spectrum disorder. For every person who has ten laughable SMH moments a day, there is someone who can’t hold a job or who feels like they cannot maintain a meaningful relationship because of their ADHD. For some people, ADHD can be a source of more than frustration; it can lead to self-criticism and deep emotional pain.

I love reading the comments and responses to the ADHD-related videos we make because so many people seem to enjoy them. But there are some comments that hit me in a different place: those comments from people who are clearly hurt by the suggestion that life with ADHD is anything to joke about. I want to own that. You’re right. My take on ADHD has been informed by my experience with it. My very lucky, very privileged experience with it. I don’t know what it’s like to feel that ADHD is an unbreakable curse. I’m not speaking here for all of ADHD-dom, only for myself. My hope is that you’ll find something to relate to here—even if it’s our shared tendency to leave our keys in the fridge. And if not, I get it. I’m pulling for you.

I want to say right up front that if you are struggling in a way that feels insurmountable, if you are having the deepest, darkest thoughts,
please seek out a medical professional who can walk you toward a mentally healthy place.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS BOOK

My goal as I wrote this book was to make sure that someone with ADHD would actually read it. So, don’t worry, you’re not in for page after page of jargon-filled text that only people who wear lab coats to work would get excited about.

You won’t find a laundry list of your shortcomings. You won’t find a checklist of the obstacles you’re going to have to overcome that make so many of the much-respected ADHD books on the shelves kind of a bummer to read. You will not find complicated explanations of neuroscience and detailed diet recommendations. What you will find is a generally positive approach and a snappy pace.

Novelty is essential to keeping the ADHD brain engaged, so this book has short sections full of useful information that you can implement right away. You will also find some fun extras to keep you from becoming bored. Get in, get out, move on. You can read it cover to cover or dip in and out as you please.
INTRODUCTION

ROAD MAP FOR THIS BOOK

- **Part 1:** A crash course on ADHD—what it is and how it affects you.
- **Part 2:** Reputation damage control. Removing the stigma ADHD has unfairly carried and replacing it with a healthy appreciation of your amazing ADHD brain.
- **Part 3:** Strategies and techniques for surviving and thriving in daily life and over the long haul.

A HIDDEN DISORDER

One of the most frustrating things about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is that it can hide in plain sight. If you’re not looking for a group of symptoms that come together to indicate a diagnosis, ADHD behaviors can easily blend into the background. There’s no wheelchair or hearing aid to signal to the world you have a brain difference. A lot of people with ADHD mask their difficulties using adaptive strategies, so to the average observer, they may not even appear to have ADHD. It’s a bum situation—the more successful you are, the harder it is for people to believe you have an actual disorder. They’ll look at you and wonder why you are not able to complete a seemingly simple task like filling out a form at the DMV.

On top of that, because ADHD ebbs and flows, it can look to the outside world as if the people who have it are simply not trying. Sometimes, we knock it out of the park. Other times, we can’t even get our jerseys on. This can be confounding for people observing ADHDers, because they see what we can do and then wonder why we don’t just, you know, do it. You didn’t forget to unload the dishes yesterday. How come you forgot today? But like people who have other types of neurodivergent brains—such as people with autism spectrum disorder or dyslexia—those of us with ADHD are not in control of how our brain differences...
manifest. It's simply how we are wired. Unfortunately, much of the world doesn't recognize that, and this lack of understanding can make people with ADHD feel . . . well, bad.

I call BS on that. You are not hidden to me. I see you. I feel you. And I have a very different idea about what it means to have ADHD.

**AWESOME? WHAT DO YOU MEAN “AWESOME”?**

Whether you are newly diagnosed or you’ve long identified as a member of the ADHD club, I want you to know having a neurodivergent brain is awesome. Before you jump down my throat to tell me all the ways ADHD is decidedly *not* awesome, hear me out, because when I say “ADHD is awesome,” I mean *awesome* in all senses of the word.

Have you ever actually looked up the definition of *awesome*? My eleventh-grade English teacher told me I should never, ever, ever begin a report with “The dictionary defines . . .” I’m sorry, Mrs. Findlen, but this is the perfect place for a dictionary definition.

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<th><strong>awesome</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>/ˈôsəm/</td>
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<tr>
<td>adjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>causing or inducing awe; inspiring an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear</td>
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That’s exactly what I mean when I say ADHD is awesome. ADHD can be great, inspiring, incredible, eye-opening, marvelous, wondrous,
staggering, and many other positive things. But I can’t just blast you in the face with a fire hose of positive thinking. Awesome can also mean hard to comprehend, overwhelming, challenging, or daunting. If you find ADHD scary, I’m with you. Totally. It can be overwhelming. Definitely. But can it also be awe-inspiring? Yep. When you think about everything a person with ADHD manages in a single day, absolutely. Both things are true. We have challenges, but for every challenge, there is an upside. So here’s the deal: I’m going to share the good parts of having ADHD and try to find a way to laugh about the bad parts.

You’re still going to leave your phone at the restaurant. You’re still going to realize mid-conversation that you have no idea what your friend is talking about because you’ve been wondering why certain British people never sound British when they sing. You’re still going to find your socks in the refrigerator.

But you’ll also be armed with the knowledge that different does not mean dysfunctional. The same brain that gets restless and easily bored allows you to make rapid-fire connections, think creatively, innovate, and entertain. When life throws a lot at you, you’ll be equipped with the tools to make your way through.

Considering how many of us have ADHD, it’s shocking how poorly understood the condition is. Some people might think you’re lazy or rude, but those of us with ADHD know better.

Your brain is not broken. You are not a space cadet, a disaster, or a hot mess of any sort. You’ve got ADHD. That makes you awesome.

A Note from People Who Have ADHD to People Who Don’t Have ADHD

Dear Everybody Who Doesn’t Have ADHD:

First of all, thanks for reading this book. The very fact that you picked it up means you care enough about someone with ADHD to learn more about what it’s like for them to go through life with an ADHD brain. We appreciate the effort. We know it’s not always easy to understand what...
we’re going through. Our behavior can be a head-scratcher if you don’t share our wiring. Whether it’s your child, your partner, your sister, or your roommate, you have probably looked at them and said, “Man, what is it like to be in your head?” We hope reading this book (and this letter) will give you some hint of the ADHD experience.

To kick things off, here are a few things those of us with ADHD wish those of you who don’t have ADHD could know:

1. **We love you—even if it may not always look that way to you.**
   The way we ADHD types show our love may not always look how you would have drawn it up, or the way it is portrayed on TV or in the movies. We might not always remember to do the things you ask us to do. Like, if you ask us to bring your book with us when we come downstairs, we might agree to do it, having every intention of doing so, and then just 100 percent forget. We might not lock eyes with you for a two-hour-long feelings convo about how hurtful it is when we fail to do a simple thing like bring your book downstairs. But we really do love and care about you, and we care about what you have to say. We are sometimes powerless in the face of the distractions that cross our minds. Even if we are aware of our tendency to wander off track during conversations, and even if we are working on it daily, it still happens. It is not because we don’t love you. It is just how our neurons fire.

2. **The easy things are sometimes the hardest things for us to do.** We are great at working on things that are new, challenging, or of personal interest. (Hats off to Jessica McCabe, who described this holy trinity in her excellent “How to ADHD” videos.) But “working on” turning the lights off, closing the garage door, and remembering your birthday? We will go zero for three on those because our brains simply aren’t designed to dial in to everyday tasks the way a non-ADHD brain does. This might be frustrating for you, because it’s hard to fathom how we can lock ourselves in a room all day to paint a landscape or invest countless hours inventing an automatic bird feeder, but we can’t remember to clear our dishes from the table.
3. We feel ashamed. When we forget our phones at home, leave the water running before we go out for a run, or miss an important appointment, we feel real shame, even if we laugh it off. Every time we mess up, it’s a reminder that we just aren’t as good at managing some aspects of day-to-day life as you are. We don’t mean to make your life harder. Honest. We know in our hearts our mistakes are not intentional, but it still feels bad to watch someone we love get annoyed about something we did.

As bestselling author and social scientist Brené Brown has taught us, guilt is feeling bad about something you’ve done, while shame is feeling bad about who you are. Shame doesn’t hit like a lightning bolt; it’s more like standing in quicksand and slowly sinking. When we first make a mistake, we get that panicked elevated heartbeat, as our brains try to figure out whether or not we can fix what went wrong. Either way, we relentlessly replay how we made the mistake to diagnose where things went off track—an endless loop of How could I have been so dumb/lazy/careless? What really sucks is when we realize we have no memory of how we made the mistake. We don’t know when or how we put your ChapStick in the spice cabinet. It’s like a blip in our memory because our brains were focusing on something else when our bodies were sliding the ChapStick between the cumin and the cinnamon. Inevitably, this is followed by embarrassment and a wave of terrible self-talk about why we are this way, how we are broken, and how we can’t be fixed. (Of course, this isn’t true, and that’s what this book is for!)

4. We’ve got you. If you are ever feeling down or alone, we will be there for you. Your happiness is of personal interest to us, and finding a way to cheer you up is new and challenging. That’s a three out of three on the “Does this interest my ADHD brain?” quiz. We may not do a great job of listening to you if you’re telling us about your favorite podcast, but if you are low and struggling, we will be there for you. We may even be funny enough to get you to smile.

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5. **We feel accompanied when you lend us a helping hand.** We would love to have you as allies in our daily struggles. Once you understand what’s going on in our noggins, you may be able to help by offering grace and forgiveness, which goes a long way in preventing stress from mounting, which helps our symptoms not to flare up and engulf us in a fiery ball of aggravation. Win-win! If you’re up for it, you can also talk to us about ways to help manage things that are difficult for us. A little secret: We don’t like making mistakes. What’s more, we don’t like having to use ADHD as an excuse when we do. Every time we blame our ADHD, we are probably doing it so we don’t have to dwell on our mistakes. But we do want to try to improve. We don’t always know how, but we are willing to learn. If you can lend a hand with a good attitude or a gentle reminder, we will be eternally grateful. We also see how much work and energy it takes for you to do so. We know ADHD is not a hall pass for bad behavior or an excuse to ask you to find our missing library book. But we really, really appreciate it when you walk beside us in our ADHD journey.

6. **You can be an anti-“othering” crusader.** If you’re ever in a situation where someone is talking smack on someone with ADHD, giving them a hard time for one of their symptoms or teasing them for being different, feel free to drop some knowledge and educate the speaker (kindly and respectfully, of course) to let them know we’re not trying to be jerks. We just have neurodivergent brains. The more we can all do to help people get that everyone’s brain is different, the better. Every incremental increase of understanding makes the world a friendlier place for those of us with ADHD and other forms of neurodivergence.

Thank you for reading. Someone out there is going to have a better day—and maybe even better self-esteem—because you did.

Sincerely,

*Penn Holderness*
You are not alone, friend. It might feel like you are the only person on earth whose brain functions like yours, but there are millions of people just like you who share the same wiring. We walk the streets like the X-Men, hidden among the general population, sharing a secret kinship and incredible superpowers. But in a world that values conformity and frictionless interactions, our very frictionful (yeah, we know that’s not a word, but we will be inventing a few in this book) challenges can make us feel like freaks—or at the very least, like a bundle of frustration.

Human beings are wary of things we don’t understand. Part of the reason many of us with ADHD don’t sit comfortably with our identity is because we don’t fully understand the ins and outs of having ADHD. Our fear of the unknown—What is going on with me? Why does everything seem harder for me than it does for everyone else?—can get in the way of our ability to unlock our potential. Everything seems scarier in the
abstract. The more you can demystify what goes on in the black box of your mind, the better equipped you’ll be to work with your ADHD instead of against it.

The first part of this book aims to do just that: demystify the mystifying. I’ll give you the thirty-thousand-foot view of ADHD—who has it, how it gets diagnosed, how it manifests, and what goes on at the neurological level—to help you understand what the heck is going on in that fascinating, bulbous organ called your brain.

Give yourself some extra time to read this next chapter. It’s a little complicated but really important.

—Penn
Real quick, here’s a list of things ADHD is not: a character flaw, a shortcoming, a choice. It’s not a referendum on your parents for failing to instill discipline in you or for not paying enough attention to you as a child. It’s not a fad, a trend, fake news, a clever ploy by big pharma to make a killing selling unnecessary medications, or a scare tactic to drive up television ratings. It’s not a ginned-up excuse to get special treatment at school or at work. It’s not a pass to behave however we want because, you know, ADHD. It’s certainly not a badge of shame, even though—get this!—ADHD has had a long history of very shameful names.

So what is it anyway? Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a chronic but manageable neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the development and function of your brain. Your brain differences can result in three main categories of symptoms: inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.

A typical person with ADHD will have challenges with listening, completing tasks, and keeping track of time (and possessions). They’ll be restless, always “on the go,” talkative, and impatient. Symptoms usually show up when you’re a kid, and they can stick around into adulthood. Annoyingly, for those of us with ADHD, these symptoms can look a lot like poor behavior, bad manners, or flat-out refusal to play by the rules. But in people with ADHD, they are not voluntary behaviors; they are involuntary symptoms dictated by neurochemistry. To repeat, ADHD symptoms are not choices—they are neurologically determined.
Despite the diagnosis’s (terrible) name, having ADHD does not mean you are incapable of paying attention or can’t sit still (though either or both may describe you at times). **In fact, if you have ADHD, you may be better at focusing than your neurotypical friends, as long as you’re actually interested in what you’re doing.**

The newest science describes ADHD as a disorder that affects your ability to self-regulate—whether it’s staying in your chair or waiting until someone else has finished talking before sharing the interesting fact you just learned about blue whales. (Some of their blood vessels are so wide a human could fit through them!)

With ADHD, every day is an adventure. Sometimes you need to find a way to rein in your wild imagination, but sometimes that imagination solves a problem and saves the day. Because ADHD is a spectrum disorder, your symptoms might vary quite a bit from your ADHD neighbor’s—and they might vary quite a bit day to day. You’ll have days (or maybe just hours or minutes) that aren’t especially intense ADHD-wise, where symptoms are at a low hum, but when you encounter a stressful or overstimulating environment, symptoms can kick up to a deafening roar.

### ADHD SYMPTOMS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Our Symptoms Look Like</th>
<th>What They Really Are</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulsiveness</td>
<td>Involuntary actions due to brain chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disorganization</td>
<td>Problems with prioritizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor time management</td>
<td>Problems with focusing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trouble multitasking</td>
<td>Restlessness</td>
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<td>Poor planning</td>
<td>Low frustration tolerance</td>
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If you didn’t really pay attention to that last paragraph because you are still thinking about swimming through a whale’s blood vessel, that’s okay. Go back and read the paragraph again. It will help you understand why you didn’t pay attention to that last paragraph. (But yeah: A blue whale’s heart can be five feet long and five feet tall, if you’re wondering.)

Yes, ADHD is a chronic disorder that can cause chronic disorder (see what I did there?), but getting a diagnosis is not the end of the universe. The symptoms of ADHD can be managed. Like high blood pressure, if ADHD goes unmanaged, it can be truly detrimental to your health (especially your mental health), but if you have a clear diagnosis and a careful plan for working with your incredible brain, you can live a full and fulfilling life. You can learn to improve your ability to self-regulate through behavioral changes, adjusting your environment, exercising, mindfulness training, and engaging a coach, and sometimes by taking medication. I’ll provide suggestions and strategies to help you manage in part 3 of this book.

WHAT CAUSES ADHD?

In the great nature-versus-nurture debate, nature kicks nurture’s butt when it comes to ADHD. For decades, people assumed ADHD was the result of bad parenting or a weakness in character. People would say things like, “What that child needs is more boundaries! Where’s my ruler?” But now scientists generally agree your ADHD is largely biologically determined. Scientists have long established there is a difference in how ADHD brains work in the areas that manage attention, emotionality, and impulsivity.

Getting an ADHD diagnosis is not about how much sugar you eat each day or how many video games you play before bed. It has nothing to do with whether you have the kind of parents who let you eat Doritos for dinner or the kind who came at you with a squirt of Dawn if you
interrupted during grace to tell everyone about the weird bug you saw on your way home from school.

Your parents aren’t totally off the hook, though, because there is a hereditary component to ADHD’s biological origins. Scientists have identified seven genes and a few dozen locations on the genome that seem to be involved with the disorder, which means ADHD tends to run in families. Chances are good you have at least one relative with the condition as well. According to a study cited by clinical professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University and preeminent ADHD expert Russell Barkley in his book Taking Charge of Adult ADHD, more than half of children who had ADHD also shared the diagnosis with a biological parent.

I feel like I am living proof of this statistic. I don’t even know if I understood the genetic pull of ADHD until Kim came to one of my family reunions. She sat, eyes wide open in shock, as the crowd expertly maintained multiple conversations at once. Many in my extended family wear their ADHD diagnoses like badges of honor, and that has certainly helped me navigate my own brain with confidence.

**A NOTE FROM KIM**

I sat in awe at that first big family dinner because no one finished a conversation. One sentence sparked a question on another topic, and then someone chimed in with a story, then the person next to me asked about my mom. I had whiplash. They could balance multiple conversations at once, and it broke my brain. I loved the energy at the table and fell in love with every single one of those people, but after about ten minutes of trying to keep up, I needed a nap.
For some people who are diagnosed at a young age, some symptoms of ADHD will disappear as they get older. In an interview, Dr. Steven Kurtz, former clinical director of NYU Child Study Center’s Institute for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Behavior Disorders and former senior director of the ADHD Center of the Child Mind Institute (Sidenote: I know that was a long title, and thanks for making it to the end of it, but the experts like Dr. Kurtz who agreed to be interviewed for this book went to school for a lot of years to earn all those titles, so we will be listing every one of them for every impressive doctor who was generous enough to give us their time), drew a distinction between brain differences that cause a delay in developing a skill and ones that cause the absence of that skill. Many children with ADHD will experience a delay in development in a particular area, whether it’s impulse control or time management, but they will not lack the ability. With practice, it is possible that skill can improve.

**THE THREE MAIN TYPES OF ADHD**

While everyone’s precise cocktail of symptoms will vary, they do tend to cluster into three main types of ADHD:

- **HYPERACTIVE/IMPULSIVE TYPE**
  - Fidgety, restless, chatty

- **INATTENTIVE TYPE**
  - Poor at listening, forgetful, inattentive, easily distracted

- **COMBINED**
  - A combo platter of inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive types
ADHD IS AWESOME

For what it’s worth, I am the combined type. I have to work really hard to listen or make it through books. I also tear my napkin into tiny pieces no matter whom I’m eating with, and, if you let me, I will talk for way too long. I’m working on it.

Generally speaking, girls tend to be diagnosed with the inattentive type more frequently than the hyperactive/impulsive type, which may be partially why their diagnoses slip under the radar. Being a daydreamer isn’t recognized as a symptom as easily as the inability to keep still.

Dr. Kurtz explains that the hyperactive/impulsive presentation tends to get noticed earliest in kids because there isn’t a lot of opportunity to see toddlers struggling to pay attention. The wiggler is easy to spot. When kids reach school age, however, and they are asked to be on task for longer periods, the inattentive and combined types are easier to recognize.

WHO GETS DIAGNOSED WITH ADHD?

Millions of people around the world are living with ADHD. Somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of children and between 3 and 5 percent of adults in America have been diagnosed with ADHD.

For decades, people thought of ADHD exclusively as a disorder of little boys bouncing all over the classroom, but now, with better diagnostic tools and more awareness, we can see subtle lifelong variations. Of children who are diagnosed before the age of seventeen, the vast majority—around 90 percent—will continue to have symptoms as adults, though the symptoms may come and go depending on what’s going on in their lives.

Even though some people dismiss ADHD as overdiagnosed, it is actually underdiagnosed in many populations, including the following groups:

Adults. A lot of adults go undiagnosed because our understanding of how ADHD shows up in adulthood is new. The kid climbing on the couch becomes the adult compulsively tapping his pen on his desk.
Generally speaking, adults display less hyperactivity. For ADHD adults, our behavior is less about jumping up and down and more about jumping from project to project because we have a hard time sitting down and focusing on a single task. In their book *Driven to Distraction*, Dr. Edward Hallowell and Dr. John Ratey claim that 90 percent of adults who have ADHD aren’t even aware of it. For many adults, it isn’t until they happen upon an article or a podcast about ADHD or have a friend or family member who gets diagnosed that they say to themselves, *Hmm. There’s something about how you’re describing this ADHD thing that sounds familiar . . .* 

**Girls and women.** According to Dr. Marcy Caldwell, who specializes in the treatment and assessment of adult ADHD and is the owner and director of Rittenhouse Psychological Assessments and founder of the blog ADDdept.org, girls’ and women’s symptoms tend to get overlooked, partially because of social pressure for girls to internalize their difficult experiences. As a result, boys are two to three times more likely to receive a diagnosis as girls. Adult women with ADHD get described as “chatty” or “overly social” and chalk up their symptoms to just having a social personality. 

Because women are supposed to be on time, tidy, and in charge of managing the whole family, women with ADHD can feel a huge amount of shame. Without a diagnosis, you can assume the reason you can’t seem to get the kids out the door with their lunches and signed permission slips is simply because you are deficient in some way. But it’s not a deficit; it’s a brain difference.

**Highly intelligent people.** Being high-functioning can hide a lot of things. Intelligence can mask symptoms as you coast on your natural gifts, making the presentation of ADHD very subtle. Many people don’t get diagnosed until college when the deadlines, independence, and pressure lead to a greater presentation of symptoms. I have been told by my doctors that I fall into this category, which may be why it took so long for me to be diagnosed.

**Minority populations.** Black and Latino children are less likely than white children to receive both a diagnosis of and treatment for ADHD. Bias and systemic racism affect people’s perceptions of minority
ADHD IS AWESOME

children and adults, so behavior stemming from ADHD gets labeled as the result of poor parenting or a lack of discipline. White children are diagnosed with ADHD at a rate of 11.5 percent, while Black children are diagnosed at 8.9 percent and Latinos at 6.3 percent. According to Dr. Tumaini Coker, a pediatrician and a professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine, there is some suspicion in the Black community that the ADHD label is being used as an excuse to dismiss and pathologize Black boys in particular, so some kids who might benefit from having a diagnosis don’t receive it.

Young children. So many of the identifying symptoms of ADHD resemble the state of just being a kid. Parents and teachers assume distracted, active, daydreamy behaviors are conditions kids will grow out of eventually, so they never get evaluated or diagnosed.

People with other disorders. ADHD pairs frequently with depression and anxiety, so teasing out what is ADHD and what is another disorder can be difficult.

If you’re thinking that list looks so broad it could include just about anyone who might have ADHD, you’re right. Even though our awareness of ADHD has grown massively in the past couple of decades, the disorder is likely still vastly underdiagnosed.

ADHD Diagnosis Comparisons

![Bar chart showing comparisons of people million in various categories: Watched the Emmys in 2022 (5.9 million), Live in Virginia (8.6 million), Got the flu during the 2021-2022 season (9 million), Have ADHD in the US (14 million).]