

In Their Own Words: Examining the Impact of ADHD for Female University Students

Research Spotlights *highlight scientific research focused on girls and women with ADHD and inform non-scientists about the research process. Article Citation: Morley, E., & Tyrrell, A. (2023). Exploring Female Students' Experiences of ADHD and its Impact on Social, Academic, and Psychological Functioning. Journal of Attention Disorders, 27(10), 1129-1155.*

Study Goal

- To provide a better understanding of ADHD in adult females by exploring personal experiences of female university students in the United Kingdom (UK) and the impact of ADHD on their social, academic, and psychological functioning.

What is already known about the topic?

- ADHD diagnoses are often missed in females for a variety of reasons. For example, compared to males, females often experience more inattentive symptoms that are less disruptive and obvious to others. Female individuals also frequently have other mental health conditions, like anxiety or depression, which can make it harder to recognize and diagnose ADHD.
- Current processes for diagnosing ADHD are largely based on research with mostly male participants. As a result, most people think of ADHD in terms of how it typically appears in boys (e.g., displaying more hyperactive and impulsive symptoms).
- Undiagnosed and untreated ADHD can lead to additional challenges for females compared to males, such as more relationship issues, lower self-esteem, and greater psychological distress.

How was this study done?

- Design:** This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28).
- Participants:** Eight adult women (ages 22–53, average age of 31) who studied at universities in the UK and were diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood.
- Recruitment:** Researchers used social media advertisements in UK-based ADHD women's support groups.

Terms to know

Qualitative research: A way of exploring people's real-life experiences in depth, often through open-ended conversations or interviews.

Thematic analysis: A method for finding and understanding patterns, or themes, in qualitative data.

- Exclusion:** Individuals with a serious mental health disorder (e.g., major depressive disorder, personality disorders) were not included.
- Procedure:** Each participant completed the GHQ-28 to assess their overall wellbeing and general health. Then they took part in a short online interview to talk about their journey to diagnosis and the impact of ADHD on their social, academic, and psychological life.
- Analysis:** Researchers recorded the conversations and analyzed the recordings to identify the main themes.

What were some of the study's findings?

The researchers found three main themes and six subthemes:

THEME 1 Stigmatization Surrounding ADHD in Females

Misconceptions, social discrimination, prejudice: Participants reported experiencing disbelief, stereotyping, and misinformation from professionals, educators, family, and colleagues about ADHD, leading to feelings of shame, being misunderstood, and inferior to others.

Selective disclosure: Many participants said they chose not to share their ADHD diagnosis widely with others to avoid judgment or misunderstanding.

THEME 2 Journey to Receiving an ADHD Diagnosis

Symptoms affecting functioning: Before receiving an ADHD diagnosis,

Why are these findings important?


- Females have been found to be diagnosed later than males, and delayed ADHD diagnosis can harm self-esteem, relationships, and academic success.
- Gender stereotypes and misconceptions can contribute to delays in ADHD detection and support.
- Greater awareness of ADHD in females could lead to earlier diagnosis, improved interventions, and reduced stigma.

Suggestions for Support and Additional Information

Clinicians can:

- Learn about sex differences in ADHD presentation to improve recognition and support. Check out this continuing medical education (CME) opportunity from [Psychiatric Times](#).

Women with ADHD can:

- Seek professional evaluation if ADHD is suspected, even in adulthood. Check out [this guide](#) to having the initial conversations with your doctor about ADHD.
- Check out [this blogpost](#) that describes potential ways to access support for your ADHD at work.
- Connect with other females with ADHD through support groups, such as those offered through Attention Deficit Disorder Association ([ADDA](#)) . 

participants described struggles with focus, organization, procrastination, time management, and emotional regulation, which they often thought were due to personal flaws.

Prompted to seek diagnosis by others: Friends, family, or colleagues of participants recognized ADHD signs, while comorbidities or coping mechanisms sometimes masked symptoms.

THEME 3 Adult Diagnosis

Mixed emotions: Participants commonly felt relief and validation with their diagnosis, though some felt indifferent at first.

Emotional validation: Understanding the impact of their ADHD improved their self-esteem, encouraged self-compassion, and led to engaging in ADHD management strategies (e.g., medication, organization tools).