

Be alert for overlooked ADHD diagnoses due to symptom differences in women

By Louise Bedrossian

Historically, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was thought to be manifested only in boys and characterized by hyperactivity. It was believed to dissipate by adolescence. Consequently, most ADHD studies used only, or predominantly, males. Although much has been learned, many still mistakenly believe it to be just a boys' disorder.

Women and girls often fall between the diagnostic cracks because they try to cover up symptoms, although they may spend countless extra hours studying, often seeking assistance from parents or teachers. They are much less likely to have hyperactivity and typically seek to be pleasing or compliant, so they do not create disturbances.

The *DSM-5* requires evidence of ADHD symptoms before the age of 12. Symptoms in girls often are unnoticed until much later, if at all. It is difficult to document symptoms retrospectively, making it much more unlikely that women with ADHD will be accurately diagnosed and properly treated. It is not surprising that the percentage of women with ADHD seeking accommodations in higher education, although growing, is still typically smaller than that of men.

DSM-5 criteria are now more appropriate for adults but still require substantial behavioral demonstration of symptoms. Girls and women are more often diagnosed with inattentive ADHD, characterized by less visible symptoms, including poor attention, forgetfulness, distractibility, and inability to complete assignments or activities. Underdiagnosis is further compounded by women's tendencies to suppress or compensate for symptoms, creating even less visibility and further hindering appropriate diagnosis.

Given the difficulties created by untreated ADHD symptoms, it is not surprising that women experience higher levels of stress. The stress leads to demoralization and low self-esteem that appear like depression. Not surprisingly, they are often diagnosed, or misdiagnosed, with anxiety and/or depression. These conditions may be secondary to missed ADHD, which is actually the root of the problems. Bipolar disorder may also be misdiagnosed in women with hyperactive ADHD.

Most service providers have students who requested extra testing time or experienced academic difficulties but lacked diagnosis of a disability. They may report "going blank" during tests despite having mastered the material. Others report exerting extreme

effort to achieve satisfactory results or are despondent because they are failing despite significant effort.

Given these common scenarios, what should service providers look for when female students report such unexplained problems? Consider undiagnosed ADHD, looking for the manifestations common to women. And probe further if there are anxiety or depression diagnoses.

Besides exploring common ADHD symptoms, below are some specific questions you can ask women you suspect of having ADHD:

- Do you feel overwhelmed in crowded places like stores, parties or other noisy places?
- Do you have trouble shutting out nearby conversations or sounds?
- Does your life seem out of control because you can't meet all the demands?
- Are you exhausted from trying to keep up, organize and/or be on time?
- Do you spend excessive energy trying to cover up mistakes or compensate for difficulties?
- Do you have creative ideas but no idea where or how to start implementing them?
- Do people think you are "spacey"?
- Does it seem you spend most of your time and energy coping, catching up and covering up — with little time for fun or relaxation?
- Are you worried you might not reach your goals or true potential?
- Do you feel "different" and wonder how others keep it all together?
- Are you fearful that being asked to do one more thing might put you over the top?

Because women are much less likely than men to be correctly diagnosed with ADHD, disability service providers should be especially cognizant of women's distinctive presenting issues. DS providers can provide life-changing guidance facilitating accurate diagnosis and essential supports for lifelong self-management and achievement for women with ADHD. ■

About the Author

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