

Understanding ADHD in Girls & Women

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Session Plan



- Introduction - overview of context & ADHD
- Missed - masking, assessments, different presentation
- Misdiagnosed
- What can we do?
- Resources

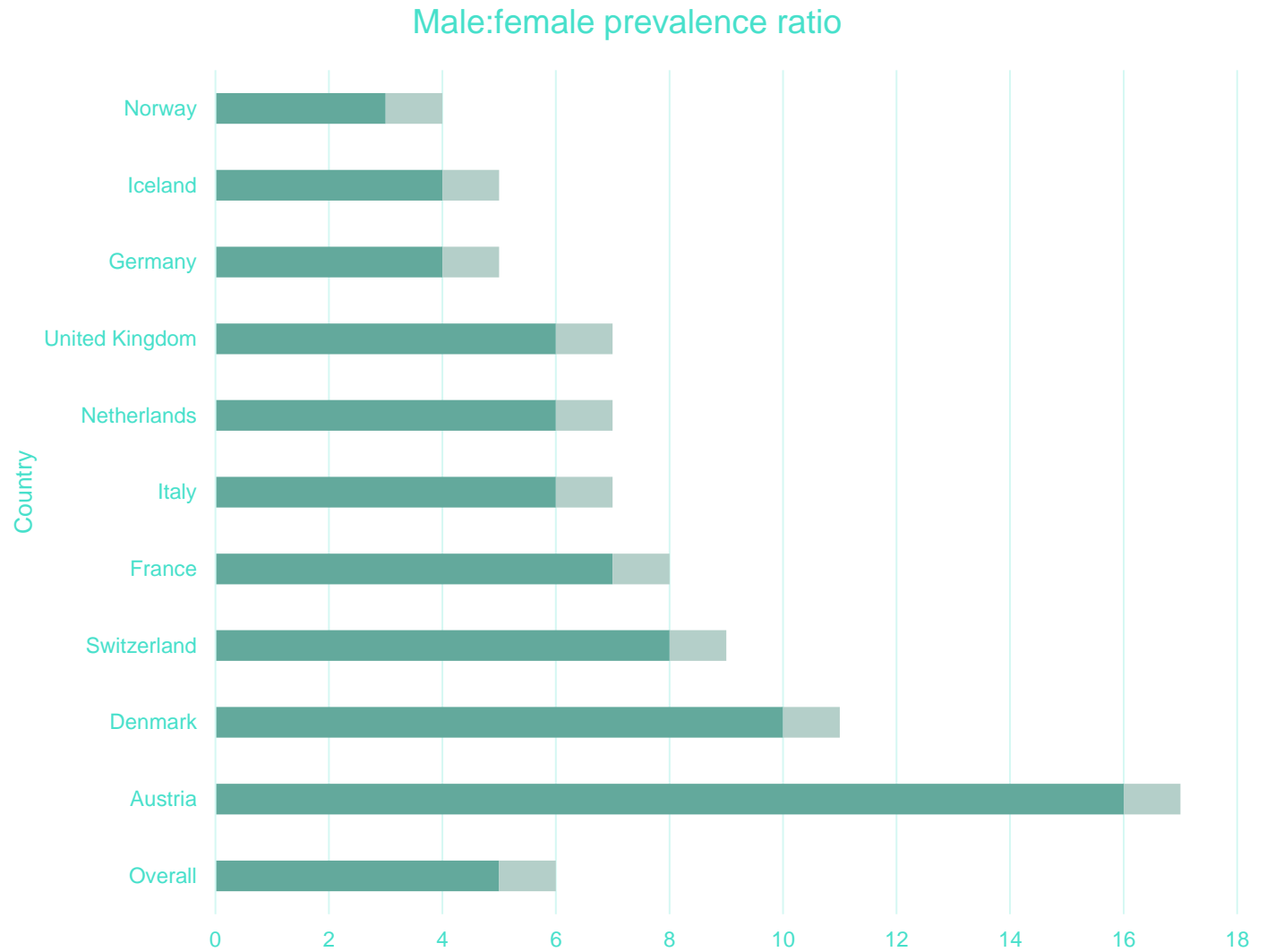
Girls and women - who do we mean? Female presentation can also be present in boys and men

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 - often emotional regulation difficulties & rejection sensitivity

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?



ADHD Across the Lifespan

- ADHD can be diagnosed and treated at all ages
- Just 10% of children with ADHD outgrow it (previously thought to be 30%)
- There are many adults who are undiagnosed as children
- The profile of ADHD can change throughout development. Hyperactivity and impulsivity are more likely to reduce into adulthood.
- Important to consider how ADHD can present differently between males and females.
- Comorbid conditions can be diagnosed initially and can mask ADHD
- Long waiting times in CAMHS services means some young people turn 18 before they are seen



Girls & women 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.



A collection of voices

“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)

Impact Of Late Diagnosis and Untreated ADHD

- Female presentation often diagnosed later in life
- Impact on learning in school and university
- Increased risk of family conflict
- Growing up being labelled as 'naughty' or 'lazy'
- Impact on self esteem and identity
- Increases likelihood of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression
- An increase in risk for substance use, nicotine addiction, and alcohol abuse
- Financial and employment difficulties
- Not having access to treatment for ADHD



Women & girls are now speaking out



Why now?

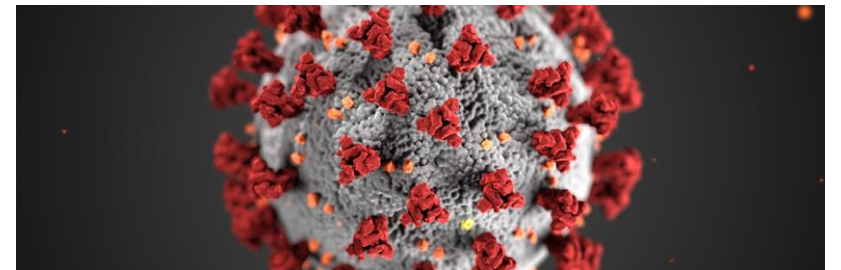
- **ADHD is getting more exposure via social media than ever before; Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube**

- Increased awareness and acceptance
- Reduces stigma
- Content is unregulated and often misleading
- Can reinforce stereotypes
- Influencers / content creators unlikely to be trained to support vulnerable people



- **Covid-19**

- Change to routines, removal of structure and support
- Online / home schooling highlighted difficulties to parents
- Working from home exacerbated symptoms for adults



Missed

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?

- These girls and women 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)
- Research has demonstrated that females with ADHD are less likely to have learning difficulties or manifest problems at school compared to males



Masking

- 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, being compliant
- Particular issue in girls and women



Examples of Masking

- 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
- Working very hard to cover up the difficulties



Impact of masking

- 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”
- **Screening tools**
 - Pre-assessment rating scales based on research done in boys: female specific traits not represented
 - Screening tools are completed by parents and teachers who have ADHD stereotypes in mind
 - Parents and teachers judgements are biased and subjective comparing ADHD traits in girls vs boys.
- **Clinician bias**
 - Study by Bruchmuller et al in 2011 using identical case vignettes found gender was a significant predictor of ADHD diagnosis

Why might women be missed?

There may be limited evidence from early years of ADHD symptoms

- Adults often do not have, or in some cases do not want parental involvement in the assessment process
- No access to early school reports
- When there is access to school reports, these can sometimes provide limited information, particularly if there were never any concerns with learning.
- Scaffolding in school and at home has masked ADHD symptoms in the early years
- Symptoms may have been attributed to a mental health condition rather than ADHD

Different presentation?



- As girls mature, they tend to INTERNALISE the hyperactivity to become socially acceptable, so less overt symptoms.
- 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

But they can concentrate!

- 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 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!

Famous Faces with ADHD



Misdiagnosed



Why might they be misdiagnosed?

- 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 and parents can unintentionally hide ADHD through their support
 - 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

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. ADHD rarely travels alone.

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

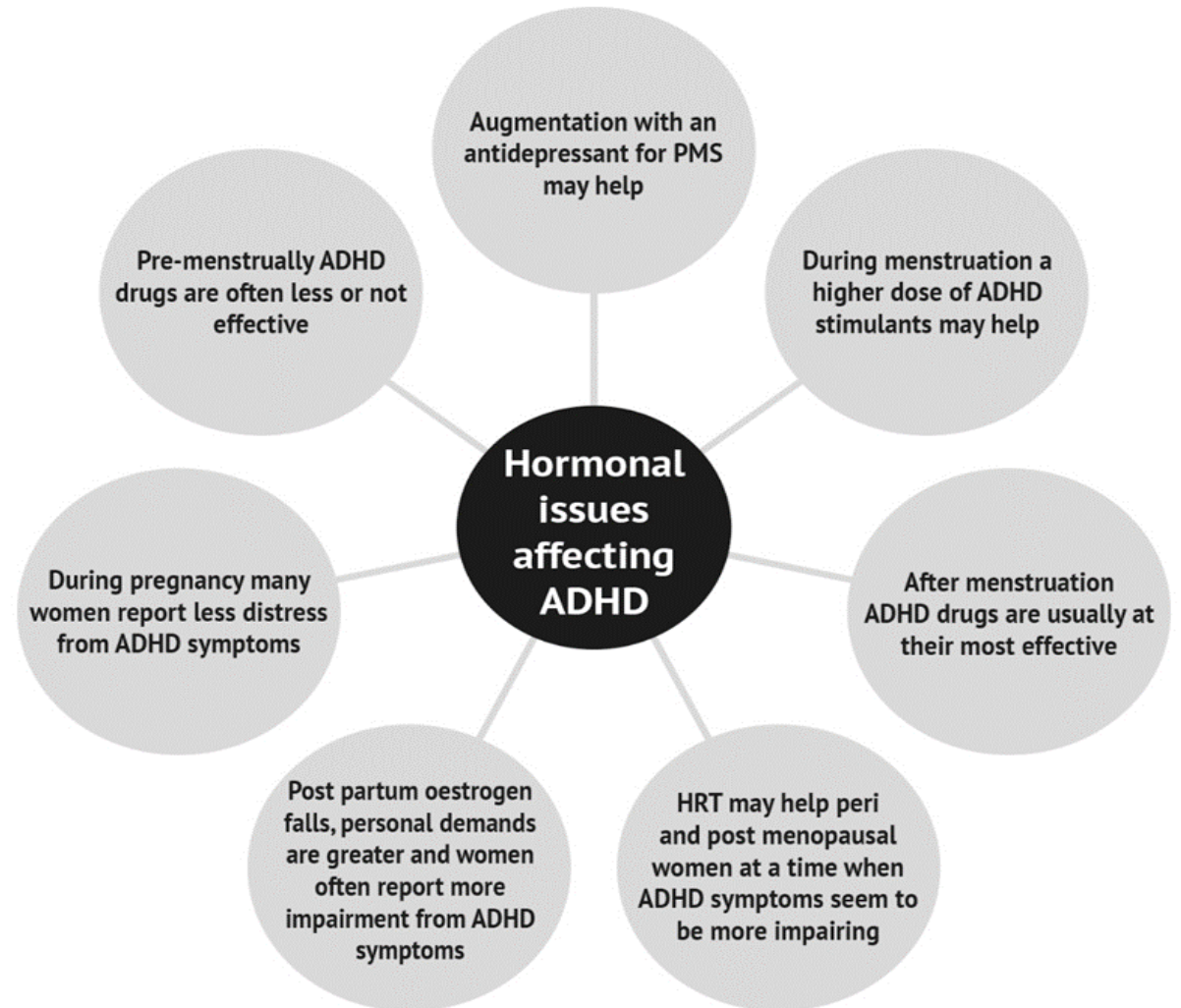
Sara's story

“Early on in secondary school, I began to drink alcohol to deal with socialising. I self-harmed and developed an eating disorder to deal with intense emotions, self-esteem issues, feeling stupid, not good enough, a failure. I made several suicide attempts from age 18 onwards. My family didn't understand me. I was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder, borderline personality disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. The depression and medication stripped me of my creativity. I relied on alcohol and weed to get through the lonely days. After lots of therapy, I was still struggling with life when I took an online mental health course that mentioned ADHD. I had always joked I had ADHD, but now I was convinced. Now I have a diagnosis, I'm learning coping skills that could have been taught to me as a child. You can't help but wonder if things had been different for me if it had been recognised earlier. Would I have graduated? Would I have a job rather than being unemployed for a decade?”

Hormones

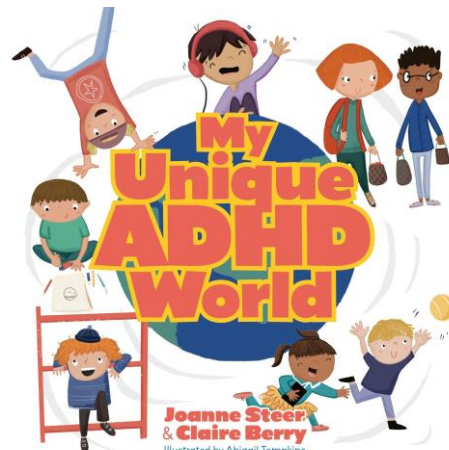
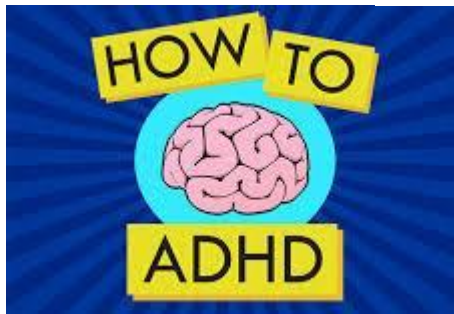
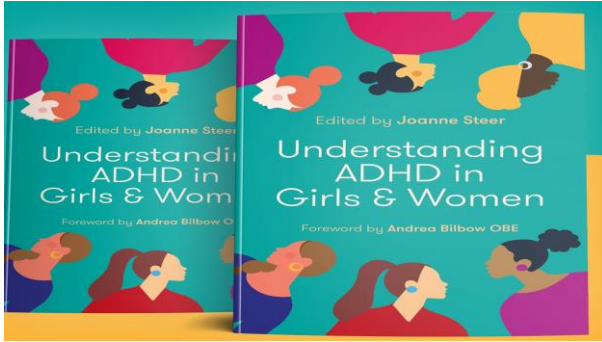
ADHD symptoms are impacted by hormones – during puberty, menstrual cycle, pregnancy, post pregnancy, peri-menopause and menopause. Important to be aware of how hormone cycle can impact on ADHD symptoms.

Diaries / trackers of menstrual cycles and symptoms can help understanding of the links.



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

- Understanding ADHD in Girls & Women edited by Joanne Steer (Audiobook also available)
- ADHD in girls short film – ADHD Embrace <https://youtu.be/j85NMw47rnc>
- 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/>
- Instagram @gracetimothy @adhdunlocked @adhd_girls @howtoadhd
- Youtube How To ADHD (Jessica McCabe)
- ADHD Girls <https://adhdgirls.co.uk/>
- My Unique ADHD World by Joanne Steer & Claire Berry (out June 2023)

Questions

