

UNTANGLE ADHD

Understanding ADHD

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES. A BROADER PICTURE.

A down-to-earth guide to what ADHD is, how it can show up, and the different ways we can understand it.

FOLLOW THE THREADS.
RECOGNISE THE PATTERNS.
CHANGE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

Understanding ADHD

As research on ADHD evolves, so does our thinking. This means there are ongoing changes to how we describe ADHD, the language we use and how we interpret and manage characteristics.

This guide is not about finding one perfect explanation. It is about looking beyond a single definition or source, considering different perspectives and building a more informed understanding of ADHD.

Looking at more than one source

Shape your own informed approach to living with or alongside ADHD by looking at a variety of information sources and checking for accuracy and context. Each person will have their own preferred type of resource, pace and capacity to learn depending on their neurostyle.

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What do we mean by ADHD?

ADHD is currently described as a neurodevelopmental difference. In medical and diagnostic settings, attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity or restlessness form part of the recognised criteria used to identify ADHD.

The recognised symptoms matter

Diagnostic criteria give clinicians a shared framework. They help identify patterns that have been present since childhood and that affect everyday functioning.

But a diagnostic description only tells us part of the story.

ADHD is often described in medical terms of symptoms because symptoms are the basis for diagnosis. Alongside those core symptoms are many everyday signs, characteristics and strengths that are also important to understand.

Living with ADHD can affect far more than attention and organisation. It can influence confidence, motivation, emotions, relationships, decision-making, responsibilities and many other parts of daily life.

A useful distinction

Symptoms help us recognise and diagnose ADHD.

Understanding helps us make sense of how ADHD is actually experienced by a particular person.

ADHD can affect the whole person

ADHD can influence how someone thinks, feels, responds, relates to other people and manages everyday life. These areas do not operate separately. They interact with each other, which is one reason ADHD can look so different from one person to another.

Cognitive

Attention
Memory
Thinking and problem solving
Motivation

Emotional

Emotional regulation
Mood changes
Sensitivity
Self-esteem

Behavioural

Impulsivity
Activity levels
Habits
Risk-taking

Relational

Communication
Friendships
Family dynamics
Work relationships

Physical

Sleep
Energy levels
Sensory experiences
Physical health

Everyday life

Organisation
Time
Responsibilities
Transitions and change

Why this matters

If we only look for attention problems, we can miss the wider pattern. Understanding the connections between these areas can make experiences that once seemed confusing or unrelated begin to make more sense.

ADHD across a lifetime

ADHD begins in childhood, but how it shows up can change considerably over time. A child who cannot sit still may become an adult who experiences internal restlessness. Forgetting homework may become missed deadlines, unpaid bills or forgotten appointments.

Childhood

- Difficulty getting started
- Losing things
- Forgetfulness
- Impulsive behaviour
- Restlessness

Adolescence

- Increasing demands
- Organisation struggles
- Risk-taking
- Emotional intensity
- School or social pressures

Adulthood

- Managing work and home
- Time and organisation
- Relationships
- Financial impulsivity
- Parenting and responsibilities

Life changes can make a difference

ADHD may become more noticeable when life demands more of us - starting a new school or university, beginning a demanding job, becoming a parent, managing a household, menopause, bereavement, moving home or other significant changes can alter how manageable existing patterns feel.

Some people experience only minor difficulties, while others find that work, relationships, confidence and everyday responsibilities become increasingly difficult to manage. The impact can change at different points in life.

The ADHD you don't always see

Not everything associated with ADHD appears neatly on a diagnostic checklist. Many people describe subtle patterns in everyday life that only begin to make sense once they start learning about ADHD.

Behaviour & habits

Needing urgency to get started. Forgetting something exists when it is not visible. Avoiding a task for days or weeks, then completing it in a sudden burst. Becoming intensely absorbed in something interesting.

Emotions & internal experience

Overthinking conversations long after they happened. Feeling overwhelmed by ordinary responsibilities. Strong frustration when plans change. Emotional intensity that can feel difficult to explain.

Time, organisation & focus

Losing track of time. Difficulty switching attention between tasks. Knowing what needs doing but struggling to decide where to start. Pulling everything together at the last minute when it finally feels urgent.

These are not additional diagnostic criteria

They are experiences many people with ADHD describe. They can help explain everyday difficulties that otherwise make very little sense - but they should not be used on their own to decide whether someone has ADHD.

Different ways of understanding ADHD

ADHD can be viewed through different lenses, including biological, environmental and evolutionary perspectives. Each perspective offers useful insights, but none tells us everything on its own.

Biological perspective

Research suggests ADHD has a strong genetic component. Scientists have also identified differences in brain development and functioning, particularly in areas linked to attention, motivation, emotional regulation and executive functioning.

Environmental perspective

Researchers continue to explore how factors such as early life experiences, stress, trauma, sleep, physical health and environment may influence how ADHD develops or is experienced. The extent of these influences remains an area of ongoing discussion.

Evolutionary perspective

Others view ADHD as part of natural human variation. Characteristics such as curiosity, novelty-seeking, adaptability and risk-taking may have offered advantages in different environments, even if they create challenges within modern systems.

Looking beyond one perspective

No single explanation gives us everything we need. Medical information, current research, clinical experience and lived experience can all contribute to a more informed understanding.

What we still don't know

There are still significant gaps in our understanding of ADHD - from the role of hormones and emotional regulation to why ADHD presents so differently between people, changes across the lifespan and overlaps with other conditions.

Areas where understanding is still developing

- the role of hormones and why ADHD may present differently across the lifespan
- emotional regulation and how it relates to ADHD
- overlap with anxiety, depression, autism and other conditions
- why ADHD looks so different between individuals
- how environment and life experiences interact with biology
- which forms of support work best for whom

Research continues to develop, and not everything we experience can be neatly separated into ADHD and not ADHD.

Staying curious

Understanding ADHD sometimes means becoming more comfortable with uncertainty - staying curious, considering different explanations and resisting the temptation to make every behaviour, thought or feeling fit one simple answer.

A useful reminder

ADHD myths are still believed.
Our understanding of ADHD continues to evolve.
Always fact-check ADHD information for accuracy and context.

Understanding the person, not just the ADHD

Two people can meet the criteria for ADHD and have very different lives. Their personality, strengths, relationships, upbringing, responsibilities, environment and experiences all sit alongside their ADHD.

Look beyond a list of symptoms

Understanding ADHD means asking not only what symptoms are present? but also:

- When do difficulties show up most?
- What makes things easier or harder?
- What strengths does this person bring?
- What has changed at different stages of life?
- How do other people understand and respond to them?
- What happens in relationships when different ways of thinking and functioning meet?

How we talk about ADHD shapes the way people understand themselves and how others respond.

When ADHD is talked about without enough understanding, myths can circulate - reinforcing stigma, encouraging blame and shame, and oversimplifying behaviour. Comments such as 'We're all a little bit ADHD' can also contribute to people delaying assessment or support.

A final thought

Whatever perspective you find most helpful, understanding ADHD is often less about finding one explanation and more about understanding how ADHD shows up in each individual.

ADHD looks different in all of us.

Recognising the patterns is useful. Understanding what those patterns mean for the individual - and for the people around them - is where things start to become clearer.

Where to go next

This guide is a starting point. If something here has made you curious, follow the subject that feels most useful rather than trying to learn everything at once.

Common ADHD symptoms

Start with the recognised symptoms used to identify ADHD and how they can show up in adult life.

Subtle signs of ADHD

Explore the everyday habits, experiences and patterns that may sit around the recognised symptoms.

ADHD strengths

Look at strengths, qualities and characteristics alongside difficulties - and how they show up differently depending on context.

ADHD & relationships

Explore what happens when different minds live, communicate, plan, parent, disagree and make decisions together.

Resources, tools and courses for adults, partners and couples.

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