

THE
ADHD



Field Guide



FOR 

ADULTS

THE
ADHD

Field Guide

FOR

ADULTS

Cate Osborn & Erik Gude

WITH RENNIE DYBALL



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**To those who've
been told they're too
much, not enough,
or just needed to try
harder.**

You are never alone.

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**Authors'
Note**

How to Read This Book



This book might look a little different from others on the shelf, and that's because it was carefully constructed to make it accessible. Many people with ADHD struggle with reading difficulties, including Erik, and benefit from nontraditional texts.

With this in mind, we've broken down dozens of topics about living with ADHD into a Q&A format based on the questions we get most from our audience. You'll also hear from other members of our community, plus guest experts on key topics. The answers are bite-size, so you won't be overwhelmed by pages upon pages of straight text, **and the key points are in bold.** We structured our book this way so that as many people as possible can benefit from it.

IF COLOR-CODING OR ANNOTATING
a text for yourself makes you more
likely to retain the information, you have our
full, enthusiastic permission to mark up
this book however you please!

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I'm going to use this color for

**Whether you read cover to cover or flip
to a random page, you'll be greeted with at
least a nugget of helpful information.
There is no wrong way to read this book!**

FOREWORD



I first came across Cate on TikTok, where we were both sharing bits of our journey with ADHD and offering tips to others who were navigating the ups and downs of being an adult with this diagnosis. I knew then she had a gift for connecting and communicating. Every video held my attention and taught me something new about my brain. This book is an extension of that.

When Cate and Erik first shared their manuscript with me, I was immediately struck by how accessible this work is. It's a rare thing for someone with ADHD to feel that they can stay focused through a whole book (barring books that happen to coincide with our current hyperfixation, of course), but I was able to read this one with ease. As someone who has given a lot of thought to how to write books for people with ADHD, I can honestly say they've nailed it.

When Cate and Erik first shared their manuscript with me, I was immediately struck by how accessible this work is.

Of course, being accessible is only beneficial if the book's content is helpful. I can say with enthusiasm that this one is. What I wouldn't have given to have this book when I was diagnosed with ADHD in my mid-thirties, trying to figure out how to manage my money and clean my house and deal with rejection sensitivity. There's no fluff here—just straight-to-the-point information on how to understand your brain and how to work with it in all areas of life. I imagine it will be sitting on the shelves of ADHDers and therapists alike for decades to come.

What makes *The ADHD Field Guide for Adults* so powerful is that it normalizes the ADHD brain. Many of us with ADHD have spent our lives feeling broken, always aware we aren't quite staying on top of life in the way the world says we should. We view our struggles through the lens of moral failure—we are lazy, irresponsible, chaotic, messy—even resources that aim to help us get our life together often reinforce this message by offering solutions that don't work for our brains. Perhaps you, too, have felt like a square mind living in a round world.

This book shines because both the message and the delivery are effective. And, what's more, not only have Cate and Erik written a book that gives solid information and practical tips in a format that you can actually consume but they have a way of making you feel like you are not alone anymore. Because you aren't. You're one of us.

—KC Davis

INTRODUCTION

You Are Not a Fuckup



It is September 2018, and I am sobbing uncontrollably on my couch. In less than two weeks, I'm supposed to play Miranda in *The Tempest* and Maria in *Twelfth Night*, and despite my nightly efforts to sit down and focus on studying my lines, I am wildly unprepared.

I sit and read, and I reread, and I try to learn the lines forward and quite literally backward. Nothing sticks. I try writing them down. I try listening to recordings. I try making up songs and anagrams and I try every single trick and skill I've ever developed to memorize, but nothing stays in my head for longer than a few minutes, if I can even sit down and focus for that long.

I am terrified. This has never happened before. I have two master's degrees in Shakespeare. This has always been easy for me, and this is the thing I love to do. Why can't I sit down and focus? Why can't I memorize my lines like usual? I am sure that I must have early-onset

dementia—something is definitely wrong. But how do I say, “I’m having trouble remembering Shakespeare lines” at the doctor and be taken seriously?

I can feel the *wrongness* lurking around corners, in stacks of dishes gone undone, in piles of laundry and clutter that crowd my hallways, in the unsent emails and unanswered texts, in the plans I keep making and breaking, in the way that I seem to be outside myself, watching my world fall apart. I am drowning, and the water is invisible to everyone but me.

I keep willing myself to get up off the couch.

Just send the email just send the text just put the dishes away this time don't forget to take out the trash why can't you ever keep anything clean just do the laundry or can you at least brush your teeth or take a shower you really are a piece of shit why can't you do anything right why are you such a fuckup . . .

I start having panic attacks. I start finding reasons to miss rehearsal—if I don't go, they won't know that I'm a fuckup, and they won't know that I'm suddenly too stupid to memorize a bit of Shakespeare. I can just quit; I can just hide. I can never do anything I like, ever again, because fuckups don't deserve nice things.

I am ashamed and embarrassed. I'm a terrible wife, a crappy partner. I am an embarrassment to my family, and I'm lazy and worthless, and I simply need to buckle down and try harder. And so I do. Over and over, day after day, I wake up and promise myself that today is the day that everything changes. Today is the day we sit down, focus, and learn the lines. And then, at the end of the day, I am exhausted from simply existing, but the laundry piles remain, the dishes are still undone, and my depression, shame, and anxiety grow and grow until finally I confess to a friend, through sobs, that I'm worried I'm going crazy.

He pauses thoughtfully and says, “I don't know if you're going crazy, but I do think you have ADHD.”

Over and over, day after day, I wake up and promise myself that today is the day that everything changes.

The part I often leave out of the story was that he made the phone call to make the first appointment with my doctor, because at the time, even that was something I couldn't find the motivation to do.

That phone call became the catalyst for great change. Four months later, the day before my thirtieth birthday, I sat in a psychologist's office and told her my story, convinced the whole thing was ridiculous. I told her about how I'd been incredibly successful academically, how I'd earned multiple degrees, how I'd been told several times in my life that I couldn't possibly have ADHD. People with ADHD don't get good grades, I'd been told. "People with ADHD aren't smart like you, aren't good students like you, aren't pretty and outgoing and talented like you." I believed them.

She smiles at me and says, "Yeah, I believed them, too."

In that moment, I am seen. And for the first time in thirty years, I begin to understand myself. A year later, I begin devoting my life to helping others do the same.

AT THE START OF 2020, I was the entertainment director of the Georgia Renaissance Festival, while Erik was working as an artisan pizza chef at a high-end restaurant in California. We were unaware of each other's existence, both of us climbing our own ladders. Then in March, Covid-19 shut down the entertainment and restaurant industries, and our careers ended in an instant. Stuck at home with nowhere to go and no fast-paced careers to distract us, our ADHD had us all to itself.

We both started to make videos about how ADHD affected our lives, sharing our struggles and triumphs. Our videos started to resonate through the ADHD community, and eventually both of us went viral. Then one of us got tagged in the other's video. On August 8, I sent a message to Erik that read, "The laws of ADHD TikTok demand that we do a collab." The first time we got onto the phone, we talked for three hours.

Eventually, we started a podcast together, *Catie and Erik's Infinite Quest: An ADHD Adventure*. It turned out that there were a lot of people in the world who wanted to hear two people—with vastly different experiences of ADHD—talk honestly and openly about how

ADHD has affected their lives. We ultimately became full-time content creators and advocates for the ADHD community, making a career of educating and supporting other adults with the disorder.

But this book isn't our story. Although you'll learn about us along the way, our book is a guide and a resource to help other adults with ADHD navigate their way through the world, too. We decided to write this book mostly in a Q&A format because the questions you'll see in these pages are the ones we get most frequently from our audience. We hope that you'll find some answers that prove helpful in navigating life with a neurodivergent brain.

ADHD used to be something that people believed existed only in context and that affected only children. It wasn't viewed as a debilitating, chronic condition; an insidious disorder that infiltrates all aspects of a person's existence.

But guess what?

DRUMROLL, PLEASE . . .

That's exactly what it is.

ADHD (formerly ADD), or **A**ttention **D**eficit **H**yperactivity **D**isorder, is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the brain's executive functions. These are a set of mental processes that help us regulate our behavior, plan and organize tasks, pay attention, and control impulses. They act as the conductor of your brain's orchestra, ensuring that all the brain's intricate processes are working together effectively.

In people with ADHD, the brain's executive functions don't work as effectively as they should; the conductor isn't paying attention. This leads to, among other things, difficulties with attention, organization, and self-control. Individuals with ADHD may struggle to focus on tasks

that are not stimulating or interesting to them, or they may have trouble completing long-term projects because they struggle with planning and time management.

People with ADHD may also exhibit physical hyperactivity and impulsivity, which can make

We hope that you'll find some answers that prove helpful in navigating life with a neurodivergent brain.

it difficult for them to sit still or wait their turn. These behaviors are thought to be related to difficulties with inhibiting motor responses and regulating emotions, which are also controlled by the brain's executive functions.

Scientifically, we now know that the construction of an ADHD brain is fundamentally different. When it comes to your ADHD-related struggles, the issue is not as simple as

- you haven't been trying hard enough,
- you just "need to apply yourself," or . . .
- you're "lazy" or you "just don't care."

In short, your executive functions don't work the way they're supposed to, *and that is not your fault*. This can be really, really hard to internalize, especially for those who were diagnosed later in life, but it's incredibly important to keep in mind as you read this book.

Regarding your diagnosis with shame or guilt or embarrassment (or a tasty cocktail of all three) will stop you in your tracks when it comes

to making progress. We're speaking from experience here.

It is okay to need to look up resources on how to get your laundry done, how to organize, or how to maintain friendships.

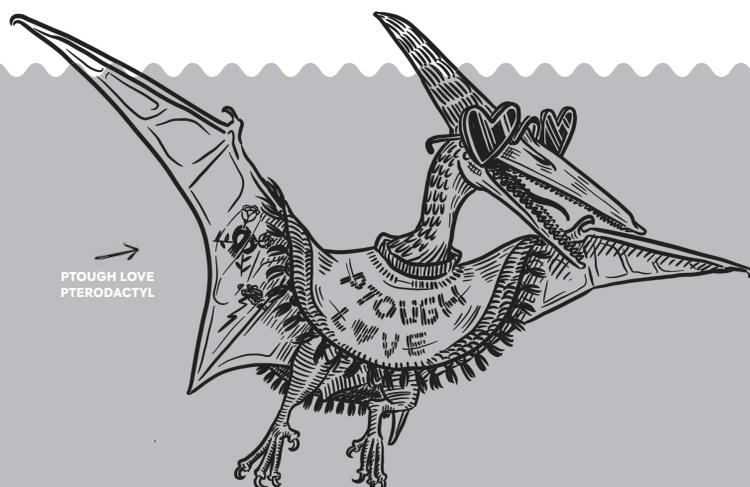
It is healthy to develop systems (anything that makes tasks easier) and structures that work FOR

YOU, regardless of what conventional society might think. It is FINE to need assistance and to work around your limitations, because you are not a fuckup. You are neurodivergent, and therefore your brain works differently. Plus—more good news—there are tools, structures, systems, and support available to help you.

But there is a *but*.

Having ADHD does *not* mean that you can't develop coping strategies and systems that minimize the impact on your life. You most definitely can.

**Scientifically,
we now know that
the construction
of an ADHD brain
is fundamentally
different.**



This is our first big TOUGH LOVE moment, so buckle up:

you cannot "cure" ADHD. You CAN manage it by being willing to put in the work.

WELCOME to the Club

You are not alone. While ADHD is generally considered to be a chronic, lifelong condition, recent efforts to decrease stigma among doctors and the public have led to an increase of late-diagnosed adults—*anyone who's learned they had ADHD after high school or beyond*. If that's you, then you are the intended audience for this book! As well as the people who love you.

According to a 2019 study, the prevalence of adult ADHD diagnoses has doubled since 2009. ADHD diagnoses are growing four times faster among adults than for children in the United States, and many scientists believe the disorder is *still* thought to be highly underdiagnosed in adults.

But why are we seeing so many more diagnoses now than we did ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? When ADHD was first recognized as a disorder in the 1960s and '70s,* it was largely seen as a behavior problem that could be controlled through discipline and punishment. Many people believed that children with ADHD were simply lazy or unmotivated and that their parents were to blame for not being strict enough with them.

In the '60s and '70s, many people believed that children with ADHD were simply lazy or unmotivated.

As more research was conducted on ADHD, it became clear that the disorder was caused by differences in brain chemistry and structure rather than a lack of effort or willpower. But even as this understanding of ADHD evolved, stigma surrounding the disorder persisted. Many people with ADHD have been subjected to negative

stereotypes and discrimination, with some people viewing them as unreliable, irresponsible, or even dangerous.

One of the most significant factors is that the diagnostic criteria for ADHD were historically based on research conducted primarily on young boys. As a result, the symptoms of ADHD in girls and women (not to mention trans and nonbinary people) were not as well understood, and they were often misdiagnosed with other conditions such as anxiety or depression.

Not only is it possible for girls and women with ADHD to present with symptoms that are different from those seen in boys and men, but social and cultural factors may play a role in the underdiagnosis of ADHD in women, gender-nonconforming people, and other minority groups whose experience of the condition has not been well researched. *It wasn't until 2022 that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) first included a section on gender and racial differences, noting that lived experience and socialization can have a major impact on how neurodivergence is both detected and diagnosed.*

* Cate, the resident historian here!

There is also a strong hereditary component to ADHD, so when a child is diagnosed, the symptoms may seem familiar to a parent, leading that adult to seek out an evaluation for themselves. College is another common time to be diagnosed, as it's the first time people with ADHD are out on their own. Marriages, divorces, and other major life events are also well-known catalysts for seeking treatment. In short, all sorts of adults are being diagnosed with ADHD, and many more already know they have it.

So now we're playing the world's worst game of catch-up, in which all the previously undiagnosed adults (or adults who are starting to understand the scope of the disorder) are now learning that the struggles they live with are actually due to ADHD.

Since there's no ADHD fairy that comes down on your eighteenth birthday and takes your ADHD away (that we know of), those of us who grew up in the 1980s and '90s are now adults who still must live with the condition, the difference being that now we have the agency to ask questions. We want to understand ourselves and why we are struggling, and we seek help to make life easier.

Fortunately, research on ADHD is catching up. Where it used to center on the needs of children with ADHD, it is now, finally, starting to address more adult concerns. For example: How does ADHD impact

sex and intimacy? Now we can confidently say that ADHD can profoundly affect your experience with intimacy. There's research behind it, and there are things you can do about it.

This is just one area of adulthood where we dive into the implications of life with ADHD. It's

not all sunshine and rainbows, but we've learned through our work how important it is to have these tough conversations.

Our book is an ADHD guide that addresses all the subjects you haven't read about before. It is a comprehensive manual on life as an adult with this chronic condition, as told by two people who are

Our book is an ADHD guide that addresses all the subjects you haven't read about before.

living it and educating about it. We'll employ the help of medical professionals here and there as needed, but this survival guide is mainly about offering real-life suggestions on every page from our own lived experiences—as well as permission to ignore whatever doesn't suit you.

We believe adults with ADHD need a tool to help them get through the day and, perhaps more importantly, a reminder that everything is going to be okay. *You are going to be okay.*

LIFE HACKS: Take 'Em or Leave 'Em

Many self-help books are predicated on the ableist notion that if you just try hard enough and pull yourself up by the bootstraps, your issues will magically disappear, and you'll finally reach ultimate self-fulfillment.

If that works for you, awesome.

Some of us need a little more than that.

There is no one “right way” to ADHD. There is, frankly, no **WRONG** way to ADHD, short of hurting others—don't do that. We are not here to tell you that your systems are invalid because they aren't how we do things. Because what works for you might not work for one of us, and that is okay.

You don't have to employ any ADHD “hacks” if you don't want to.

It's really that simple.

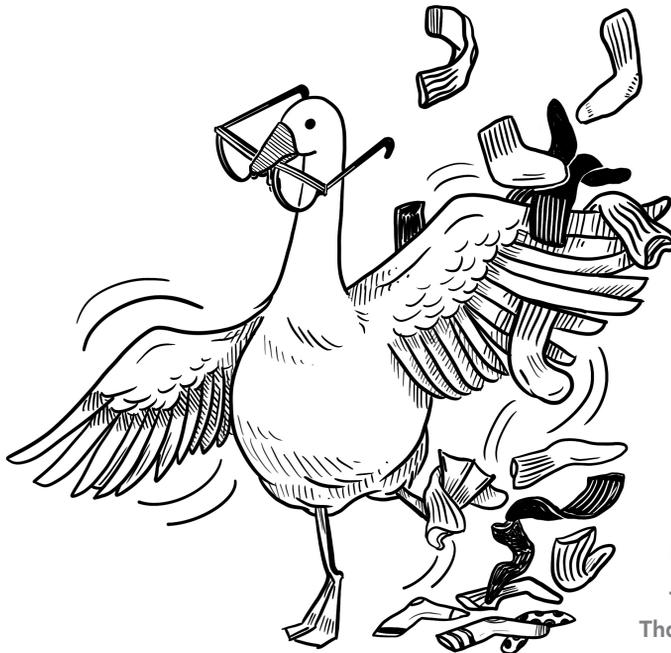
We didn't write a book to tell you how to live your life. However, between our own lived experience and the feedback we receive from millions of people with ADHD, we've got some solid advice for you to take if you want it and leave if you don't.

Want to be able to find your pants more easily? Great! A pants hook (trademark pending) can be a genius solution for this issue. Is your

floor covered in socks and you are absolutely fine with it? Hell yeah, friend, you do you. We're here to offer suggestions.

At the very least, we hope that this book will provide you with some useful tools to manage parts of your ADHD that you choose, some insight into how your brain works (or doesn't work), and some strategies for building systems that might work for you in the long run. Most importantly, we hope that you remember, once and for all . . .

YOU ARE NOT A FUCKUP, YOU SILLY GOOSE



That's you.
That's you being
a silly goose.

PART

1

**An ADHD
PRIMER**



THE

**Technical
Stuff**



The date is February 17, 2010.

I'm fifteen years old. I'm sitting next to my mom on a too-soft couch, waiting for a psychologist, Dr. Emerson, to return with the results of my seemingly endless ADHD evaluation process. My shoes are wet from the Michigan slush, and the microfiber fabric of the couch pulls and twists under my jeans every time I move. Despite this discomfort, I'm having trouble staying awake because of the room's warm lighting and the hum of the building's heating system droning in the background.

Dr. Emerson enters the room and, after some pleasant conversation, hands us a thick packet printed on firm, authoritative stationery. It feels heavy in my hands.

PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL REPORT

PATIENT NAME: Erik Gude

Dr. Emerson takes us through sixteen pages of confusing jargon, esoteric charts, and technical acronyms that, all together, apparently prove one thing: I definitely have ADHD.

On the very bottom of the sixteenth page, the last page, is a section titled “Recommendations,” which reads:

Erik may benefit from a trial of medication to help with the ADHD and depression symptoms.

It will be another four years until I learn that my ADHD doesn't affect me only in an academic environment. It will be seven years until I learn that my ADHD makes me more prone to addiction. And it will take ten years before I hear the term *executive dysfunction*.

It is our hope, dear reader, that the following section will serve to enlighten you about the various facets of ADHD in a format that will hopefully save you a decade or two of wondering why your brain works the way it does.

—Erik

What Is ADHD?



Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects both children and adults. It is characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that can impact various aspects of an individual's life—including academic performance, work, relationships, and daily functioning.



So, what does that **ACTUALLY** MEAN?

It means your brain works differently than the brains of neurotypical people, and you will very likely need systems and support in your life to make ADHD more livable.

But it does **NOT** mean you are a fuckup.



Neurodevelopmental

Neurodevelopmental refers to the processes that shape the development of the brain and nervous system from early embryonic stages through childhood and adolescence. This includes the growth and organization of neural cells, the formation of neural connections, and the establishment of neural networks that support various cognitive and behavioral functions.

TL;DR: Neurodevelopmental: the way your brain develops neurological pathways that influence how you function.



Is ADHD a DISABILITY?



Yes. ADHD is considered a neurodevelopmental disability, depending on the severity. However, it is not considered a **learning disability** (at least not in the United States in 2025).

This can make it very hard to get disability benefits for ADHD. ADHD often comes *with* learning disabilities—dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia—so you can get work accommodations in that regard.



Dyslexia

“A condition of neurodevelopmental origin that mainly affects the ease with which a person reads, writes, and spells, typically recognized as a specific learning disorder in children.”¹



Dyscalculia

“Dyscalculia is a learning disorder that affects a person’s ability to do math. Much like dyslexia disrupts areas of the brain related to reading, dyscalculia affects brain areas that handle math- and number-related skills and understanding. Symptoms of this condition usually appear in childhood, but adults may have dyscalculia without knowing it.”²

—CLEVELAND CLINIC



Dysgraphia

“Dysgraphia is a neurological disorder characterized by writing disabilities. Specifically, the disorder causes a person’s writing to be distorted or incorrect. In children, the disorder generally emerges when they are first introduced to writing. They make inappropriately sized and spaced letters, or write wrong or misspelled words, despite thorough instruction. For example, writing ‘boy’ for ‘child.’”³

—National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke



In other words, *neurodevelopmental* refers to the way in which the brain and nervous system mature over time, which can have important implications for a wide range of developmental outcomes, including cognitive, emotional, and social functioning.

It’s also important to note that **ADHD is a spectrum disorder**, and disability is not a monolith. Then we have the conversation of **comorbidities (other conditions that exist in a person alongside their ADHD; lots more on this in chapter 2)**. Because a large percentage of people with ADHD also have depression and anxiety, substance use disorders, sleep disorders, eating disorders, and more.⁴

I always say, “If you know one person with ADHD . . . you know one person with ADHD.”* **One person with ADHD might be great at things like organization or task management and be absolutely garbage at the relationship side of things. It may not look like a disability on that person, but that doesn’t mean it’s not disabling.**

* We actually found out while editing this book that Stephen Shore says the same thing about Autistic people!



You have the right to think of your ADHD however you want—you don't have to think of it as a disability. You can think of it as a superpower. You are entitled to your own understanding of your own brain and your own mind and your own ADHD.

sidenote

ABOUT THE TERM **DISORDER**



Many neurodivergent advocates believe that applying the word *disorder* to things like ADHD and/or Autism pathologizes a natural variation in the vast array of human experiences. By doing so, we stigmatize traits that are simply different from the average person's; we are inclined to agree.

It's difficult, in particular, when the actual *medical name* of the condition *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder* contains two different ways of emphasizing and amplifying that we're deficient and disordered, simply by existing as we are. And that sucks.

Celebrating neurodivergence doesn't mean ignoring the challenges that these traits might cause, but rather understanding that every person's experience with ADHD (or any other difference) is unique and should be tailored to their individual needs.

In this book, we have tried to avoid using the term *disorder* as much as possible, but in some cases, particularly when addressing where ADHD lives in psychological and medical contexts, it's difficult to avoid.



What is SOMETHING you ENJOY about having ADHD?

“ I love my ability to retain knowledge, and the empathy I have for others as not all maladies are visible.

—Andrea from Calgary

“ I enjoy the hectic noise in my brain. Now that I know how to self-regulate better, I find times when the “bees in my brain” help me be more creative and spontaneous and allow me to think in ways that neurotypical people wouldn’t think to. It keeps me moving, and while it’s harder to manage at times, sometimes work gets best accomplished when I take the reins and go for the ride.

—Mattie Rose from Atlanta



Can a person develop ADHD LATER IN LIFE, as an ADULT?



If you’re reading this, we assume that you’re an adult, perhaps even an adult who had no idea that you had ADHD until recently. Welcome to the club. First and foremost, you’re not a fraud.

It is not uncommon for a person not to really notice the difficulties presented by their ADHD until after they reach adulthood and are expected to manage their own lives.

For the most part, researchers agree that ADHD can often go unnoticed and unrecognized, especially in scenarios where you have a lot of support, structure, and access to resources.

Think about it this way: if you had a luxurious apartment with a butler who provided everything you needed, you would find out how often you lose your keys only once the butler left and stopped finding them for you.

If you've never had to make your own schedule that demands juggling lots of small details, you might not realize that your attention to detail sucks until you're making that schedule.

You might not notice that you constantly lose track of time until you're staring down a deadline wondering where all the time went.

This is why lots of people are diagnosed with ADHD in college. College is the first time that many people navigate the “real world,” without the structure and support of parents and teachers, and they find that the sudden shift into direct personal responsibility comes with a crash and burn, resulting in an ADHD evaluation.

sidenote



What do I do if my **HANDWRITING** is terrible?

➔ **First of all**, I get it. I know that feeling of getting a really important form to fill out, and they give you **a pen**, and you think: *Okay, no screwups. I better nail this first try.* Or the pressure of writing down something in front of your boss. A large percentage of people (some studies say up to 59 percent)⁵ with ADHD also have **dysgraphia**.

Personally, I indent a lot and make space between paragraphs to make the page at least look more organized. I use different colors as much as I can. Try to find your own preferred utensil.

For me, writing with a smooth, gliding pen is a nightmare. I love the twisty-top pencils. It took me a long time to figure out, but they are very comfortable for me to write with. **Find your utensil and then get as many as you can so you always have one nearby when you need to write something down. It helps control the variables.**

Let's Learn Some **SCIENCE TERMS!!!**

“Adult ADHD is considered to be a part of the **externalizing spectrum** with which it shares both **homotypic comorbidity** and **heterotypic continuity** across the lifespan.”⁶

HERE'S WHAT ALL THAT MEANS . . .

- The **externalizing spectrum** refers to a group of disorders that are expressed outwardly and often involve disregarding social norms by way of hyperactivity, impulsivity, aggression, etc. ADHD, oppositional defiance disorder (ODD), antisocial personality disorder, and even substance use disorder all fall into this category.
- ADHD having **homotypic comorbidity** means that it often occurs alongside other disorders within the externalizing spectrum.
- ADHD having **heterotypic continuity** means it's for life, but its presentation, the way it **externalizes**, is likely to change throughout a person's life. My ADHD looks different at thirty than it did when I was fifteen and than it did when I was nine. And it will look different when I'm fifty. Yours probably will, too.

ADHD can also make itself known after major life changes: a marriage, a move, the death of a loved one, a new job, the onset of menopause, and for many in the LGBTQIA+ community, transitioning or coming out. Much more on all that later.

Since ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, that means you're born with it, and your brain is structured differently. Something happens during brain development that results in this disorder.



You're not going to *develop* ADHD. You don't *catch* ADHD. What winds up happening in a lot of cases is that through childhood and your teenage years, you have a lot of support and structure, so you don't really notice it.

Or maybe you're a little bit messy, like me. And then major life changes are often what make the ADHD symptoms and struggles much more profound. For some, it's going off to college, living with a new partner, or having kids. It can happen for others in menopause.

So, no. **You didn't magically wake up one day with ADHD, but your systems and your structures burned down because you started living your life differently**, and that's probably why you're reading this book.



What is the DIFFERENCE between ADD and ADHD?



There isn't one. ADD is an antiquated term.



Cate the historian chiming in here, with a tiny bit of background. ADHD has always been around. This isn't about the rise of the Internet or Adderall or whatever. **People have been experiencing these issues for centuries. And when it first got a name in the *DSM*, that name went through a few changes before we ended up with ADHD.**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM) is the reference book used by mental health professionals to aid in diagnosis and treatment of various mental health concerns. It's also important to remember that it's a LIVING document—the American Psychiatric Association often publishes updates or clarifications when new research comes to light, like in 2013 when they made it “officially” possible to be co-diagnosed with ADHD and Autism. Before that, psychiatrists had to choose one. The newest version, the DSM-5-TR, came out in 2022.

A lot of doctors and psychiatrists still call it ADD. And that is an indicator that they were trained at a certain time. If they *persist* in refusing to call it ADHD, that may be a red flag.

Sometimes that “H”, the hyperactivity portion, isn’t physical. Sometimes it’s just mental hyperactivity.



The term was changed in the *DSM*, but ultimately **experts figured out that**

ADD and ADHD were actually different presentations of the same underlying disorder.

Sometimes that “H”, the hyperactivity portion, isn’t physical. Sometimes it’s just

mental hyperactivity. There are different *presentations* of ADHD, but not different *types*, despite what you may read on the Internet.



There is some pervasive junk science on the Internet about the different “types” of ADHD. So you’ll probably see this, and you may come across people who say they have a certain type of ADHD, but the scientific community identifies different presentations. There are no subtypes.



How did you FIND OUT about your ADHD?

“ My brother was diagnosed as a kid. I had to wait until thirty-one for them to care about looking at women.

—Sarah from Utah



Can GIRLS have ADHD?



YES.

ADHD and ADD used to be inadvertently genderized, where girls were often diagnosed with ADD because hyperactivity looks different on different people based on things like socialization and expected behaviors. So there was a big divide between diagnoses—boys were primarily being diagnosed with ADHD, while girls were primarily being diagnosed with ADD. As we’ve done more research, the *DSM* changed, because we’ve learned that it comes back to that presentation conversation—presentations change. It’s why we stopped saying “types” and we started saying “presentations.”

When we talk about “gendered” differences of ADHD, we also have to keep in mind societal factors—for many women, ADHD symptoms aren’t necessarily a visible, external thing. The hyperactivity, the distractibility, the managing . . . all that is happening internally, with racing thoughts, trouble sleeping, struggling with clutter, impulsive spending, and for some, using substances to self-medicate. Many women find themselves spending all their time and energy with this internal struggle while externally looking just fine.

On top of that, normal hormonal fluctuations throughout the month can also severely impact ADHD, as can pregnancy and menopause.

This is the late diagnosis story of many. According to Patricia Quinn, MD, the average age of diagnosis for women with ADHD who weren’t diagnosed as children is thirty-six to thirty-eight years old.⁷ If a doctor tells you women can’t have ADHD, that doctor is wrong, plain and simple. That narrative was around for a long time, but it’s been refuted.

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION



What is executive dysfunction?

Executive dysfunction is one of the defining characteristics of ADHD, in which the part of your brain that controls thoughts, emotions, and behavior (your executive functions) is disrupted. People with ADHD experience this dysfunction with a higher frequency and magnitude than neurotypical people. Everyone struggles with impulse control from time to time. Those with ADHD struggle with it intensely, nearly all the time.

What are the executive functions?



It's surprisingly hard to find a definitive list, but for simplicity's sake, we'll use the one on the ADDvantages Learning Center website.⁸ This list is similar to the list that many doctors also use. The executive functions are impulse control, emotional control, flexible thinking, working memory, self-monitoring, planning and prioritizing, task initiation, and organization. **People with ADHD are generally deficient when it comes to executive functioning.**



Also, if you have comorbidities—like if you're ADHD and Autistic, or have ADHD and depression, or ADHD and anxiety—these executive functions are going to behave in different ways.



1. Impulse Control: This term may make you think of a little kid in the back of the classroom, unable to control themselves. **With adult impulse control, it looks more like overeating, overspending, gambling issues, alcoholism, or risky sexual behavior.** People with ADHD also have more traffic accidents as a whole because their brains don't automatically focus in driving situations.⁹



Or it could seem like a really good idea one night to spend thousands of dollars you don't have on something, and the next morning you wake up and hate yourself for spending that money. Checking your phone constantly can be related to impulse control as well.

Impulse control has a lot of implications in relationships, like speaking before you think or acting on impulse when you're working through conflict rather than taking the time to reflect.



2. Emotional Control: ADHD is not an emotional disorder. However, we do have trouble regulating our emotions. People with ADHD struggle with regulating dopamine and serotonin, which are responsible for things like regulating your emotions and your focus/concentration. So a person with ADHD might seem like they get angrier or more joyful than most people. The wall between what we're feeling and what we're outwardly presenting can be less consistent than others'.

Having ADHD is like driving a manual car. Your car (brain) can still do all the things that automatic cars do, but you've got to learn how to drive a stick. We have to make a concerted effort to manually regulate our emotions, because we tend not to do it as automatically as other people.



3. Flexible Thinking: Flexible thinking is, generally, your brain's ability to quickly shift gears and adapt to new information, situations, or strategies, and it's WEIRD to me how little this gets talked about in context with ADHD. There is literally a functionality in your brain that is responsible for adapting to change. Deficits in this functionality can result in a lack of flexibility, creating rigid thinking patterns and even just difficulty seeing things from someone else's point of view. This can have a HUGE impact on how we navigate through our day, especially planning, organizing, and emotional control.





4. Working Memory: If you think of your brain like a computer, your working memory is like your desktop. Your computer is storing an

immense amount of information—it’s got documents and pictures and all sorts of stuff in there, but anything you’re working on at any given time is on your desktop.



People with ADHD can have a very hard time managing what’s on our brain’s “desktop.” Files are opening and closing at random, getting pushed to the background, until eventually we forget what’s even open.

Working memory is completely different from long-term memory, or your storage capacity. As an example, working memory can look like forgetting somebody’s name right after they said it, or forgetting your coffee cup on top of your car.

For me, working memory is very different depending on where I’m at in my depression and anxiety levels. It’s much harder for me to function, get off the couch, do the dishes, take a shower, or brush my teeth if I’m in the throes of depression.

That depression is often compounded by anxiety—while I am struggling to do basic care tasks, I’m also watching those care tasks: The dishes go from a single dishwasher load to four or five days’ worth of dirty dishes. The tasks start to feel bigger and scarier and more overwhelming the longer they sit, so I become less and less likely to start. The anxiety and depression cycle continues while I keep putting off tasks and then beating myself up when it happens. It’s fun in my brain.



5. Self-Monitoring: Self-monitoring is being consciously aware of your actions and the effect they have not only on you, but on your environment and others ****AND**** the ability to regulate/

control your behaviors, emotions, and responses. For ADHDers, this includes not only managing impulsiveness (interrupting, making comments, etc.), but also regulating your emotions and focusing attention. This is the executive function that informs reflecting on behavior and noticing if it requires adjustment.

Self-monitoring can be difficult for neurodivergent brains. It’s what gives us insight into things like social cues and appropriate behavior, but if our attention or interest is focused elsewhere, we might miss those vital social cues and wind up with awkward or uncomfortable social interactions.





6. Planning and Prioritizing: Starting a task is different from planning and prioritizing for that task. They're actually different processes.

With planning and prioritizing, imagine you're building an IKEA shelf. Do you make sure you have all your tools in place first, or do you just get into the middle of it and realize you don't have the right tool, and now the shelf is going to sit there unfinished for the rest of your days?

You need to ask yourself, *What do I need in order to start?* and *How will I finish this?* as part of the planning process. As for prioritization, what is more important? Building the shelf or getting to your grandmother's birthday party on time? Or doing the dishes? Or eating a snack? For people with ADHD, it can be extremely difficult to look at a to-do list and say to yourself, *Okay. I need to make sure that I'm on time to my grandmother's birthday party, so I shouldn't get a tattoo right now.* That's a real story from my real life.



7. Task Initiation: simply put, this is your ability to start a task. This involves a transitional space (the time between one activity ending and another one beginning), which can be very hard for people with ADHD.



8. Organization: When we talk about organization, we're not just talking about your ability to keep your DVD collection organized,* we're talking about the broad IDEA of organization and how it applies to your life. Bringing order to the chaos that surrounds us all.

As well as keeping our physical spaces tidy, organization also relates to prioritizing tasks, setting (and sticking to) deadlines, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, creating schedules and plans, categorizing information, and summarizing information—ALL those things deal with organization in your executive functioning.



* Do people still have DVD collections?



How do people with ADHD PERCEIVE TIME differently?



People with ADHD perceive time differently than neurotypical folks, but “time blindness” isn’t real. Before you get mad, let me explain: *Time blindness* is a colloquial term that the neuro-divergent community has sort of adopted to refer to the **very real** time perception deficits in people with ADHD. There is ample science to prove that **time perception deficits are measurable when you have ADHD.**

There have been a bunch of different studies on how people with ADHD perceive time. It breaks down like this:

People with ADHD have a really hard time knowing how much time has passed. We have a really hard time estimating how long something is going to take. We have a really hard time estimating how long it will be until something happens in the future. For example, if something is happening in a week, that’s forever! Until it’s tomorrow, and then you’re fucked.

Often that time perception deficit is written off as “You’re just being lazy, you’re just not keeping track of time, you’re not being responsible, you’re being rude, or you’re being disrespectful to your boss and your fellow employees.” But people don’t always realize that there’s actually a measurable difference in our brains.¹⁰

Planning for the future can be super hard for people with ADHD. Saving money, too, though it’s less about the actual action of saving money. What it comes down to is that time perception deficit: “Well, of course I’ll have enough money by the end of the month to pay my rent.” And then you don’t.

Many of the struggles, and even the relationship issues that happen with people with ADHD, boil down to time deficits. “Oh, I didn’t realize it’s been six months since I called my mom. I didn’t realize that I haven’t texted my partner back in four hours, even though I said I was gonna call him at noon.”