

# Women Living Well with Adult ADHD

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## HomeWomen Living Well with Adult ADHD



If you're an adult female living with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), it's entirely likely that you weren't diagnosed until adulthood since more males than females are diagnosed in childhood. It's also likely that you didn't even realize that ADHD was your problem until you stumbled upon information that described your symptoms in shockingly relatable detail or until your mental health professional put the pieces together and explained it to you. You may have struggled with anxiety and/or depression before you ever received an ADHD diagnosis, and you may have had an epiphany when you realized that the two (or three) things are often inexorably linked and tend to feed off of each other, making ADHD even more difficult to spot. You probably understand the feelings of blame, guilt, frustration and anxiety that go along with attempting to navigate life with a brain that feels like it never turns off, let alone slows down, and makes almost everything you do so much more challenging.

The good news is that treatment, whether medication, therapy, coaching or some combination, can improve your quality of life significantly. Even just knowing what you're dealing with when you get that diagnosis can be tremendously helpful. As you put a name

to the face of your ever-wandering mind, learning more about ADHD by talking to others and doing research is a great way to learn tips to cope with everyday life. You may see yourself or someone you know in one or more of these women's stories.

## Melissa's Story

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Though Melissa struggled with disorganization, forgetfulness, depression, following through and planning throughout her life, she had no idea that she had inattentive ADHD until she happened to look through the book *Delivered from Distraction* while at the library one day. As she read, she found herself laughing at how much the descriptions sounded just like her father. "Then I browsed through the book's questionnaire and realized that I had answered 'Yes' to every single question, except for the ones dealing with hyperactivity," Melissa says. "I felt humiliated and excited at the same time. It was definitely an 'aha' moment: 'So **that's** what's wrong with me.'"

Officially diagnosed at 44, Melissa felt hopeful about the future now that she understood why she had struggled so much. Having battled genetic depression her entire life, she realized that her ADHD made it even worse. "It's hard not to be depressed when you feel like you're working harder than everyone else to maintain a basic level of practical success as an adult," says Melissa. Even though she did well in school, which helped "offset the depression somewhat," she says, Melissa feels that her good grades and test scores also disguised her ADHD.

Medication has become a key part of Melissa's life. "I've been taking Wellbutrin for depression for about 10 years, but life really improved once I started taking Ritalin, about a year and a half ago," she says. "After taking the first pill, I got more done with more focus in four hours than I had in the previous two weeks. It felt like a miracle, like I had walked through a door called 'normal.' And I thought 'Oh, so this is how regular people get things done.'" The intensity of the Ritalin has since worn off, but she still feels like she gets more done and can focus better when she's on it.

Good habits and self-discipline are something Melissa wishes she would have had more of as a child. "Even with medication, I can still zone out and fall down a rabbit hole at home and hyper-focus on one exciting thing...and suddenly realize several hours later that the house is a wreck, I forgot to defrost dinner, and I haven't done what needed to be done that day," she says. This is where she feels good habits would help her significantly.

To help herself plan and organize, Melissa uses a chore planner called *Motivated Moms*, as well as timers to help keep her activities in check. She also made a reminder list with two columns: "Things I Can Do When the Kids are Home" and "Things I Can Do When the Kids Are Away," she says. "Listening to audiobooks also helps me focus mentally when I'm doing boring household chores, and keeps me from wandering off somewhere else."

## Candace's Story

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As a child, Candace felt like one of the “bad kids,” always in trouble for not paying attention, failing math and getting negative feedback everywhere she went. She learned to act out on purpose just so she could get attention. Interestingly, Candace slowly pieced together that she had ADHD through using recreational drugs with her friends as a young adult. “I took a muscle relaxant a couple of times, but they always made me feel very focused and I could never figure out why. One night, we had all taken Adderall,” she says. “Everyone else was all over the place, but I was like, ‘The world is real. Everything makes sense. What’s going on?!’ I had never felt more like I understood everything that was going on. It was amazing. I thought, ‘This is what it’s supposed to be like,’” she says. “I felt bad for it though. I felt bad that I felt good.”

When a friend told her several years later that she had been diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, Candace responded the way many people do: “There’s no such thing as ADHD in adults,” she said. However, she began to notice how her friend acted when she didn’t take her medication. “She was just like me,” Candace remembers. “I asked her what she took and she said Adderall, exactly what I had taken (that one day). I was starting to not feel so bad anymore. I thought, ‘Maybe this is what I need.’”

Her breaking point came one summer when she became severely depressed. “I couldn’t figure out why as an adult, I can’t get it together. Why do I look so irresponsible? Why do I look like I don’t care? Why does life make sense to other people, and I just can’t get it right?” she says. Finally, after having her child, she decided to find out if she had ADHD. “I decided, ‘I’m going in, because I’m not going to short-change my child,’” she says. She received her diagnosis at 27.

These days, Candace is on Adderall, and she says it has improved her life dramatically. “I used to think that everybody was better than me, that anything that I put my hands to was going to be destroyed, that people liked me for a short time, but once they really got to know me, they were gone. I really had no self-confidence,” she says. “After my diagnosis, after I started taking my medication and I started getting things right, it was like everything was narrowed down for me and I wasn’t guessing anymore.” She also regularly listens to podcasts about ADHD from ADDitudemag.com and highly recommends them. “I would not know how to handle my relationship if I had not been listening to those,” she says.

## Heather's Story

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Heather never considered the possibility that she could have ADHD until her ex-husband accused her of it during an argument. “At the time I blew him off as a guy with a shiny new counseling degree needing to put labels on everyone,” she says. “I didn’t fit the stereotypical

image of someone with ADHD. I was punctual, easily met deadlines and was reasonably organized. And most of the time I was tired, not hyper. But the seed was planted and years later, I did some online research.”

The research led her to realize that she fit other aspects of ADHD. “I talk too fast, interpret other people’s conversations, have trouble staying focused, and am easily distracted,” Heather says. “I get lost in a project if I find it especially fascinating and can lose all sense of time. I’m also hypersensitive to random stimuli like flashing lights, high-pitched sounds, rough textures, smells and tastes.” Her doctor referred her to a counselor to be tested for ADHD, but the counseling department she went to didn’t even have a test for adults, so she had to take a test for kids instead. She was diagnosed at age 39.

After trying a variety of ADHD medications, including Adderall, Concerta and Strattera, with little improvement, Heather’s doctor put her on the highest dose of Wellbutrin, which helps her symptoms. Though she tried counseling for a while as well, “it felt like the counselor didn’t know how to deal with an adult female with ADHD,” she says. “The whole office was set up for kids. I really wanted to just go play with the toys and ignore the counselor’s manipulations.”

Having a diagnosis of ADHD has helped Heather understand why she does some of the things she does and has helped her find tools and coping mechanisms. Using reminders with Google calendar on her iPhone helps her stay organized. At work, she uses one earbud to play music, which helps her focus and tune out the noise around her. In the past, Heather used to change jobs every year or so because she got fired or was bored, but she has had her current job for six years now.

## Kelsey’s Story

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Kelsey’s figured out that she might have ADHD when she was in middle school. “I owned a book called *The Gifted Kids’ Survival Guide*. It talked about learning disabilities and how they can show up and affect students also labeled as gifted,” Kelsey says. “Based on the disabilities they talked about, ADHD seemed to make the most sense.” Because Kelsey has inattentive type ADHD, her pediatrician didn’t think she had it. As an adult, she was missing work and school, which strained her relationship with her parents, before she finally got a diagnosis at 23.

A few weeks before getting her ADHD diagnosis, Kelsey was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. “My anxiety is believed to be solely caused by my ADHD,” she says. “I’m not treating the anxiety with medication because my stimulant medication helps treat my ADHD, and therefore treats my anxiety.” Kelsey is in therapy for both her anxiety and ADHD, but she feels like the two feed off of each other, making it more difficult to deal with one at a time.

Now Kelsey is on Adderall, which she says makes a huge difference. In therapy, she is working on learning to take care of herself, as well as ways to help her ADHD and anxiety. "Understanding that I have ADHD changed my life for the better," says Kelsey. "I now have access to advocates at my college, which leaves me less stressed when dealing with school because I have more help if something slips, and I'm able to focus more during class thanks to my medication." One trick she has found to be helpful is to dedicate certain days or times of the week to particular activities, like homework or working out. This helps keep her more organized so that even if her schedule at work changes, she has those windows of time already blocked off.

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*Written by Sarah E. Ludwig*