A GLOBAL FEATURE · NOVEMBER 2026

ADULT ADHD & AUTISM · LATE DIAGNOSIS · WHAT COMES NEXT

After the Name

Rock stars, novelists, chefs' wives, entrepreneurs, grandmothers in Adelaide and actors in Kerala. What adults around the world say happens when the name finally arrives, and what they still need once it has.

INSIDE · 30 voices from 8 countries · the menopause tipping point
the relief–grief arc · what lies beyond medication · the post-diagnosis gap
the inheritance · finding your tribe · where helpers fit



IN THIS ISSUE

A generation is meeting itself for the first time

Across the last five years, a wave of adults have learned in their thirties, forties, fifties and beyond that they are ADHD, autistic, or both. This feature gathers what they have said, in their own words, and sets it beside the research.

03 **The click.** The moment the name arrives

04 **Voices.** Thirty people, eight countries

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19 **What's missing.** The post-diagnosis gap

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IN NUMBERS

366m

adults worldwide estimated to have symptomatic ADHD (6.76%); 139.8m meet the stricter, childhood-onset definition (2.58%)

787%

rise in recorded autism diagnoses in UK primary care, 1998 to 2018, with the steepest climb among adults and women

89%

of autistic people in the UK aged 40–59 estimated to be undiagnosed; 97% of those over 60

46%

of Canadian women with ADHD surveyed by CADDAC had first been misdiagnosed with something else

54%

of women with ADHD in an Icelandic cohort had severe perimenopause symptoms, against about one in three without

15%

of adults with ADHD in England receive medication, by the NHS taskforce's estimate

Sources for every figure are listed on the final pages. Screening figures and diagnosis figures are not the same thing, and this feature labels each.

OPENING

The click

Ask a late-diagnosed adult what the moment felt like and you will hear the same small word again and again, in Aberdeen, Brighton, Melbourne and Kochi. Click. A key turning. A life reorganising itself around a fact that was there all along.

When Sue Perkins, then 53, replied to a musician on social media who said he was "creeping towards" an ADHD diagnosis, she told him she had fully crept, and that once the diagnosis came, "*suddenly everything made sense*", both to her and to the people who love her. Days later, the comedian Johnny Vegas said he had been assessed too, after Perkins encouraged him.

That chain reaction is the first thing worth noticing. These stories do not arrive alone. They arrive in clusters: a son's school report, a friend's Instagram post, a podcast heard on the school run, a colleague who quietly asks, have you ever been assessed? Mel Robbins found out at 47 while reading her son's assessment. Matt Haig followed his son. Jools Oliver followed her children. A Canadian woman interviewed by CTV began her journey when a supervisor pulled her aside.

Annie Lennox was 70 when she told BBC Woman's Hour that testing had confirmed she has ADHD. Her verdict was gentle and enormous: "*It makes sense of so much.*" In Kerala, the actor Fahadh Faasil learned his diagnosis at 41 after asking a doctor, almost in passing, whether ADHD could be cured if it was found that late. In Adelaide, Laverne Bell was diagnosed at 65.

The click is real, and it is good. But it is not the end of the story. It is the moment the story becomes readable. What follows, as dozens of people describe it, is a longer and stranger season: relief folded together with grief, an old self to be reread, a body changing in midlife, and the slow work of finding out who you are when you stop performing who you were told to be.

This feature tries to hold all of it. The famous voices are here because they are loud enough to be heard. But the patterns they reveal are the same ones that turn up in research interviews with ordinary adults in Japan, Sweden, Canada and Kenya, and in thousands of quieter posts in online groups at two in the morning.

> *"You can't have power with that which you can't name."*
>
> A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY ONLINE COMMUNITY

A note on language. People in these pages use different words for themselves: ADHD, autistic, AuDHD (both together), neurodivergent. Some love the word superpower. Others, like Jools Oliver, reject it outright. Both are honest, and both are here.

VOICES · PART ONE

In their own words

Public figures who have spoken about an adult diagnosis. Quotations are kept short; the rest is paraphrased from the interview or post cited in the sources.

Annie Lennox

SCOTLAND · MUSICIAN · ADHD AT 70

"my own personal decision and not a directive for anyone else"

Describes herself as highly sensitive and observant, and has chosen not to take medication, while stressing that this is her choice alone.

Jools Oliver

ENGLAND · AUTISM & ADHD IN HER 40S

"It's no superpower. It's just a drain"

Says living undiagnosed cost her 45 years of believing it was something else. Her children's diagnoses led her to assessment, and now bond them: *"Yeah, I get you. I got it."*

Mel Robbins

USA · AUTHOR · ADHD & DYSLEXIA AT 47

"Adults with ADHD tend to be highly, highly, highly self-critical."

Found out through her son's assessment. Calls it a blessing and a curse, and believes undiagnosed ADHD drove the anxiety she lived with. Names a "lost generation" of women treated for anxiety instead.

Matt Haig

ENGLAND · NOVELIST · ADHD & AUTISM AT 46

"bittersweet in midlife when you get a diagnosis"

Expected the ADHD result; the autism one surprised him. Says it made him *"more self-compassionate, more mindful, helped me stop drinking."* Chooses not to become a spokesperson while he works it out.

Alex Partridge

ENGLAND · FOUNDER, LADBIBLE · ADHD AT 34

"change who we are in order to fit in"

Describes low self-esteem, sensitivity to criticism and an "internalised hyperactivity". Turned his diagnosis into the ADHD Chatter podcast and a bestselling book, and says women have been badly let down by medicine.

Paris Hilton

USA · ENTREPRENEUR · DIAGNOSED IN HER LATE 20S

"too everything"

Wrote in Teen Vogue that she was always told she was too energetic, distracted and talkative. First hid the diagnosis for fear of stigma; now calls it her superpower and urges an end to the word "disordered".

Em Rusciano

AUSTRALIA · COMEDIAN · ADHD AT 42, THEN AUTISM

"early menopause, which exacerbated my ADHD"

Calls it her "diagnostic trifecta": ADHD, autism and early menopause within five years. Spent two years rebuilding her sense of self, then gave evidence to Australia's Senate inquiry.

Ben Branson

ENGLAND · FOUNDER, SEEDLIP · AUTISTIC AT 39, ADHD MONTHS LATER

"To change how the world sees neurodivergence."

Diagnoses brought clarity and exposed how hard support is to reach. He founded a charity and podcast, now known as The Hidden, to break the cycle of shame and silence.

VOICES · PART TWO

Further afield, and closer to home

Fahadh Faasil

INDIA · ACTOR · ADHD AT 41

"well, that's me"

Revealed his diagnosis while opening a school for children with disabilities in Kerala, describing how a casual question to a doctor about curing ADHD became a question about himself.

Sue Perkins

ENGLAND · BROADCASTER · ADHD AT 53

"suddenly everything made sense"

Later told Radio Times the diagnosis was useful, and that she refuses to use it as an excuse for her behaviour. Her openness prompted Johnny Vegas to seek his own assessment.

Sheridan Smith

ENGLAND · ACTOR · ADHD AT 42

"brain background noise"

Told British Vogue the diagnosis helped her make sense of a lot of things in her life.

Ben Fogle

ENGLAND · ADVENTURER · ADHD AT 50

"I admit to my own cynicism"

Shared his diagnosis after what he called a mental health storm, and argued that people are more than a single word.

Busy Philipps

USA · ACTOR · ADHD IN ADULTHOOD

"I have every single one of those."

Recognised herself while going through her daughter's checklist, and notes how many women are diagnosed in their late 30s or 40s through a child.

Elyse Myers

USA · CREATOR · ADHD, THEN AUTISM AS AN ADULT

Known to millions as "The Internet's Best Friend", she has talked about masking, people-pleasing and boundaries, and the before and after of finally having language for herself.

EVERYDAY VOICES

Laverne Bell

AUSTRALIA · ADHD AT 65

"late-diagnosed women popping up everywhere"

Grieves the life she might have had, as girls today get seen.

Antoinette Monks

ENGLAND · AUTISM AT 71

"It's exhausting being me."

Also probable inattentive ADHD.

Jean Ward

ENGLAND · ADHD AFTER 60

"stopped hating myself"

Always wondered what was wrong with her.

Julia

ENGLAND · ADHD AT 59

Put in the "dunce" class at five; felt like an imposter for nearly 60 years.

Natalie Stechyson

CANADA · AUTISTIC, LATE DIAGNOSIS

"I expected to experience some kind of transcendent unmasking."

Instead, months of ignoring it.

A 60-year-old patient

SOUTH AFRICA · ADHD AT 60

Broke down in tears when a Johannesburg doctor gave her the diagnosis.

From an online forum: "*So much wasted time, opportunity and potential.*" And from Kenya, a writer reflecting on women's late diagnosis asks the question many in these pages carry: "*What if she wasn't careless? What if she was struggling?*"

Stages, pitches and kitchens

Mel B

ENGLAND · SINGER · ADHD, DYSLEXIA, DYSPRAXIA AT 44

"you don't feel as alone or different or crazy anymore"

Diagnosed in 2019, she has said she wishes she had known at school, and that she has no concept of time. She works out to quiet her anxiety and has described sitting in the countryside for hours, saying that being around "*green and nature*" feeds her.

Lucy Beaumont

ENGLAND · COMEDIAN · ADHD AND DYSLEXIA AS AN ADULT

Creating cake chaos on *Bake Off* prompted her to find out why she was "like this". Her mother was diagnosed with Asperger's and ADHD at 65, when the Covid slowdown finally gave her room to be seen. Two generations of one family, diagnosed late, a few years apart.

Lucy Bronze

ENGLAND · LIONESS FOOTBALLER · ADHD & AUTISM AS AN ADULT

Revealed before Euro 2025 that she had been diagnosed four years earlier, that most people close to her found it obvious, and that it gives her a kind of superpower on the pitch.

Johnny Vegas

ENGLAND · COMEDIAN · ADHD IN HIS 50S

"answers a lot of questions"

Assessed after Sue Perkins encouraged him, a small proof of how one person's honesty opens the door for the next.

Helen George

ENGLAND · ACTOR, *CALL THE MIDWIFE* · ADHD

Spoke about her diagnosis publicly for the first time on the *I'm ADHD! No You're Not* podcast, after more than a decade playing one of television's best-loved midwives.

Sue Perkins, revisited

ON THE SAME PODCAST, LATER

"no real aftercare"

Talking about her ADHD alongside a benign pituitary tumour, she described deep frustration with the private assessment route: a diagnosis, then no roadmap for what happens next. The podcast summed it up as meds or no meds, and off you pop.

Do we still need the label?

Davina McCall, who has not described herself as having ADHD, put the question directly on her *Begin Again* podcast: do we still need to put a label on ADHD? It was on the same podcast that Jamie Oliver talked about Jools's neurodivergence in 2025. The voices in this feature mostly answer yes, at least for now, because the label is still what opens the door to support.

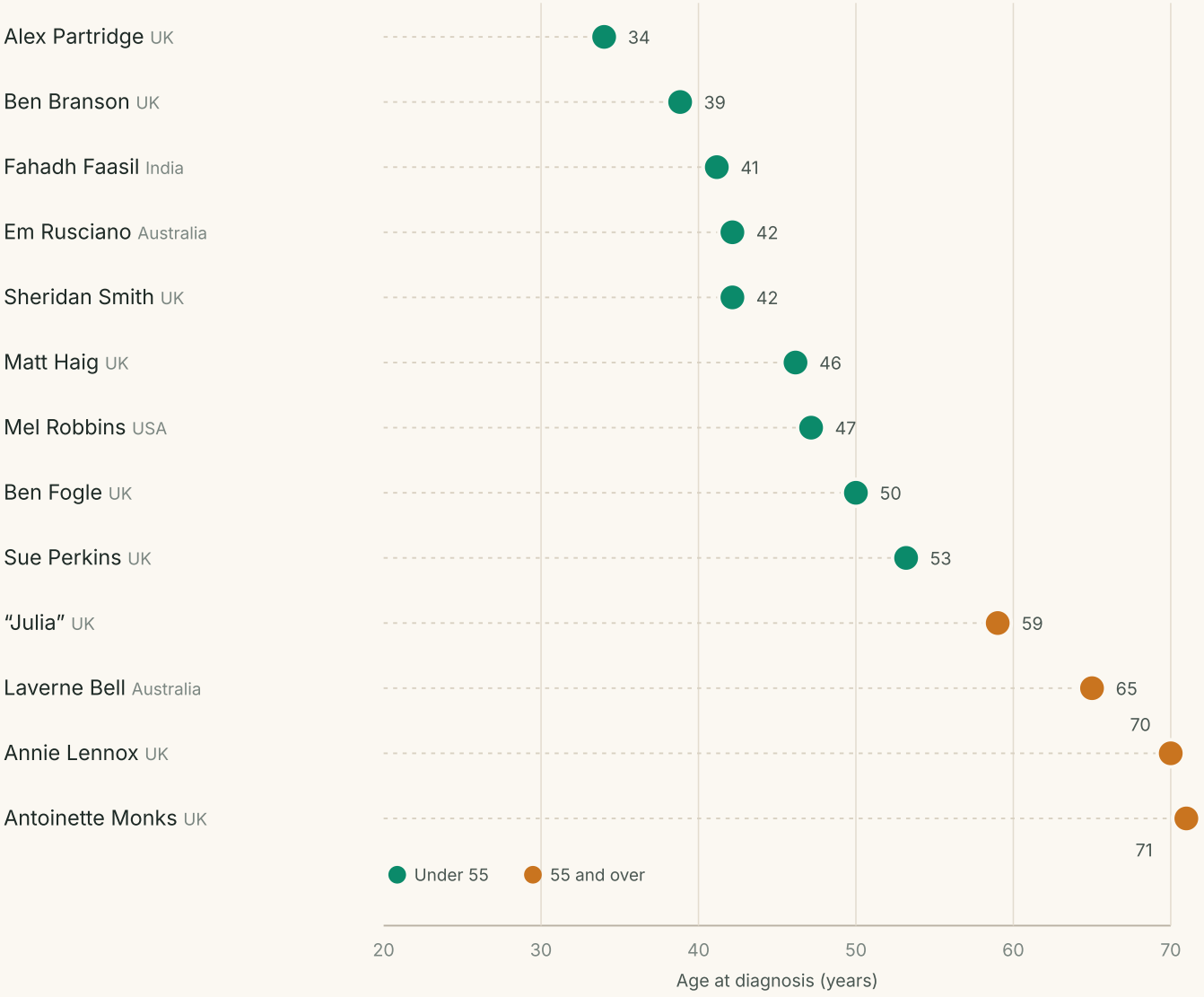
The partner's view

Comedian Sara Pascoe's husband, Steen Raskopoulos, has an ADHD diagnosis. On *ADHD Chatter* the couple talked about shame within families, rejection in marriage and the benefits of his diagnosis. On *I'm ADHD! No You're Not*, Pascoe spoke about life with her husband's ADHD and the juggling act of parenting and performing.

INFOGRAPHIC

When the name arrived

Age at diagnosis for the people in this feature whose age is on public record. The cluster in the forties is not a coincidence: it is when children are being assessed, careers and households peak in complexity, and perimenopause begins.



47

median age at diagnosis across these 13 people

≈37 vs 7

average age at ADHD diagnosis for women vs men, cited by Canadian clinical scientist Lisa Batten

~½

of the 15.5m US adults with a current ADHD diagnosis in 2023 received it in adulthood (CDC)

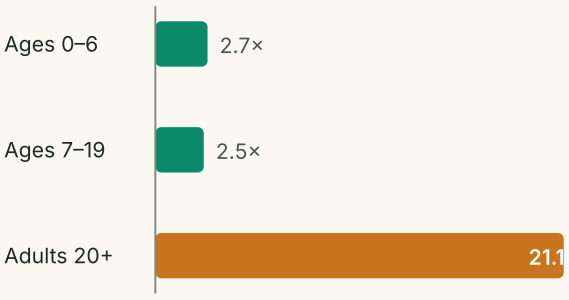
Ages as reported in the sources cited. Ages for Paris Hilton (late 20s), Jools Oliver (40s) and others given only as a range are left off the chart. This is a set of public stories, not a representative sample.

THE SCALE OF IT

Not a trend. A recognition.

The surge in adult diagnoses is often described as a fad. The researchers who study it mostly describe something else: a backlog of people who were always there, now being seen.

Japan: new ADHD diagnoses, fold-increase 2010 → 2019



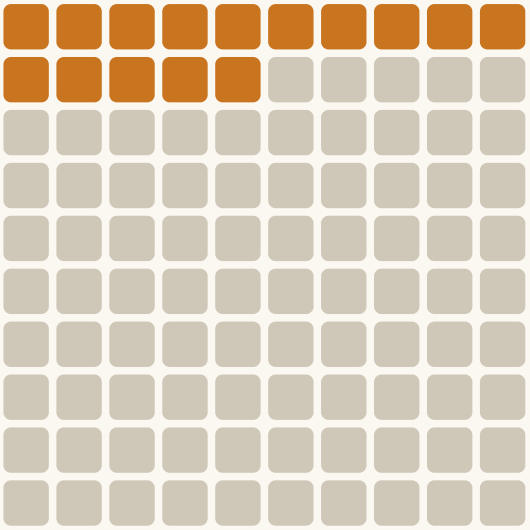
National insurance claims data, Sasayama et al. The adult rise was steepest after Japan approved its first adult ADHD medication in 2012, then levelled off around 2018.

UK: autism diagnoses, 1998 → 2018

+787% recorded incidence in GP records. Greater for women than men, and greatest of all among adults.

Russell et al., University of Exeter. The authors attribute it mainly to better recognition, not more autism.

England: of every 100 adults with ADHD, how many get medication?



■ 15 receive medication ■ 85 do not. NHS England ADHD Taskforce, 2025, which notes that 70–90% of people benefit from medication. Some waits for assessment have stretched to 10–15 years.

Misdiagnosis before diagnosis. ADHD UK estimates the average person with ADHD in the UK experiences three to four misdiagnoses first. In Canada, 46% of women surveyed by CADDAC had been misdiagnosed, most often with anxiety or depression.

AROUND THE WORLD

Nine places, one pattern

What the public conversation looks like in each country, and the gap people keep naming.

WHERE	WHAT IS HAPPENING	THE GAP PEOPLE NAME
United Kingdom	A national ADHD taskforce reported in 2025. By March 2026, 683,088 people in England had been referred for ADHD assessment. Only 1.19% have a recorded diagnosis, against 3–5% expected; some services have stopped taking new adult referrals.	Waits of years; little support while waiting or after diagnosis; GPs needing better training.
Ireland	Trinity College Dublin research asks the question late-diagnosed autistic women keep asking: “So now what?”	The period straight after diagnosis.
Canada	About 1.8 million Canadians have ADHD (CADDAC). New diagnoses among adult women nearly doubled between 2020 and 2022.	Misdiagnosis; women diagnosed some 30 years later than men.
USA	15.5 million adults had a current ADHD diagnosis in 2023, nearly half diagnosed as adults. Peer support networks such as ADDA and CHADD are long established.	Cost and insurance; “lost generation” of women.
Australia	A 2023 Senate inquiry drew 701 submissions and made 15 recommendations, including a national framework.	Cost, waits, and extra barriers for women, First Nations and multicultural communities.
Iceland	A cohort of over 5,000 women produced the first population evidence that ADHD changes perimenopause.	Menopause care that knows about ADHD.
Japan	Adult diagnoses rose 21-fold in a decade. Interviewees described difficulty accepting the diagnosis, then relief, then identity questions.	Stigma and masking; time to absorb the news.
India	Fahadh Faasil’s disclosure at 41 sparked national coverage. A large study found diagnosed ADHD at 0.22% or lower among people over 50.	Recognition in adults at all.
Kenya & South Africa	A Kenyan household study found 13.1% of adults screened positive (screening, not diagnosis). South African experts describe adults trapped in “a life of perpetual failure”.	Clinician awareness, access to assessment and treatment.

Insight

The richer the country, the more the conversation has moved from “does adult ADHD exist?” to “what happens after diagnosis?” In much of the world, the first question is still being asked. The emotional story, though, is remarkably consistent across every culture where it has been studied.

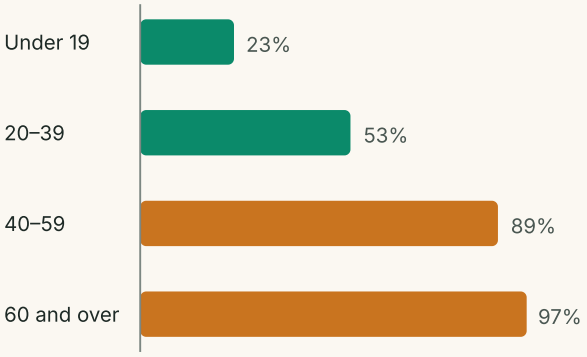
A caution on numbers

Prevalence varies with the tool used. Screening questionnaires capture symptoms; diagnosis requires a clinical assessment and a childhood history. The World Mental Health Surveys average 2.8% of adults, higher in wealthier countries, partly because they look harder.

The older you are, the less likely you've been seen

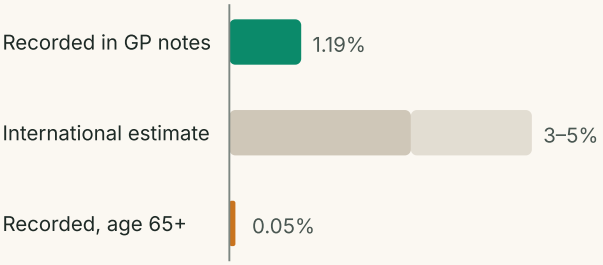
Two studies from King's College London, UCL and Liverpool, published in 2025 and 2026, put numbers on something many people over forty already feel: whole generations grew up before anyone was looking.

Autistic people in the UK estimated to be undiagnosed, by age



Stewart, Happé et al., 2025

ADHD in England: recorded diagnosis vs expected prevalence



John, Stewart et al., The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, 2026. 42 million patient records, 2000–2024.

75 vs 81

average life expectancy, autistic vs non-autistic people in the UK (likely skewed by underdiagnosis)

20% vs 4%

of autistic vs non-autistic adults over 40 report being socially isolated

1.03 → 2.53

new ADHD diagnoses per 1,000 person-years in England, 2021 to 2024. Among adults, the rise was most notable in women.

683,088

people in England referred for an ADHD assessment (NHS data, March 2026), up over 130,000 in a year

What this means

The headlines say diagnoses are "soaring". The researchers read the same data the other way: even after the surge, England records well under half the ADHD that international studies would predict, and almost none in people over 65. The lead author notes that low rates in older adults likely reflect who was ever recognised, not who has ADHD. For autism, nine in ten people over forty may never have been told. The late-diagnosed are not a trend. They are the visible edge of a much larger, older, unseen population.

Not the problem. The solution to the problem.

Behind many late diagnoses stands an older figure: a father, grandfather or uncle with a quick mind, a restless body and a drink in his hand. He was never assessed. He was "a character". For many families, the drinking was not the problem. It was how a brain with no name found some quiet.

ADHD is among the most heritable conditions studied. Across 37 twin studies the average heritability is 74%, close to that of height, and parents, siblings and children of someone with ADHD are several times more likely to have it. So when a mother recognises herself in her son's assessment, she is often seeing three generations at once: her child, herself, and the parent who raised her.

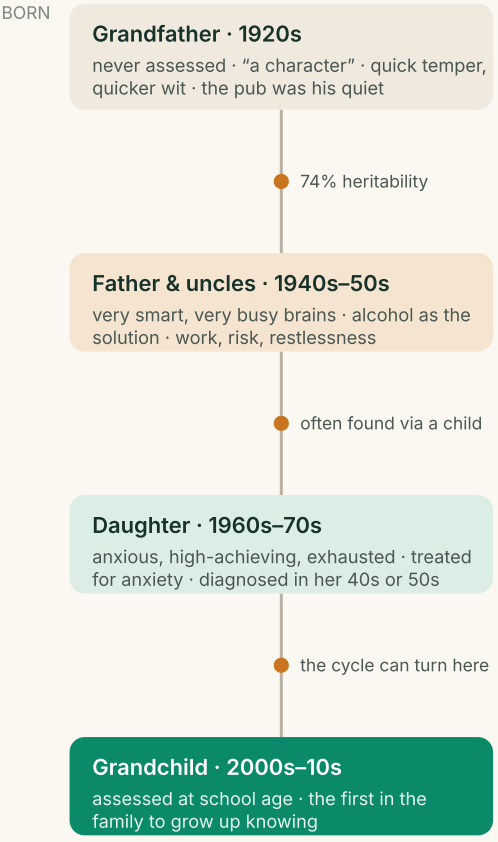
In forums and essays, adult children describe those parents with the same mix of love and loss. On Reddit, a woman who suspects her own ADHD writes of her undiagnosed father: "*The man was brilliant.*" She asks whether, with a name for it, he might have been more present, and might have beaten his drinking. In an ADDitude comment, a woman nearing 60 describes trying to get her brilliant, troubled father, nearing 90, assessed for autism and ADHD at last.

Adults in recovery tell the same story from the inside. "*I definitely drank to quiet my brain,*" wrote one man diagnosed in his late 40s. A tech writer put it more plainly: "*It wasn't the alcohol. It was the quiet.*" A woman diagnosed at 53, two years sober, said drinking had always seemed the reason she was disorganised, until the diagnosis showed her it was the other way round.

The research supports what they describe, carefully. Clinicians writing on adult ADHD and addiction call self-medication a plausible explanation and recommend early diagnosis as prevention. The man in the armchair was not weak. He was managing, with the only tool on offer.

> *"You can't fix a problem if you don't know what it is."*
>
> A DAUGHTER ON HER FATHER'S LATE ADHD DIAGNOSIS, HUFFPOST UK

An illustrative family, pieced together from the stories



A composite drawn from many accounts, not one family.

Alcohol and ADHD, in numbers

Young Canadian adults with a lifetime alcohol use disorder	36% with ADHD vs 19% without
Any substance use disorder, same survey	about half vs 23.6%
Alcohol-dependent patients with childhood ADHD (German clinic)	about 1 in 5

Where unrecognised minds end up

The other side of the inheritance is harder to look at. It shows up in prisons, in divorce courts, and in the files of children taken into care. None of these outcomes is inevitable. Each is more likely when nobody knows.

Prison

~1 in 4

adult prisoners meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD (26%; 30% of young offenders), from a meta-analysis of 42 international studies. Against about 2.5% of adults generally, that is roughly ten times the rate.

England & Wales

½

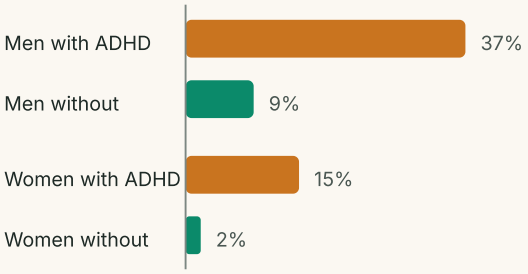
of people entering prison could reasonably be expected to have some form of neurodivergent condition, by the 2021 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection's estimate.

Worldwide

2.8m

prisoners estimated to have ADHD, by the UK ADHD Partnership's consensus group.

Sweden: criminal convictions over four years (2006–09)



The same study, of over 25,000 people, found criminality fell by **32% in men and 41% in women** during periods when they were on ADHD medication, compared with periods off it. A King's College London professor noted it is not necessarily the medication alone: treatment also brings people into care and support.

Families and care

Parents divorced by the time a child with ADHD turned 8 (US study)	22.7% vs 12.6%
Genetic risk for ADHD and parental separation (England)	higher genetic risk, more breakdown
ADHD among looked-after children, across studies	3.8% to 68%, mostly far above national rates
Mental illness among children in care aged 11–15 (UK)	49% vs 13.5%

Research on care-experienced children is thin and varied, and trauma can look like ADHD. One study's authors note ADHD often runs in families, so a parent may be struggling too. Another, from Canada, found no higher divorce rate.

Sir Stephen Fry

ENGLAND · WRITER, BROADCASTER

"I couldn't focus, I was all over the place."

Expelled from school and briefly imprisoned as a teenager for credit card fraud, Fry says he later realised he had struggled badly with ADHD, a condition almost unknown in his youth. He has suggested that untreated ADHD can migrate into bipolar disorder, which he was diagnosed with in his thirties, and Mr Porter reports his belief that his bipolar may have stemmed from unmanaged ADHD. On the *I'm ADHD! No You're Not* podcast he urged listeners to stop seeing neurodivergent minds as broken. His story holds this whole chapter in one life: the school, the prison, the late understanding.

What the inspectors said

The 2021 inspection was struck by how often the word "difficult" was used about neurodivergent people in the justice system, and suggested turning it round: to ask how difficult the system is for them. Staff showed consistently low awareness, and the inspectors asked first of all for listening, empathy and compassion. The same reframe runs through every chapter of this story. The men who drank, the families that came apart, the young people in custody were rarely given the name. A diagnosis does not excuse harm. But it offers something earlier generations never had: a reason, and a way to break the pattern.

ANALYSIS

What I'm noticing

Reading these stories side by side, from celebrity interviews to research transcripts to forum posts, ten threads keep surfacing.

1 **The child is the doorway**

Mel Robbins, Matt Haig, Jools Oliver, Busy Philipps and many unnamed mothers found themselves inside their child's assessment. Robbins calls this the number one way women discover their ADHD. Diagnosis is often a family event, not an individual one.

2 **Anxiety was the first label**

Robbins's "lost generation" were treated for anxiety in their teens and twenties. A Canadian survey puts misdiagnosis at 46% of women; ADHD UK estimates three to four misdiagnoses on average. Many people spent decades treating the smoke and not the fire.

3 **Relief and grief arrive together**

Haig's word is bittersweet. Robbins calls it a blessing and a curse. A 2026 synthesis of 21 studies found the same double movement everywhere: relief at an explanation, grief and anger for lost time.

4 **Hormones tip the balance**

For women, the decades of compensation often hold until perimenopause, when they don't. Em Rusciano, the Menopause Dinners guests and the Icelandic data all point the same way (page 15).

5 **Substances were the self-prescribed medicine**

Partridge writes of alcoholism; Haig of slipping back into drinking and of diagnosis helping him stop; Rusciano of quitting alcohol; Lily Allen of sobriety. Understanding the impulse made it easier to put down.

6 **"Superpower" and "drain" are both true**

Paris Hilton credits ADHD for her entrepreneurship; Jools Oliver calls it no superpower at all. The difference seems to lie less in the brain than in the fit between a person and their surroundings, and in how much support and freedom they have.

7 **The masks were heavy**

Partridge describes learning young to change who you are to fit in. Autistic adults name masking as the most common cause of burnout. Unmasking is the quiet project that follows so many diagnoses.

8 **Diagnosis is a door, not a destination**

Natalie Stechyson expected a transcendent unmasking and instead ignored the news for months. Research across the UK finds post-diagnosis support is mostly a leaflet and a list of links.

9 **Community does what services don't**

The most consistently healing thing people describe is other people who get it: a neurodivergent therapist, a late-diagnosed friend, an online group. The research agrees (page 21).

10 **Many turn toward service, some on their own timeline**

Partridge built a podcast, Branson a charity, Rusciano testified to a Senate. Haig chose not to become a spokesperson while still working it out. Both paths are honoured in these stories.

INFOGRAPHIC

The threads, person by person

A filled circle means the person has spoken publicly about this theme in the sources reviewed. An empty cell means we did not find it, not that it isn't true for them.

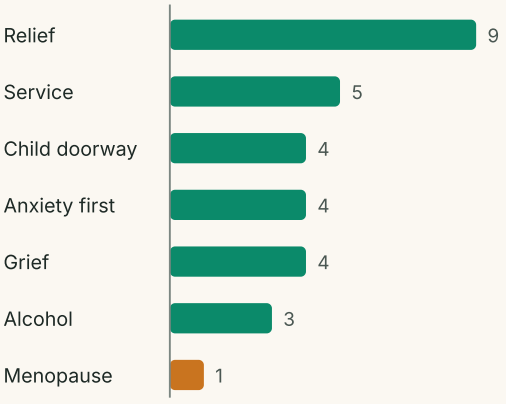
PERSON	CHILD LED THE WAY	ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION FIRST	RELIEF, "IT MAKES SENSE"	GRIEF OR LOST YEARS	ALCOHOL	MENOPAUSE	TURNED IT INTO SERVICE
Mel Robbins	●	●	●	●			●
Matt Haig	●	●	●	●	●		
Jools Oliver	●		●	●			
Em Rusciano		●	●		●	●	●
Alex Partridge		●	●		●		●
Busy Philipps	●		●				
Annie Lennox			●				
Paris Hilton			●				●
Ben Branson			●				●
Laverne Bell				●			
How many of 10	4	4	9	4	3	1	5

Reading the matrix

Relief is near-universal among those who have spoken publicly; it is the story that gets told first. Grief appears less often in headlines than it does in research, where it shows up in most accounts. That gap is itself a finding: grief is the part people talk about in smaller rooms.

Menopause appears only once among these public figures, yet population data suggests it shapes the experience of a large share of late-diagnosed women. This is one of the clearest places where public conversation lags behind lived experience.

Share of the ten who spoke to each theme



Menopause highlighted: underrepresented in public accounts relative to the research.

When the scaffolding falls

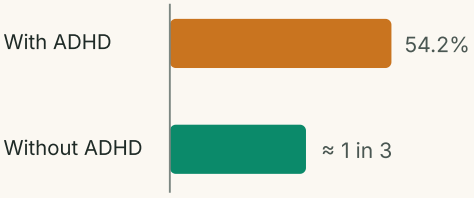
For many women the systems that held a life together for thirty years quietly give way in their forties. Some discover ADHD for the first time. Others find the ADHD they knew about has changed shape.

The author Shanna Pearson describes women who kept careers, families and relationships running for decades, "*And then, boom: Perimenopause hits.*" Em Rusciano received ADHD, autism and early menopause within five years and says the menopause made her ADHD worse. In the UK, the broadcaster Nadia Sawalha was diagnosed in her late 50s, as clinicians describe a trend of women aged 45 to 55 being diagnosed after seeking help for the menopause.

Davina McCall, who has not spoken of an ADHD diagnosis but has led Britain's menopause conversation, captures how frightening the overlap can be. Of her own perimenopausal brain fog she said: "*I thought it was some kind of dementia.*" On the Menopause Dinners podcast, a woman named Nikki described waiting more than two years for an ADHD assessment and finding her symptoms worsened after menopause.

The science is young but moving fast. The 2025 Icelandic study is the first population-based evidence, and King's College London found menopausal difficulties rising in step with the severity of ADHD symptoms.

Severe perimenopause symptoms, women aged 35–55



Icelandic SAGA cohort, n = 5,392 (2025)

FINDING	FIGURE
Peak age of severe symptoms, with ADHD	35–39
Peak age, without ADHD	45–49
Women 45+ saying peri/menopause was when ADHD hit hardest (ADDitude survey, ~5,000)	63%
Noticed ADHD symptoms change in peri/menopause	>93%
Women in a Dutch ADHD clinic with symptoms suggesting PMDD (Dorani et al.)	45.5% vs 28.7% in a general survey
Of 300 perimenopausal women screened in the Netherlands, positive for ADHD	35%

What this means. Perimenopause may begin up to a decade earlier in women with ADHD. A woman of 37 whose focus, mood and memory are unravelling may be meeting both at once, and may be told it is "just stress" or "just hormones".

Petra Bagust

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND · BROADCASTER · ADHD IN MIDLIFE

Host of the *Grey Areas* podcast, Bagust was diagnosed with combined-type ADHD after her son, and after the singer Anika Moa turned the tables mid-interview and asked her a personal question. She describes a grieving process before acceptance, and the diagnosis arriving amid the hormonal whiplash of menopause. She is "trying the label on for size", and says it has freed her from relentlessly high standards. Her guest, neuropsychiatrist Dr Greg Finucane, says perimenopause with ADHD can cause "*things to unravel*". Then the story travelled: a listener named Robyn says a *Grey Areas* episode sparked her own late diagnosis. One woman's honesty, passed hand to hand.

RELIEF, THEN GRIEF

The shape of the season after

Research from Sweden, Japan, the UK and online communities describes a surprisingly stable emotional journey. It is not a straight line. It loops.



Illustrative, synthesised from qualitative studies (Aoki et al. 2020, Japan; 2015 Swedish study; Mair et al. 2026; 2026 thematic synthesis of 21 studies and 397 adults). People move back and forth; there is no correct order or timetable.

86%

of women in a 2025 study of adult ADHD diagnosis expressed grief for the life they might have led (as reported by Dr Lewis)

21

studies across 397 adults pooled in a 2026 synthesis: diagnosis is a turning point for identity, bringing relief and grief together

4

feelings that recur in 225 social media posts about late identification: grief, relief, gratitude and burnout

One participant in a 2025 study described the most intense anger of her life in the fortnight after her diagnosis, before grief settled in. Japanese interviewees first struggled to accept the diagnosis at all, then went looking for information, shared it with loved ones and slowly made peace with it. The researchers' advice is simple: give people time.

The researchers studying online posts concluded that late-identified adults need care that holds them before, during and beyond diagnosis. The forum post that reads "So *much wasted time*" and the Woman's Hour interview that sounds like celebration are not opposite experiences. They are often the same person, a few months apart.

The person underneath

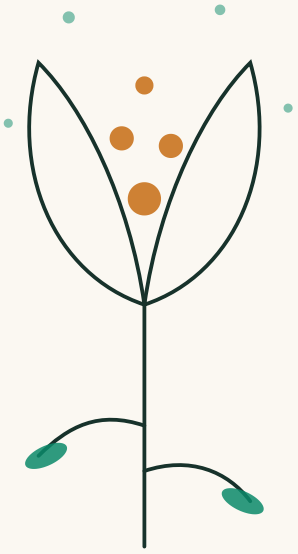
Masking, also called camouflaging, means hiding traits to fit in: forcing eye contact, scripting small talk, smoothing every edge. It is often how late-diagnosed people survived. It is also, the research suggests, what wore them out.

Studies co-produced with autistic adults found that masking to pass as non-autistic is exhausting over time, yet is used to avoid bullying, stigma and lost opportunities. Masking was the reason participants most often gave for autistic burnout, and time spent camouflaging was what most damaged their mental health. The main reason they gave for needing to mask was society's lack of awareness and acceptance.

Unmasking, then, is not a switch. A writer in Texas, diagnosed autistic at 35, compared letting the real self out to walking around naked, and described the first online community of late-diagnosed adults as *like finding my people for the first time.* A South African woman featured in the documentary *Unmasking* said diagnosis didn't change who she was, but "*it changed how I understood my life.*"

> *"I spent all of my life up until my diagnosis feeling broken."*
>
> AN AUTISTIC WOMAN WRITING ON THE MIGHTY

For ADHD the language differs but the shape is similar. Partridge describes a lifetime of reshaping himself to belong. Hilton hid her diagnosis at first. Unmasking here often means dropping the shame-driven over-effort, and building systems that fit the brain instead.



What unmasking looks like, in people's descriptions

- Letting yourself stim, fidget or doodle
- Leaving the party earlier, without apology
- Noise-cancelling headphones, softer clothes, dimmer light
- Saying "I need it in writing" at work
- Fewer, deeper friendships
- Rest before the crash, not after it
- Telling people, or choosing not to

Composite of practices described in the personal essays and studies cited.

What people actually do next

Medication helps many, and the taskforce in England argues far too few receive it. But when people describe what changed their lives after diagnosis, the list is much longer than a prescription.

Self-compassion, practised
Haig credits the diagnosis with making him gentler with himself. Jean Ward stopped hating herself. Mel Robbins's message is that there is nothing wrong with you.

Getting honest about substances
Seeing drinking as self-medication helped Haig stop; Rusciano quit alcohol; Partridge writes openly about alcoholism.

Moving the body
Rusciano exercises more than ever and took up strength training, partly because menopause left her bones "like chalk".

Grounding the senses
Still struggling to rest, Rusciano uses her five senses to anchor herself in the present moment.

A therapist who gets it
Therapist Jess Champion found that being understood by a neurodivergent therapist, "*without having to explain myself, was incredibly healing.*"

Re-reading relationships
Partners describe light-bulb moments; one Australian woman says the diagnosis came just in time to save her marriage. Parents understand their children differently.

Choosing, not just complying
Annie Lennox chose not to take medication; Sue Perkins chose not to use ADHD as an excuse. Ownership of the choices matters as much as the choices.

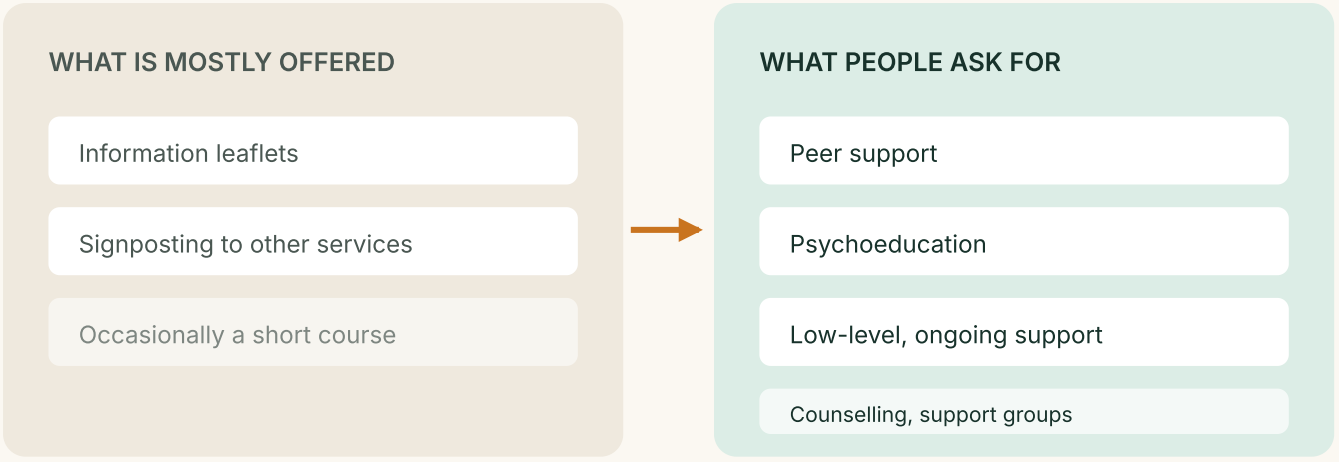
Making something of it
Podcasts, memoirs, stand-up shows, charities, songs. Hilton recorded a song called "ADHD"; Rusciano took her diagnoses on tour.

SUPPORT	WHAT IT OFFERS	WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT ACCESS
Medication	Benefits 70–90% who take it, per the NHS taskforce	Reached by about 15% of adults with ADHD in England
Psychoeducation	Understanding how your brain works	Most wanted, often just links and leaflets
ADHD-aware therapy & coaching	Grief, identity, practical systems	Often private and costly
Peer support	Belonging, validation, strategies	Mostly volunteer-run; patchy
Menopause-aware care	Treating hormones and ADHD together	Rare; evidence still emerging

WHAT'S MISSING

The post-diagnosis gap

A Bristol systematic review screened more than 27,000 records to find out what support autistic adults diagnosed in adulthood actually receive in the UK. The answer, mostly: information and signposting. What they asked for was something warmer.



Norris, Hull et al. (Bristol, 2024); Stirling study of post-diagnostic peer support; Healthwatch Gateshead (2026), which concluded that diagnosis alone does not lead to meaningful support.

What's missing, in people's own framing

MISSING PIECE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	EVIDENCE
Somewhere to land	A clear pathway in the weeks after diagnosis, so no one leaves with only a report	Healthwatch Gateshead; Trinity College Dublin
Support while waiting	Information, groups and practical help during waits that can last years	NHS England ADHD Taskforce
Clinicians who recognise adults, and women	GPs trained to spot ADHD; fewer anxiety-first misdiagnoses	Taskforce; CADDAC; ADHD UK
Menopause and ADHD in one room	Clinicians who treat hormones and neurodivergence together	Iceland cohort; King's College London
Room for grief	Therapy that addresses identity and loss, not only symptoms	Qualitative syntheses, 2025–26
Fair access	An end to the two-tier system where private assessment is the fast lane	Taskforce; Australian Senate inquiry
Older adults seen	Assessment that distinguishes ADHD from early dementia after 60	Nadeau; clinical reviews
Recognition beyond the Anglosphere	Trained clinicians and stigma reduction in Africa, South Asia and East Asia	South Africa, Kenya, Japan, India research

The cruel paradox

Em Rusciano put it plainly to Australian senators: "*You asked a lot of us to overcome our disability*" just to make a submission. It is the paradox at the heart of adult diagnosis. The very traits being assessed, the trouble with forms, deadlines, phone queues, waiting rooms and follow-ups, are the ones the system demands you overcome to be assessed.

For women in midlife it compounds. They arrive at appointments after decades of being told they are anxious, too sensitive, too much, or simply tired. They are often doing the advocating for their children at the same time. And they may meet clinicians who still picture ADHD as a hyperactive schoolboy, a scepticism the 2026 synthesis found was sharpest for late-diagnosed women.

Across the Senate submissions in Australia, the Healthwatch polling in England and the CADDAC surveys in Canada, people describe the same exhausting tasks: finding a referral route, affording a private assessment, getting a diagnosis recognised by an employer or a university, and finding medication supply and follow-up.

What helps, people say, is not more resilience. It is someone alongside. A partner who comes to the appointment. A friend who has been through it. A group where someone shares the script that worked with their GP. An employer who offers adjustments without being asked to see the paperwork twice.

Bring a witness

Several people describe a partner, parent or friend corroborating childhood history as the turning point in being believed.

Write it down first

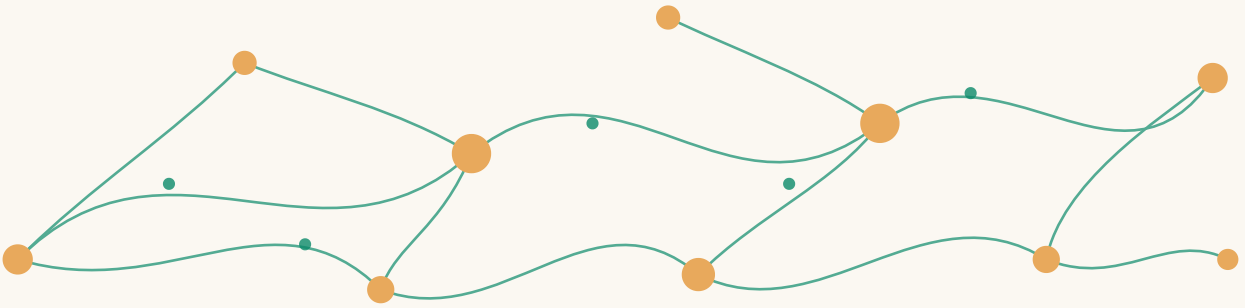
Notes on school reports, past misdiagnoses and hormonal patterns make a short appointment count.

Borrow a script

Peer groups pass on what worked: wording for GPs, workplace requests, menopause clinics.

> *"What if she wasn't careless? What if she was struggling?"*
>
> SANDRA NZIOKI, KENYA, ON WOMEN'S LATE ADHD DIAGNOSIS

More medicine than anything



Ask what helped most and, again and again, people name other people. The therapist who did not need it explained. The late-diagnosed friend Natalie Stechyson credits alongside therapy and exercise. The online community that a Texas writer called like finding their people. ADDA members describe it simply as a place to belong after years of feeling weird.

The research has started to catch up with what support group members already know. A 2026 Frontiers study of large adult ADHD Facebook groups found they work as safe spaces that provide informational, emotional and social support, fostering belonging and reducing isolation. Earlier work found online communities helped adults accept their diagnosis and validated their experience. A 2022 study linked peer support to protection from depression and anxiety. When autistic adults are asked what they want after diagnosis, peer support is at the top of the list.

Why might a group do what a prescription cannot? The stories suggest three reasons. A group ends the isolation that made the struggle feel like a personal failing. It offers living proof that a good life is possible on the other side. And it turns private shame into shared, often funny, recognition, the kind Elyse Myers built a following of millions on.

There are cautions worth naming lightly: clinicians warn against diagnosing anyone online, and social media can amplify misinformation. The best groups seem to hold both, warmth and good information, side by side.

Belonging

reducing isolation and loneliness

Validation

accepting the diagnosis, feeling seen

Strategies

body doubling, scripts, systems that work

Eight openings for anyone who wants to help

Each one maps to a gap named in these pages. None needs a clinic. All of them are things people with lived experience are already doing, here and there, and could do more of.

1 **The first ninety days**

Small circles for the newly diagnosed, built around the relief, grief and re-reading season. The period researchers say is least supported.

2 **Midlife and menopause circles**

Women navigating perimenopause and late diagnosis together, perhaps with a menopause-literate clinician as an occasional guest.

3 **Support while waiting**

Groups open to people still on a waiting list or self-identifying, as many ADHD peer groups already are, with clear guidance that a group cannot diagnose.

4 **Partners and families**

Sessions for the people who love the newly diagnosed, since so many describe the diagnosis as making sense to "those who love me" too.

5 **Over sixty**

A space for people diagnosed at 60, 65, 71: a cohort growing fast and almost entirely unserved.

6 **Sensory-gentle formats**

Not every tribe meets well on a busy video call. Walking groups, quiet outdoor gatherings, cameras-off chats and text-based threads let more people in.

7 **Workplace translation**

Helping employers understand adjustments, and helping employees ask, bridging the gap between a diagnosis on paper and a working day that fits.

8 **Story as medicine**

Collecting and sharing everyday stories, not only celebrity ones, so the next person in a GP waiting room recognises herself sooner.

What the best peer spaces seem to have in common

No judgement
Lateness, chaos and tears are normal here.

Lived experience
Led by people who have walked it.

Good information
Warmth alongside reliable sources.

A place to start
A clear, low-effort first step in.

PLACES TO START

A starting directory

COUNTRY	ORGANISATION	WHAT THEY OFFER
UK	ADHD UK · adhduk.co.uk	Information, research, campaigning; no government funding
UK	ADHD Foundation	Neurodiversity charity; awareness and training
UK	The Hidden (formerly The Hidden 20%) · hidden20.org	Charity and podcast founded by Ben Branson to change how the world sees neurodivergence
UK	National Autistic Society · autism.org.uk	Online community, services directory, information
UK	Autistica · autistica.org.uk	Autism research charity; lived-experience stories
Canada	CADDAC · caddac.ca	Awareness, advocacy and resources for all ages
Canada	CADDRA	Clinical guidelines for professionals
USA / global	ADDA · add.org	Adult ADHD peer support groups, including international groups
USA	CHADD · chadd.org	Peer support, education, ADHD 365 podcast
Australia	ADHD Australia; AADPA	Advocacy; professional guidelines
Global	World Federation of ADHD	International consensus and research

Listening and reading from these pages

ADHD Chatter (Alex Partridge) · The Hidden 20% podcast (Ben Branson) · I'm ADHD! No You're Not (Dr Mine Conkbayir & Paul Whitehouse) · *Now It All Makes Sense*, Alex Partridge · *Blood, Sweat and Glitter*, Em Rusciano · *Arriving Late*, Jodi Lamanna (late-diagnosed autistic women worldwide) · *The ADHD Field Guide for Adults*, Cate Osborn & Erik Gude

CLOSING

The name is not the destination. It is the lantern. It lets a person walk back through the rooms of a whole life and see them differently: the classroom, the first job, the marriage, the long tired years of trying harder. Then it lets them walk forward, slower perhaps, and with company.

If one thing runs through every story here, from a stage in Aberdeen to a school in Kerala, it is this: nobody found themselves alone. They found themselves in someone else's story, and then they told their own.

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Editor's note: our searches found no public statement of an adult ADHD or autism diagnosis from Davina McCall, so she appears for her menopause advocacy. Stephen Fry has said he later realised he struggled badly with ADHD and links it to his bipolar disorder; we found no record of a formal ADHD diagnosis, so he is described in those terms. Quotations are kept brief and attributed to the outlet where they appeared.

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ABOUT THIS FEATURE

Who wrote it, what it is not, and what you may do with it

Worth two minutes before you pass it on, particularly if you are passing it to a patient, a client or somebody you are worried about.

WHO WROTE IT

Valerie McIntyre-Baird, from Strathpeffer in the Scottish Highlands, November 2026. She is an executive coach and a certified forest therapy guide who spent twenty-five years in operations and transformation, and who was diagnosed with ADHD in midlife. She is not a doctor, a psychologist or a therapist.

WHAT IT IS NOT

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THE PEOPLE IN IT

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