ADHD

How an ADHD brain works,
and how to build a life that fits it.

Not a lack of attention.
Attention that is hard to steer.

A PLACE TO START

For adults who have ADHD, think they might, or love someone who does. Plain language, based on research, with every source named. The last pages show where to continue. Written by someone who is not a medical professional.

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Start anywhere

There is no right order. Go to the page you need today, and print only that page if you like. Every page stands on its own. On a phone, tap any line or box to type.

People use different words for themselves. I use the ones most people have told researchers they prefer, and yours are welcome here.

> If you only have energy for one page today: **The conditions your ADHD brain needs**, page 13.

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Understanding is the first act of care.

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ONE

What ADHD is

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It is a lifelong difference in how the brain regulates attention, motivation, and emotion. It used to be called ADD. It is there from childhood, even when it is only recognised much later.

The name is misleading. People with ADHD can focus deeply, sometimes for hours. The difficulty is **steering** attention: turning it on when something matters but does not interest you, and turning it off when it is time to stop.

HOW COMMON	A 2021 global review estimated that about 2.6% of adults have ADHD that began in childhood, and 6.8% have its symptoms.
WHERE IT SHOWS	Attention, activity, impulses, time, and emotions, in more than one part of life.
WHAT IT IS NOT	Laziness, a lack of intelligence, or a lack of caring.

You were never lazy. You were trying to run on a system built for a different engine.

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TWO

What it can look like in adults

ADHD looks different in every person. These are common ways it shows up. Tick the ones that feel familiar.

	Area	What it can look like
☐	Attention	Drifting in meetings, then hyperfocusing for hours on something else
☐	Starting	Knowing exactly what to do, and not being able to begin
☐	Time	Running late, underestimating how long things take
☐	Memory	Losing keys, forgetting appointments, walking into rooms and wondering why
☐	Restlessness	In adults, often inside: a busy mind that will not settle
☐	Impulses	Interrupting, saying yes too fast, buying on a whim
☐	Feelings	Big feelings that arrive fast, and take time to settle
☐	Freezing	Wanting to start, and feeling unable to, sometimes called ADHD paralysis
☐	Out of sight	Forgetting things, and even messages from people you love, once they are out of view
☐	Senses	Background noise and lights draining your energy fast
☐	Sleep	Your mind waking up at bedtime, or staying up late for time of your own

This is not a test, and it diagnoses nothing. Many of these happen to everyone sometimes. In ADHD, they happen more, in more places, and get in the way of life.

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THREE

Three presentations

Doctors no longer use ADD as a separate diagnosis. Instead, ADHD is described in three presentations. Yours can change over your life.

Presentation	What it can look like
Mostly inattentive (once called ADD)	Daydreaming, forgetting, losing things, struggling with steps, feeling foggy. Because it is quiet, it is the most often missed, especially in girls and women.
Mostly hyperactive and impulsive	Restless inside or out, fidgeting, talking fast, interrupting without meaning to, snap decisions
Combined	Some of both

WHAT I RECOGNISE IN MYSELF

Quiet ADHD is still ADHD.

FOUR

An interest-based nervous system

The psychiatrist William Dodson, writing in ADDitude magazine, describes the ADHD nervous system as **interest-based**, not importance-based. Most people can get going because a task is important. Many people with ADHD cannot, until one of these four sparks is lit.

Interest	Challenge	Novelty	Urgency
It fascinates me	It is hard enough to be a game	It is new	The deadline is now

This is why you can stay up all night on a project you love, and still not post a letter. It is not a choice, and it is not a character flaw.

The trick is to add a spark on purpose: make it a game, do it somewhere new, set a timer, or do it beside someone.

WHAT LIGHTS ME UP

A DULL TASK, AND THE SPARK I COULD ADD TO IT

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FIVE

Now, and not now

Many people with ADHD describe time in two kinds: **now**, and **not now**. A deadline next week can feel as far away as next year, until suddenly it is now.



This is sometimes called time blindness. The answer is not to try harder. It is to make time visible.

See it

An analogue clock, a timer you can see, a wall calendar.

Shrink it

Break the deadline into smaller deadlines that land sooner.

Buffer it

Add half again to every estimate.

Hear it

Alarms for leaving, not only for arriving.

SIX

Women, and late diagnosis

For a long time ADHD was seen as a boys' condition: the child who could not sit still. Many women were missed, and only recognised in their thirties, forties, or later.

A 2020 expert consensus found that ADHD in girls and women is often quieter and turned inward, and easily mistaken for anxiety or depression.

Often seen	Often missed
Anxious, overwhelmed, tired	A brain working much harder to keep up
Perfectionist, people-pleasing	Years of masking to avoid mistakes
Talkative, daydreaming	Attention that drifts, not a lack of interest
Worse before a period, or in perimenopause	Hormones that affect how ADHD feels

A late diagnosis can bring relief, grief, anger, and a new story about your whole life, all at once. All of it belongs.

There is more on this in *After the Name*, and in *Menopause*, free on my site.

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SEVEN

After a late diagnosis

Many adults are diagnosed in their thirties, forties, fifties, or later, often when a big change, such as parenthood, a promotion, burnout, or perimenopause, overwhelms the ways they used to cope. A late diagnosis rarely brings one feeling.

1. ### Relief
   Decades of feeling broken or lazy suddenly make sense.
2. ### Grief and anger
   For your younger self, and for what might have been different with support.
3. ### Working out who you are
   Which parts are you, and which were survival masks: people-pleasing, perfectionism, over-preparing.
4. ### Frustration
   Waiting lists and forms are hard, when paperwork is the very thing you struggle with.

All of these belong. Many people hear for years that they have so much potential, if only they would apply themselves. That message leaves shame behind. It was never the whole truth.

WHAT I AM GLAD TO KNOW

WHAT I AM GRIEVING

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EIGHT

ADHD and your hormones

Oestrogen helps the brain use dopamine. When it rises and falls, many women say their ADHD feels different. The research is still young, and it does not yet agree on everything.

When	What many women describe
The week before a period	ADHD traits stronger; mood lower or more volatile
Pregnancy	Sometimes a little easier
After birth	A sharp drop, and a hard time
Perimenopause	Strategies that worked for decades stop working. A common time for a first diagnosis.

Some women on ADHD medication find it seems less effective before a period or in perimenopause.

Track it

Focus, mood, sleep, and your cycle, side by side, for a few months.

Tell both

Your ADHD prescriber and your doctor, so care is joined up.

Ask about HRT

Whether treating perimenopause might help the rest too.

Review medication

Ask your prescriber whether the dose, timing, or type should change.

There is more in *Menopause*, free on my site.

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NINE

Big feelings

Many people with ADHD feel emotions quickly and strongly. Researchers call it **emotional dysregulation**, and it is now widely recognised as part of adult ADHD.

Some people also describe **rejection sensitivity**: intense pain at criticism, or even the idea of it. It is not a formal diagnosis, but the experience is very common.

- [ ] Going from calm to furious in seconds
- [ ] Crying at a small criticism
- [ ] Replaying a conversation for days
- [ ] Saying yes to avoid letting people down
- [ ] Quitting before anyone can reject me
- [ ] Feeling everything, all at once

WHAT HELPS ME COME BACK DOWN

Big feelings are not too much. They need somewhere wider to land.

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TEN

What can help

UK guidance (NICE) recommends that adults with ADHD are offered information and support, adjustments to their surroundings, and treatment. Which mix is right for you is a conversation with a clinician.

Kind of help	What it is
Understanding	Learning how your ADHD works, for you and the people close to you
Adjustments	Changes at work, study, or home that fit how your brain works
Coaching and therapy	Practical skills for time, planning, and feelings, often based on CBT
Medication	Stimulant and non-stimulant medicines can quiet mental noise and help focus. They have benefits and side effects to weigh with a doctor.
Community	Others with ADHD, in groups or online, who understand without explaining

For many people, medication helps them stay engaged once they start, but it does not create the spark. That is why the conditions matter too.

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ELEVEN

The conditions your ADHD brain needs

A second brain

Lists, calendars, and notes, outside your head, where you will see them.

Company

Working beside someone, in person or online. Some call it body doubling.

Visible time

Clocks, timers, and alarms you can see and hear.

A spark

Interest, challenge, novelty, or urgency, added on purpose.

Movement

Walking, fidgeting, standing. Movement helps focus.

Sleep

ADHD and sleep often fight. Protect it.

One thing

Close the other tabs, on screen and in your head.

Kindness

Shame never helped anyone start. Kindness does.

A launch pad

One place by the door for keys, wallet, and bag.

Pair it

A podcast while cleaning. Music while filing.

Five minutes

Just start for five minutes. Starting is the hardest part.

Good enough systems

Clean clothes can live in a basket. Save your energy for what matters.

THE ONE I WILL TRY THIS WEEK

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TWELVE

My owner's manual

Dodson suggests every person with ADHD writes their own owner's manual: how and when you do well, so you can set those conditions up on purpose.

I DO MY BEST WORK WHEN

I GET STUCK WHEN

WHAT GETS ME STARTED

WHAT HELPS ME FINISH

WHAT I NEED PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND

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THIRTEEN

Asking for what fits

With a doctor

If you think you have ADHD, describe how it shows up now and in childhood, and ask for a referral for an adult assessment. Ask how long the wait is.

At work

Written instructions, deadlines broken into steps, a quieter space, flexible hours, check-ins that help you start.

At home

Shared calendars and lists, and a kind word for the things that slip.

With yourself

Build the life around the brain, not the brain around the life.

> THREE SENTENCES
>
> "I do my best work when tasks are written down with a clear first step. Verbal requests in passing tend to slip. Could we keep a shared list, and agree my priorities each Monday?"

WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

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FOURTEEN

Where to continue

This guide is a place to start. Here is where to go next.

TO READ MORE

ADDitude magazine (additudemag.com), written for adults with ADHD and families. Your national health service's website, and your national ADHD charity. From me, free: *After the Name*, *Neurodiversity*, *Your brain*, and *Neurodivergence at work*.

TO FIND SUPPORT WHERE YOU LIVE · WORDS TO SEARCH, ADDING WHERE YOU LIVE

What you are looking for	Words to search
Assessment	*adult ADHD assessment [your country] · ADHD referral adults*
Others like you	*adult ADHD support group [your area] · ADHD women's group*
Practical help	*ADHD coach · ADHD-informed therapist · body doubling online*
At work	*reasonable adjustments ADHD · workplace needs assessment*
If you are in perimenopause	*ADHD and menopause support*

WHAT I FOUND, AND WHO I WILL CONTACT FIRST

If you are struggling tonight and cannot wait, please do not sit with it alone. In Scotland, 111 reaches the NHS 24 Mental Health Hub at any hour, and Samaritans are on 116 123, free, day or night. In the United States and Canada, call or text 988. Anywhere else, findahelpline.com lists the lines that operate in your country. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

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Where this comes from

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Why it is free

So many of us found out late, and spent years thinking we were simply not trying hard enough. This guide is yours to keep, print, and hand to someone.

I am not a medical professional. This guide diagnoses nothing and is not medical advice. If something in your body or mind worries you, please see a doctor.

Valerie McIntyre-Baird