

WOMEN, HORMONES AND NEURODIVERGENCE · 11.1

How ADHD and Autism Present Differently in Women and Girls

ADHD and autism in women and girls have been systematically under-recognised for decades. The criteria were built around how the conditions present in boys, and the result has been a generation of women whose diagnosis was missed entirely or rebadged as anxiety, depression or an eating disorder.

FOR

Women, girls, and parents of girls

AUDIENCE AGE

All ages

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

How ADHD and Autism Present Differently in Women and Girls

Why the picture has been missed

- **The gap is in recognition, not in underlying rate.** For the same level of symptoms and impairment, girls are significantly less likely than boys to be clinically diagnosed and prescribed (Mowlem 2019). The under-recognition is structural, not statistical.
- **The boy-shaped template misses the girl-shaped picture.** Most older research, criteria and clinical templates were built around how ADHD and autism present in boys. The girl in the back daydreaming, the girl with intense friendships and a quietly unusual special interest, does not trigger the boy-template referral.
- **Co-occurring conditions often present first.** Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, PMDD, self-harm and substance use are frequently the front door to clinical contact. The underlying ADHD or autism often sits unidentified behind them for years.

How it actually shows up

- **ADHD often inattentive, often internalising.** Daydreaming, slow processing, perfectionism that pays for the executive function difficulty, anxiety as the visible front, hyperactivity that has gone inwards as racing thoughts and restlessness.
- **Autism often expressed as social camouflage.** Watching, mimicking, scripting the social rules by deliberate study from a young age. Restricted interests that look socially acceptable (animals, books, social media, psychology) rather than the trains template.
- **Sensory and emotional load managed privately.** The cost is often paid in fatigue, withdrawal and burnout rather than in visible meltdown. The girl who appears socially competent is often the one paying the highest masking cost.
- **Adolescence is often the inflection point.** Academic load increases, hormonal change interacts, the cost of the compensatory strategies becomes harder to absorb. Many adult women describe their teenage years as the time the picture stopped working.
- **Late recognition follows a recognisable arc.** Relief and recognition, then grief for what might have happened with earlier diagnosis, then reorganisation, then integration. Months and years, not weeks. Not pathological; it is what re-reading several decades looks like.

How we can help

- **NHS GP route first; Right to Choose where useful.** Ask your GP about Right to Choose, well established for adult ADHD in England, increasingly available for adult autism.
- **Private assessment for women, where the NHS wait is not workable.** NeuroFX offers adult ADHD assessment for women, with clinicians experienced in the female presentation, and adult autism assessment for women.
- **The rest of this category covers the hormonal axis.** Menstrual cycle, PMDD, perimenopause, pregnancy, menopause. Symptoms vary across the life course and the variation is real and clinical, not imagined.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if you are recognising yourself in this picture and want to start the NHS pathway. Ask explicitly about the Right to Choose pathway for ADHD (and increasingly for autism). For private assessment, NeuroFX offers adult ADHD assessment for women and adult autism assessment. For mental-health crisis at any point in the recognition or post-diagnostic phase, NHS 111 (mental health option), Samaritans 116 123, or 999 / A&E for immediate risk.

SOURCES

Hinshaw 2022; Mowlem 2019; Quinn & Madhoo 2014; Hull 2017; Bargiela 2016; Lai 2015; Faraone consensus 2021; NICE NG87; NICE CG142

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
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