

# ADHD IN ADULTS

By Amanda Hampton

Jenna Tresidder was missing her party. On New Year's Eve, she sat alone in her bedroom, motivated by a far less glamorous countdown than the one her friends down the street were celebrating. She had hours left before her college application was due, and she'd only just managed to muster up the willpower to start it.

As someone who had always seemed to excel in school and prided herself on her organizational skills, Tresidder couldn't understand why she was unable to complete tasks before they became emergencies. She couldn't understand why her AP US History readings seemed to slide from her memory as soon as she reached the end of a page. She broke down on the floor of her room, thinking, I'm a senior in high school. Why can't I read?

Halfway through her senior year, Tresidder, now a student at Emerson College, was diagnosed with ADHD. At the screening clinic, she had more company than she'd expected.

"My whole family was diagnosed at the same time. My mom started doing some reading about what was going on, and thought that ADHD might be applicable to all of us in many ways," Tresidder says.

ADHD is a neurological disorder impacting the parts of the brain that help us plan, focus on, and execute tasks. Until recently, it was viewed as a disorder exclusive to childhood.

As the medical community's understanding of how symptoms evolve and differ between individuals has progressed, many adults like Tresidder and her parents are recognizing their ADHD symptoms for the first time later in life.



"Symptoms of ADHD are often overlooked even in children, and they often find ways of dealing with their symptoms enough to get into adulthood. Then they start having difficulties with work or with close relationships, and I think it's those things that prompt them to seek help and begin to identify with ADHD symptoms," says Eileen McBride, a clinical psychologist and professor at the Marlboro Institute.

Adult ADHD symptoms are often characterized by poor time management and concentration, procrastination, and forgetfulness, all of which can make school and the workplace tough to navigate. Symptoms like poor listening skills, trouble regulating emotions, and impulsivity can make relationships difficult as well.

Like many intelligent young adults with ADHD, Diego Villaroel, a Boston-area college student, coasted through high school with minimal effort. The trouble came when he got to college.





“This kind of self-doubt is common among adults with ADHD, according to McBride. Even in childhood cases, the disorder is too often attributed to boredom or a lack of effort.

“That gets even more difficult in adulthood because adults are more aware of how others view them and are probably aware that people are saying, ‘you don’t really have a disorder, you need to work harder,’ and I think that happens a lot in college-aged students,” says McBride. “I think people dismiss ADHD or don’t take it as seriously as they should because there’s a tendency to think it’s caused by too much social media or distraction or simply not trying hard enough.”

Adding another layer of complication, ADHD in adults looks different than it does in children.

However, widely held diagnostic standards often do not reflect this difference. The symptoms listed in the DSM-5 were developed for children, and this is reflected in phrases like “can’t play quietly” and “interrupts classmates.”

“I think as people get older, the hyperactivity and impulsivity fades or is suppressed or managed, so the focus on the adult assessment should be more on the inattention piece,” McBride says.

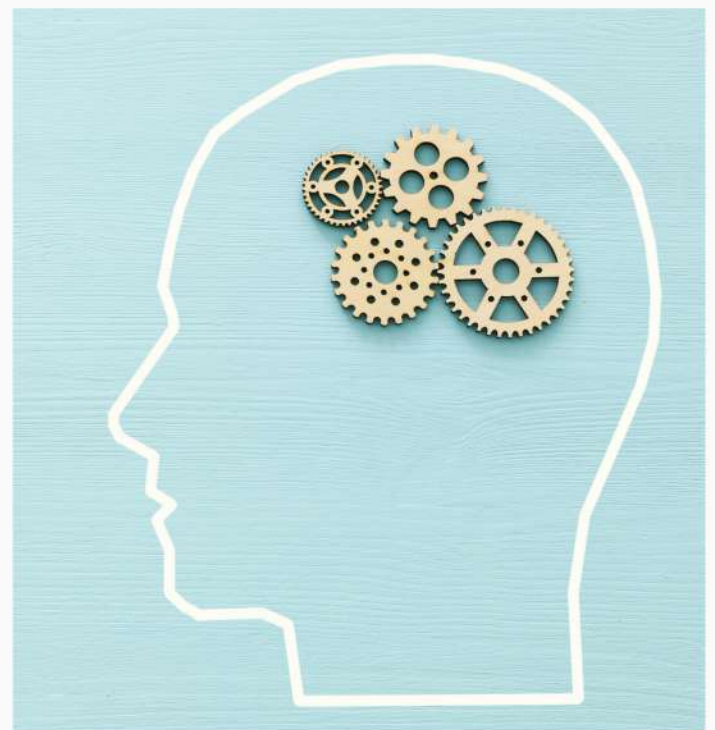
Gender also poses a major barrier for ADHD diagnosis and treatment. The disorder impacts all genders, but outdated stereotypes and the frequent differences in the ways ADHD presents in girls and women have left many women undiagnosed well into adulthood.

“I think I’ve actually had someone tell me it’s not possible for me to have ADHD because I’m a girl,” Tresidder laughs.

McBride raises the idea of internalizing vs. externalizing disorders, explaining that internalizing is more associated with girls and women. This has its roots in childhood—girls are far more likely to cover up and compensate for their symptoms.

“Because of how we socialize girls and the expectations we have of them, when they feel unhappy or have difficulties they tend to turn that in on themselves and blame themselves. That might come out in depressive symptoms. Girls are socialized to pay more attention to others so they feel more pressure to manage their behavior, listen more carefully and don’t show symptoms so clearly in childhood and that continues into adulthood as well,” says McBride.

Typical symptoms for adult women may include forgetfulness, daydreaming, and disorganization—not exactly what you’d ascribe to a stereotypical ADHD case, which is usually embodied by a loudmouthed boy making trouble in the classroom.





A professional diagnosis can make a huge difference in the lives of those with untreated ADHD. People who were diagnosed later in life acknowledge the stigma and confusion that can come with a late stage diagnosis, but encourage those who feel they may be exhibiting ADHD symptoms to get screened.

“When I was diagnosed, I was really relieved. It made it not about me, Jenna Tresidder, being a problem, it made it, ‘I have this thing and it causes these symptoms and so I do these things.’ I was definitely going through a phase where I was like, oh god, I can’t read a book and I’m a junior in high school, what happened? But then I realized there was a reason for it and that meant there was something I could do about it,” says Tresidder.

Villaroel agrees, saying, “I definitely think that since being diagnosed I’ve been able to pinpoint a lot of areas where I can work on changing my thinking and trying to create better habits for myself.”

Left undiagnosed, ADHD can sometimes lead to an escalating series of symptoms and behaviors that could have been avoided if left untreated. This is illustrated by a troubling statistic: ADHD is staggeringly overrepresented in prison populations, with a prevalence of 6-10 times higher than the general population. In most of these cases, the person was not diagnosed in childhood.

“That’s a real problem, and you can see how that ADHD impulsivity issue and risk-taking and failing in school and so on lead people to end up in that situation,” says McBride.



Of course, most people with ADHD do not go on to become criminals. If left unchecked, however, ADHD symptoms can lead to long-term risks beyond questionable decision-making. People with ADHD are also at higher risk for mood disorders like anxiety and depression.

McBride suggests doing your own research and familiarizing yourself with the symptoms of the disorder before putting your own behaviors into the context of ADHD. She recommends seeking out a psychologist for a screening if you identify with ADHD symptoms.

Now a successful honors student working on multiple film sets and preparing to write her senior-year thesis, Tresidder has one final piece of advice for adults who suspect they may have ADHD.

“It’s never too late to get tested, and there’s no harm in going to get tested. You don’t even have to pursue anything with it, but it opens up so many opportunities for learning more about yourself and your life and it might be able to help you overcome certain obstacles that are making things challenging for you,” she says.