ADHD in Women: not diagnosed till later in life

You remember everything you were supposed to do, and still forget to do it. You work twice as hard as everyone around you and feel half as accomplished. You've been called "scatterbrained", "emotional", or "too sensitive" so often you've started to believe it. You've wondered if you might have ADHD, then talked yourself out of it because you don't match the stereotype of the hyperactive little boy who can't sit still. If this resonates, you are not alone (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Martin, 2024.

Women with ADHD are late to Recognise it in Themselves

ADHD in women looks different from the textbook description, and that difference has meant decades of missed diagnoses and unnecessary suffering. Girls and women with ADHD are often underdiagnosed due to subtle, inattentive symptoms and masking. Hormonal changes can also worsen ADHD in women (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Kooij et al., 2025).



Why ADHD in Women presents Differently

- **Less visible hyperactivity:** Women's restlessness tends to be internal, racing thoughts, mental chaos rather than the physical motor hyperactivity that teachers flag immediately in boys (Zambo, 2008).
- **More inattentive presentation:** Daydreaming, mind-wandering, difficulty sustaining focus, quieter and less disruptive than hyperactive behaviour (Bauermeister et al., 2007).
- **Greater tendency to mask:** Social conditioning teaches girls to manage their behaviour more carefully. Many women with ADHD become expert at appearing organised and capable while internally struggling enormously (Butura, 2025; Martin, 2024)
- **Stronger social motivation:** Girls work harder to maintain friendships and fit in, using their social intelligence to compensate for ADHD difficulties (Williams et al., 2025).

Signs of ADHD that are Often Missed in Women

- **Chronic overwhelm:** The sense that there is always too much to manage and no idea where to start — not occasional stress, but a permanent baseline state (

Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).

- **ADHD paralysis:** Being completely unable to begin a task despite knowing it is urgent and important (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).
- **Time blindness:** A genuinely different perception of time, being chronically late, or losing hours in a task without noticing (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).
- **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD):** Intense emotional pain triggered by perceived rejection, criticism, or failure — a sudden wave of shame or devastation that is highly characteristic of ADHD (Williams et al., 2025).
- **Inconsistency:** Brilliant, highly productive days alternating with days where completing basic tasks feels impossible (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).
- **Hyperfocus:** The ability to become completely absorbed in a genuinely interesting task while being unable to engage with tasks that are merely important (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).
- **Exhaustion:** The relentless effort of managing symptoms, compensating for deficits, masking, and holding everything together takes a significant toll (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Martin, 2024).

Masking and Its Consequences

Masking, the effortful act of hiding ADHD symptoms, is protective in the short term but costly in the long term. Many women who have masked successfully for years describe ADHD burnout: a collapse of functioning following a period of sustained, effortful compensation. Many also describe a profound sense of relief when they finally receive a diagnosis, the feeling that they have an explanation, not an excuse (Butura, 2025; Williams et al., 2025).

Hormones: The Hidden Factor

Oestrogen directly modulates dopamine function in the brain. Because ADHD is fundamentally a condition of dopamine dysregulation, oestrogen levels significantly affect ADHD symptom severity in women. Many women notice:

- **Premenstrual worsening:** ADHD symptoms significantly more difficult in the 7–10 days before menstruation (Kooij et al., 2025; Osianlis et al., 2025;

Antoniou et al., 2021).

- **Perimenopause:** Many women first seek ADHD assessment in their 40s when declining oestrogen causes their previously managed symptoms to become unmanageable (Kooij et al., 2025; Antoniou et al., 2021).
- **Postpartum:** The oestrogen drop after childbirth can precipitate or worsen ADHD symptoms, and may be mistaken for postnatal depression (Antoniou et al., 2021).

When Should You Seek an Assessment?

Consider seeking a formal ADHD assessment if you consistently experience difficulty completing tasks despite genuine effort; chronic disorganisation causing problems at work, home or in relationships; emotional reactivity that feels out of proportion; or a pattern of underachievement relative to your intellectual ability (Caputo, 2023; Quinn & Madhoo, 2014).

You don't need to have been disruptive at school to have ADHD. Many women with ADHD were quiet, well-behaved, even academic achievers — held together by effort, intelligence and compensatory strategies. The mask can hold for decades before the cracks show (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014; Martin, 2024).

See our adult ADHD assessment page for what is involved. If you are a parent, read about ADHD in girls.

Think you might have ADHD?

A formal assessment can bring clarity and open the door to effective support. BNC assesses adult women in Melbourne. and all over Australia by Telehealth. Contact us to discuss your situation.

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