



# UNDERSTANDING ADHD

*A Guide for Parents, Partners & Loved Ones*

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** ADHD is like having a different operating system in your brain. It's not broken—it's just not Windows when everyone else is running Windows. This guide explains what that actually means day-to-day.

## ► PART 1: HOW THE BRAIN ACTUALLY WORKS

### ① THE DOPAMINE DIFFERENCE (THE GAS PEDAL PROBLEM)

#### What Dopamine Does

Dopamine is your brain's "motivation chemical." It's what makes you want to do things, feel good when you finish them, and stay focused on boring stuff. Think of it as the gas pedal for your brain.

#### ⚡ THE PHONE BATTERY ANALOGY

**Normal brain:** Stays at 80-100% battery all day. Boring tasks drain it slowly. Easy to recharge with small wins.

**ADHD brain:** Starts at 40% battery. Boring tasks drain it FAST. Needs BIG stimulation to recharge (like a fast charger vs. a slow one).

**The Science:** People with ADHD have differences in dopamine receptors and transporters in the prefrontal cortex and reward pathway. This means their brains don't "hear" dopamine signals as clearly, and dopamine gets vacuumed up too quickly.

## ② EXECUTIVE FUNCTION (THE CEO PROBLEM)

### What Executive Function Is

Executive functions are your brain's "management system"—the CEO that handles planning, organizing, starting tasks, managing time, and controlling emotions.

#### ⚡ THE ORCHESTRA CONDUCTOR ANALOGY

**Normal brain:** The conductor (prefrontal cortex) keeps all the musicians (different brain areas) playing together smoothly.

**ADHD brain:** The conductor is there, but sometimes takes breaks, gets distracted, or can't hear all the musicians clearly. The orchestra still works—it just plays differently, sometimes chaotically.

### What This Looks Like Daily:

- Walking into a room and forgetting why you're there (working memory glitch)
- Knowing you need to do laundry but physically can't start (task initiation paralysis)
- Thinking a task takes 10 minutes when it takes an hour (time blindness)
- Snapping at small interruptions (emotional dysregulation)

These are documented executive function deficits in ADHD affecting working memory, time management, emotional regulation, and task switching.

### 3 THE DEFAULT MODE NETWORK (THE DAYDREAM PROBLEM)

#### What Is the DMN?

The Default Mode Network is the part of your brain that's active when you're daydreaming, mind-wandering, or not focused on a task.

#### ⚡ THE TV ANALOGY

**Normal brain:** When you need to focus, the "daydream channel" (DMN) turns OFF automatically. The "focus channel" turns on.

**ADHD brain:** The daydream channel keeps running in the background—even when you're trying to focus. It's like trying to watch a movie while someone keeps changing the channel every few minutes.

This is why people with ADHD can hyperfocus on interesting things (the DMN is finally quiet) but can't focus on boring things (the DMN keeps interrupting).

## ► PART 2: SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** Here's what the same situation looks like for a "neurotypical" (normal brain) person vs. someone with ADHD.

#### ● NORMAL BRAIN RESPONSE

- Sees boring task → Still does it
- Gets small satisfaction from completing small steps
- Can delay gratification (save dessert for last)
- Time feels consistent and predictable
- One interruption = minor annoyance
- Starting a task = just deciding to do it

#### ⚡ ADHD BRAIN RESPONSE

- Sees boring task → Brain literally won't engage
- Needs BIG stimulation to feel motivated
- Immediate gratification or nothing (eat dessert first)
- Time is elastic ("5 minutes" = 30 minutes or 2 hours)
- One interruption = entire focus shatters
- Starting a task = climbing a mental mountain

#### 🎯 THE KEY DIFFERENCE

A normal brain runs on **importance** ("This is important, I should do it").

An ADHD brain runs on **interest** ("This is interesting, I CAN do it").

This is why telling someone with ADHD "just try harder" or "this is important" doesn't work. Their brain literally can't use importance as fuel. It needs interest, urgency, novelty, or passion.

## ► PART 3: LATE DIAGNOSIS & THE GRIEF

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** Many adults—especially women—are diagnosed in their 30s, 40s, or even 50s. This creates a unique emotional experience that family members need to understand.

### WHY LATE DIAGNOSIS HAPPENS

ADHD was originally defined based on hyperactive young boys. Adults—especially women, people of color, and those without hyperactivity—were often missed.

Many adults spent decades being called:

- "Lazy" or "not trying hard enough"
- "Careless" or "disorganized"
- "Spacey" or "daydreamer"
- "Too much" or "difficult"

These are documented experiences from women with late-diagnosed ADHD, who reported being dismissed, criticized, and punished for symptoms that were actually neurobiological.

## THE GRIEF OF "WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN"

When adults get diagnosed, they often feel relief at first ("Finally, an explanation!"). But then comes grief.

*"I feel failed. Everything has been such a struggle my entire life and if I'd had help sooner, my life may have been a little happier."*

— WOMAN DIAGNOSED AT 30-39

*"I wish I had my life again but with a diagnosis. It makes me so sad to know how better life could have been. It breaks my heart and I struggle to move past that. I feel cheated."*

— WOMAN DIAGNOSED AT 40-49

### What they're grieving:

- The childhood that could have been easier with support
- Years of working twice as hard for the same results
- Relationships damaged by undiagnosed symptoms
- Career or education opportunities missed
- The shame they carried believing they were "broken"

Research shows 86% of women with late-diagnosed ADHD reported negative impacts on their sense of self, including self-criticism, low self-esteem, and shame.

## ► PART 4: WHAT ADHD LOOKS LIKE IN A 35-YEAR-OLD MAN

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** Imagine a 35-year-old guy named Mike. He's smart, funny, and caring. But his brain works like this:

## AT WORK

**What others see:** *"He's capable but inconsistent." "Great in meetings but misses deadlines." "Always scrambling at the last minute."*

### **What's actually happening:**

- He can hyperfocus for 6 hours on an interesting project, then can't start a 10-minute expense report
- He works late constantly because he needs deadline panic to activate his brain
- His desk is "organized chaos"—he knows where things are, but others see a mess
- He forgets meetings unless they're in his face (working memory gaps)
- He interrupts in meetings not to be rude, but because he'll forget his thought in 5 seconds

These patterns reflect documented executive function deficits in time management, working memory, and task initiation common in adult ADHD.

## AT HOME

**What his partner sees:** *"He doesn't care about our home." "He says he'll do things then forgets." "He's always on his phone."*

### **What's actually happening:**

- He genuinely INTENDS to do the dishes, but his brain won't "start" the task (task paralysis)
- He walked past the mail 10 times because each time, his brain said "later" (procrastination loop)
- He's on his phone because it's giving his brain the dopamine it craves (self-medication)
- He forgot your conversation because his working memory dropped it when the TV was on
- He feels intense shame about all of this, which makes him avoid talking about it

## ♥ IN RELATIONSHIPS

**What his girlfriend sees:** *"He's not present." "He forgets important things." "He gets frustrated so easily."*

### **What's actually happening:**

- He's "zoned out" because his DMN (daydream network) activated and he didn't notice
- He forgot your anniversary not because he doesn't care, but because time is "now" or "not now" to his brain
- He snaps when interrupted because his focus is fragile—breaking it feels physically painful
- He overcommits socially because he wants to please people, then crashes because socializing drains his low battery
- He may have Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria—feeling intense emotional pain from perceived criticisms that others wouldn't notice

## THE MASKING PROBLEM

By 35, most adults with ADHD have developed elaborate "masking" strategies—working twice as hard to appear normal, apologizing constantly, or hiding their struggles. This leads to chronic burnout and shame. When they finally get diagnosed, they're often exhausted from decades of pretending.

## ► PART 5: HOW TO ACTUALLY SUPPORT HIM

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** Now that you understand what's happening in his brain, here's what actually helps vs. what makes it worse.

## X DON'T SAY THESE THINGS

These phrases assume he can control his symptoms with willpower. He can't. His brain is structurally and chemically different.

- "Just try harder" or "You need to focus"
- "If it was important to you, you'd remember"
- "Why can you focus on video games but not this?"
- "You're being lazy" or "You don't care"
- "Everyone has a little ADHD"

## ☑ DO TRY THESE STRATEGIES

Work WITH his brain's wiring, not against it.

- **Make tasks interesting:** Add music, competition, or novelty to boring tasks
- **Create urgency:** Deadlines activate ADHD brains—use timers, not "someday"
- **Externalize memory:** Write things down, set alarms, use visual reminders
- **Break it down:** "Clean the kitchen" is overwhelming—"Put 3 dishes in the dishwasher" is doable
- **Protect his focus:** When he's hyperfocused, don't interrupt unless necessary
- **Validate the struggle:** "I know this is hard for your brain. That doesn't mean you're broken."

## THE "BODY DOUBLING" TRICK

Many adults with ADHD can focus better when someone else is just PRESENT, even if that person is doing something else. It's called "body doubling." Sit in the same room while he pays bills or does paperwork. Your presence provides external structure his brain lacks.

## 💬 COMMUNICATION TIPS

- **Get his attention first:** Say his name, make eye contact, THEN say the thing
- **One request at a time:** "Can you take out the trash AND call the plumber AND pick up milk" = he'll remember none of it
- **Write important things down:** His working memory is like a whiteboard that gets erased easily
- **Don't take forgetfulness personally:** He forgot because of brain wiring, not because he doesn't value you

## ♥ THE PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Think of it like this: If he had a broken leg, you wouldn't say "just try harder to walk." You'd help him find crutches. ADHD is invisible, but it's just as real. Your role isn't to be his parent or his boss—it's to be his teammate in figuring out what "crutches" work for his specific brain.

According to relationship experts, explaining ADHD using relatable analogies (like the "50 browser tabs" metaphor) and being honest about both challenges and strengths helps partners understand and support effectively.

## ► PART 6: THE GOOD NEWS

**THE SIMPLE VERSION:** ADHD isn't all struggle. Understanding his brain means he can finally work WITH it instead of against it.

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Understanding ADHD | For Families & Partners | Based on Current Research