

Focus on Focus:

Decoding ADHD in the College Setting



Focus Check-In

1 – Squirrel on Espresso

Everything is interesting. Except what I'm supposed to be doing.

2 – Wandering Cloud

Drifting through thoughts... I'll get there eventually. Maybe.

3 – Traffic Light

Green for a while, then red. Then... wait, where was I?

4 – Laser Pointer

Mostly on task—with occasional detours chasing shiny things.

5 – Zen Monk with a Planner

Calm. Centered. Checking things off like a legend.

Roadmap

Today's Goals:

- Understand ADHD beyond the stereotypes
- Build empathy through experience
- Learn how to support students in and beyond the classroom



When you hear the term
“ADHD” what comes to mind?



What is ADHD, really?

- ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition, not a character flaw
- Affects attention regulation, executive functioning, impulse control
- Often co-exists with anxiety, depression, or learning differences
- Impacts academic success, relationships, emotional well-being
- 🧠 ADHD is about regulation, not inability



ADHD: Myth or Fact?



- ADHD only affects children
- Students with ADHD just need to try harder
- ADHD looks the same for everyone
- ADHD is often undiagnosed in women

Best part of having ADHD

“I have a lot of ideas when challenges arise”

“I usually have multiple ways of looking at a problem and can lock in on tasks when needed.”

“On the flipside, the way that I am able to zone in on something that interests me or captures my attention once I start is really cool.”

Hardest part of ADHD

“Annoying people by changing the topic of conversation without realizing it, especially when they are discussing something of personal importance”

“Executive functioning tasks in the real world, juggling multiple things at once. I get them done, but my brain and body suffer because of the stress I’m under when there are many tasks at once. Shifting from one task to another before I feel it’s perfectly done.”

“Honestly, for me it was thinking that I was lazy for not being able to focus or start a task for work. I felt like something was wrong with me and that all of the work I had done to get my degree was a waste and that the people who had supported me along the way would be disappointed to see where I was because of my lack of ability to follow through with things.”

What is it like to be in your job with ADHD?

“I have a team with “Type A” people to support my difficulty staying on task. I am able to hold a lot of different pieces of information and access them, but I have to have backup systems for scheduling and logistics to avoid careless errors.”

“As a therapist with ADHD, having reminders, notes, and keeping all my digital and personal content in one place or very organized helps me! It also can be a really great way to understand my clients, have patience for them, or make recommendations!”

Anything you wish people without ADHD knew about ADHD?

"When I change topics or make a change from something we previously agreed on, it is not a reflection on how I value you or our previous time. I'm always thinking multiple thoughts at once."

"I wish people knew people with ADHD are not all the same. We all think, process, engage, and handle our lives differently. We're not all hyperactive. We have our own way of making things make sense, and also need support in ways that aren't always the most obvious, so it's great to ask how you can support someone with ADHD."

"Popular culture has really ruined our collective perception of ADHD. For the longest time, I remember thinking of it as the kid that was constantly bouncing off the walls and got in trouble in school. Although ADHD can look like an excess of energy and some of the behaviors caused by ADHD can be disruptive in classroom environments, it's a super reductive illustration. In women especially, it can be hard to detect because of our ability to mask it as high-achieving behaviors. As an immigrant, it was impossible to get regular medical attention, much less get screened for mental health issues at a young age which contributed to my lack of treatment until I became an adult. Sometimes, ADHD looks like the girl sitting in the corner reading a book at family reunions while her cousins play hide-and-seek. That same girl gets all of her homework done and then when she gets to college can't focus on her readings for class and thinks she isn't smart enough. It's super disorienting."

Watch: A Day in the Life of an Adult with ADHD



https://youtu.be/t32CK5t8d2Q?si=0_1QHfo4lrzdShhE

Charleston Shoe
Productions

Video Debrief



What was it like to watch that?

What feelings came up?

How might this relate to the student experience?

Strengths + Struggles

What challenges do students with ADHD face at your college/university?

What strengths do they bring?



Strengths + Struggles

Common challenges:

Time blindness & missed deadlines

Procrastination, perfectionism, or both

Emotional dysregulation

Difficulty prioritizing or starting tasks

Trouble with long lectures, note-taking



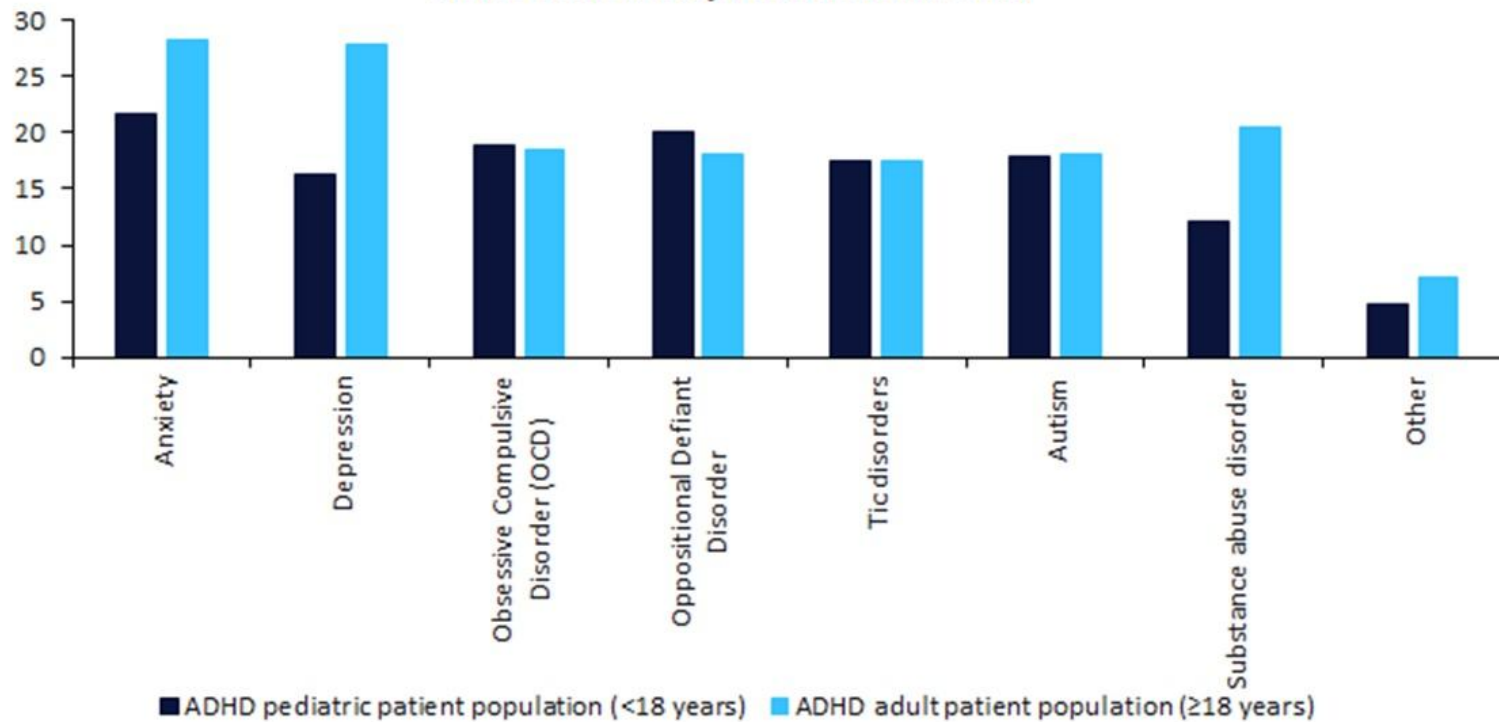
Positive aspects:

- ✓ Creativity
- ✓ Can focus for long periods on interests
- ✓ High energy & passion

Impacts on Functioning

- Tend to struggle in neurotypical peer relationships and settings
- Tend to struggle with limits/non-preferred tasks
- May see work performance slip
- Tend to present with “impulsivity” hyperactivity with adults
- Tend to be “withdrawn” or “spaced out” when inattentive symptoms
- May become overstimulated/anxious easily
- May see self-esteem difficulties
- Identity and role confusion/concerns with later diagnosis

ADHD comorbidity rate across the 7MM



Strengths-Based Support for Students with ADHD

1. Leverage Interests and Passions

💡 Support Strategy: Encourage choice in assignments, allow topic flexibility, or connect academic work to real-world interests.

2. Highlight Creative Problem-Solving

💡 Support Strategy: Offer open-ended projects, value divergent thinking, and recognize innovation even if it doesn't follow a linear path.

3. Offer Flexible Structures, Not Just Rigid Rules

💡 Support Strategy: Use visual syllabi, flexible deadlines (with boundaries), and multiple modes of participation or assessment.

4. Focus on Strengths Before Struggles

💡 Support Strategy: Use positive reinforcement, celebrate small wins, and provide feedback that highlights growth, not just correction.

Support Strategies by Role

Faculty: clear structure, chunked assignments, visual reminders

Counselors: time management tools, coaching mindset

Admin Staff: simplified forms, checklists, extra reminders

Whole College: reduce shame, educate others, inclusive culture



Integration

What's one thing you're taking away from today's conversation that will help improve the experience of students with ADHD?



Thank you!

Stay in Touch

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