Beyond The Label

Girls and Women with ADHD

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In One Hour…

- Introduction and overview of women with ADHD
- Highlight key issues from powerpoint – full powerpoint with list of resources available on the CADSPPE website
- 15 minute video featuring 3 women in a post-secondary women: their stories
- Question/Answer
This powerpoint is intended to stand alone to provide information not included in the presentation because of the limited time.

We hope the combined video, discussion and powerpoint will help to inform your work and to provide a catalyst for exploring resources and research in the area of women with ADHD in the postsecondary environment (and beyond).
The following slides are a compilation of descriptors and perhaps more unique qualities in girls and women with ADHD. They are meant only as a guide and are based on both student reflection in our work, as well as current research.

We first look at girls, and then at women. These are generalizations but are offered to provide examples of possible challenges and strengths of girls and women with ADHD.
Women with ADHD are finally being acknowledged as having unique traits which set them apart from our traditional understanding of ADHD.

Go to http://www.addvance.com/help/women/index.html for interesting information, resources and materials for people with ADHD and for practitioners working in the field.
Current DSM-IV criteria based on research focused on European boys does not "speak" as well to the more unique issues girls and women may experience because of ADHD. As a result, many girls and women may be under diagnosed or misdiagnosed.

Go to http://www.adhdcanada.com/ to read about the history of the emergence and understanding of ADHD.
Promise me you’ll always remember:
You’re braver than you believe, and
stronger than you seem, and smarter
than you think.

Christopher Robin to Pooh
Who Knew?
Several areas of the brain are affected by ADHD. The primary areas are:

**Frontal Lobes** (the boss of the brain)

**Inhibitory Mechanisms of the Cortex** (help us manage ourselves and our impulsivity and level of activity)

**Limbic System** (emotional police station)

**Reticular Activating System** (the attention centre of the brain).
Screeners and Checklists

There are many screeners and checklists available to assist practitioners in the field of ADHD but only a few probe issues more specific to women.

An excellent website for teachers, parents and other professionals is the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada (CADDAC) at http://www.caddac.ca/cms/page.php?50

An example is The **Self-Assessment Symptom Inventory (SASI)** which is a questionnaire developed specifically to screen women and girls for ADHD. Dr. Nadeau and Dr. Quinn developed this self-screener to supplement more formal investigation (not to replace formal investigation or DSM-IV based checklists). For more information go to: http://www.addvance.com/bookstore/women.html#gender
Possible Challenges of Impulsivity and Sensitivity for Girls with ADHD

- Whoops, I’m sorry…again!
- Speak &/or act without thinking
- Easily over-stimulated by sights and/or sounds
- Easily frustrated when needs are not immediately met
- Quick to become grumpy
- Overly sensitive to touch, taste, &/or smells
- Appear to become angry for no obvious reason
- Does not necessarily act out and so sometimes presents as just “moody”
The Flip Side of Impulsivity and Sensitivity for Girls with ADHD?

- Creative
- Enthusiastic
- Excited with life
- Hyper focused when stimulated (a bomb could go off and she wouldn’t notice!)
- Risk-Taker
- Sensitive to environment
- Heightened awareness to details around her
- Passionate about opinions and interests
Possible Challenges When Under Stimulated (lowered dopamine) for Girls with ADHD

- Distractible
- Sleepy in surprising situations (e.g., classroom, listening for long periods of time, kitchen table when eating, homework)
- Daydreamy
- “Turkey nod” (look like she is listening when she is not)
- Trouble getting ideas on paper
- Disorganized
- Loses and forgets things
- Cranky and argumentative
- Avoidance behaviours & may become oppositional
The Flip Side for Girls with ADHD when Stimulated?

- Be able to stay on task longer than expected, based on her other behaviours when under stimulated

- A joy to have around because she is engaged

- Can be quite organized on certain tasks which activate her attention (dopamine levels are increased)

- Drive her parents to distraction because she “seems” able to get things done on the one hand, but yet can’t seem to do “the simplest things” like put her socks away
Possible Challenges Socially for Girls with ADHD

- Dislikes school because of social issues
- Inattention to social cues leads to trouble relating to peers
- Tendency to hang out with younger children or adults
- Withdrawn, or “In your face”
- Moody and easily triggered
- Like a ghost in the classroom or,
- Speaks up too much and gets involved in issues that are not hers
- Misses subtle social nuances
The Flip Side for Girls with ADHD?

- May do well in school until a certain age/grade because she is either:
  - outgoing/gregarious (cute and fun), or
  - Perceived as quiet and polite (inattentive but well-behaved)

- Chameleon - friendly with everyone but does not actually have “one” group

- Engages easily

- Social Butterfly

- Gift of the gab

- Engages well with teachers/adults
Dopamine and Hormone Changes – Estrogen and Progesterone

Often girls are not diagnosed until teenagers (or later) because they don’t “show up” if they are not over-active or acting out, or if they are strong academically. Hormones can reek havoc on any person, but progesterone affects dopamine levels and this is even more problematic for a person with ADHD. In the luteal phase of each menstrual cycle, progesterone increases, and dopamine (the chemical required to help the pre-frontal cortex filter out distractions, manage impulsivity and general perform executive functions) decreases. Go to www.ADDvance.com for excellent articles on this subject.
Possible Eating Habits for Girls with ADHD

- Forgets to eat and then become so hungry she will eat too much

- Inattentive when eating food and may eat too much or reach for less healthy/quick foods

- May resist certain foods because of hypersensitivity to certain textures, smells or tastes

- Develop disordered eating behaviours which can lead to more serious issues later in life

An excellent and easy-to-read book actually directed at women with ADD:

Moving Into Adulthood – Under the Microscope
Possible Challenges of Distractibility for Women with ADHD

- Misplace/forget things (“where are my glasses/keys”) – not paying attention means not remembering…

- Anxious about keeping “things in their place” to cope and can become agitated with family when they don’t put things in the “right” place

- Distractible & misses important details (e.g. kid’s soccer game)

- Channel changer – bored easily

- Starts many projects but doesn’t necessarily finish them

- Forgets what she is doing - ”gerbil brain” – too many thoughts
Possible Challenges of Impulsivity and Sensitivity for Women with ADHD

- Over-stimulated/easily triggered
- May not plan ahead
- “Joy” seeker: risks = adrenaline rush! May self-medicate as well to calm nerves
- Perceived as “moody”
- Overly sensitive – often report heightened sense of smell
- Become angry for “no obvious reason” (according to those around her)
- Hard on herself – may refer to self as “perfectionist”
- Irregular eating – eat a lot or not at all
The Flip Side of Impulsivity and Sensitivity for Women with ADHD?

- Creative & entrepreneurial
- Enthusiastic and excited with life and possibilities
- Life of the party
- Hyper focused when stimulated and can get a lot done in a short period of time
- Risk-Taker and will try new things
- Sensitive to environment and may have a heightened appreciation for little details
- Heightened awareness to details around her
- Passionate about opinions and interests – can become a very strong advocate
Possible Challenges When Under Stimulated (lowered dopamine)

- Sleepy in surprising situations (e.g., meetings, listening for extended periods)
- Procrastinate until anxiety becomes “too much” then anxiety kicks in
- Chronically tired/cranky – feelings of depression
- Report feeling agitated/restless but also feeling stuck (not sure what to do with self)
- Self-deprecating/lowered self-esteem - “always screwing up & forgetting things”
- May fidget or have trouble sitting still to try and become more focused (common strategy is doodling while listening; eat for something to do)
The Flip Side when Stimulated?

■ “Super Woman” – often asked, “how do you do so much!?"

■ Involved in many activities to keep interest levels and stimulation up

■ Can be quite organized on certain tasks which activate her attention (dopamine levels are increased)

■ Sometimes described as a “whirlwind” and “amazing” when in the zone

■ Ability to maintain focus for very long periods of time – bomb could go off and she wouldn’t notice - immersed
Imposter Syndrome

Many women report that they feel as though they have to “keep a face” on at work and at home. In fact, many women report that their friends (not necessarily their family) and colleagues are often shocked when they disclose their frustration with organization/time management and attention/concentration. They hear responses like, “but you are so organized at work!” and, “you seem to be able to handle so much!”.

Women will report that by the time they have held it together for the day, they become “bears” in the evening and the effort to sustain mental focus makes it very hard to continue on with home life chores or evening activities.
Emotional Rollercoaster

Women may report chronic and longstanding feelings of anxiety “for no reason” or feeling low and moody. Some will even use the word “depression” to describe their feelings of frustration and confusion about their daily struggles. Of course these are the symptoms reported to their medical doctor, and often women will fit the profile of someone with a disorder within the depression or anxiety domains. However, if the woman actually has ADHD, often those feelings of anxiety and depression result from chronic disorganization and struggles with time management, and persistent issues with procrastination and fluctuating ability to attend and concentrate.
As a Result, Women May End Up With a Number of Diagnoses Before Landing on ADHD...some examples....

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Bi-Polar
- Personality Disorders
- OCD

Go to [www.ADDvance.com](http://www.ADDvance.com) for more information on this subject. Some women may have legitimate co-existing disorders (e.g. Anxiety disorder and ADHD) but the research is suggesting that women may be misdiagnosed because they present overtly with symptoms associated with anxiety, depression and so forth. This is why a thorough assessment is valuable, including a medical check-up. Physiological issues which can present as mimickers of ADHD can include low iron, thyroid issues, menopause, chronically low blood pressure...
Financial Issues

- Women may also report chronic and longstanding issues with money management.

- Some will explain they tend to spend impulsively (and then feel badly about it afterwards).

- Others disclose that they have not managed to balance their chequebook for years.

- In post-secondary, we see students who have to leave school because they have not managed their money, or have issues with part-time student loans (not paying them on time).
Interpersonal Relationships/Issues with Intimacy

The combination of everything we have discussed can lead to issues as an adult with relationships with family and friends.

A Comprehensive Guide to Attention Deficit Disorder in Adults: Research, Diagnosis, Treatment – edited by Kathleen Nadeau offers tremendous insight into specific considerations when diagnosing and working with women with ADHD.

This chapter in particular is worth mentioning:

Special diagnostic and treatment considerations for women with attention deficit disorder pp. 260 – 283.
Managing her schedule, planning for exams, focusing while studying, organizing her thoughts on paper, staying focused during exams, interacting with peers and professors are common challenges reported in post-secondary. Those women who have received a diagnosis and work with disability services have an advantage because they may be able to access funding for support services (e.g., Academic Strategist) and can work with their advisor or a counsellor to gain clarity regarding their strengths, her goals, and to develop her self-esteem and ability to appropriately advocate for themselves.
So Then What?

The understanding and awareness of the difference in how girls and women may present (and manage) ADHD is on the rise. More practitioners are becoming educated and professionals in the field are working very hard to adjust the ways in which we investigate and respond to girls and women with attentional issues. More books are being dedicated to intervention strategies – we have provided an extensive list of resources and **recommended readings** to help you develop your working knowledge of girls and women with ADHD, and how you may work with them in a post-secondary setting.
All learners can benefit from strategies helpful to individuals with ADHD which assist learners to focus and attend.

Go to http://www.caddra.ca/cms4/ for extensive resources for instructors, front-line professionals and medical practitioners.

As a general practice, provide all students with information about support services on campus, no matter what your role. Have it available in your office or classroom.
Take Away Two Thoughts?

Students have asked us to pass along these 2 thoughts to you:

- Please be very careful about using the term “ADHD” loosely to describe behaviours you see. Many people seem to feel comfortable using the label around and you may inadvertently deter the student from seeking further help. Describing what you see and then brainstorming possible resources and routes for exploration would make sense (learning strategy support, investigation with medical doctor, referral for a psychoeducational assessment, counselling…).

- Please don’t talk about medication unless you are a medical practitioner or are involved in the assessment. Students report they rejected the idea of ADHD because they felt medication was being “pushed” before they even had a diagnosis. You could be wrong. As mentioned, there are many mimickers of ADHD and requires a thorough investigation.
Recommended Readings and Resources


Go to [http://www.addvance.com/help/women/index.html](http://www.addvance.com/help/women/index.html) for excellent resources, materials and books focused on women and girls with ADHD (ADDvance); specifically this link to see excellent books written by well-known practioners in the field:

- [http://www.caddra.ca/cms4/](http://www.caddra.ca/cms4/)
- [http://www.chaddcanada.org/](http://www.chaddcanada.org/)
http://www.ldaa.net/articles/790.php


http://www.adhdcanada.com/


http://www.help4adhd.org/

http://www.addvisor.com/

http://adultadhdbook.com/

http://www.add.org