

Special Issues for Women with ADHD

By Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D.

To be better understood, ADHD in women needs to be looked at in a biological context (biological differences between men and women that affect ADHD) and in a cultural context (gender differences in social roles and social expectations and how those differences influence how a woman is affected by ADHD).

Biological Differences

In this article, we will address differences in social context and expectations with only a brief nod to biological differences that affect women. Those biological differences deserve our full attention and should be the focus of another article – in a nutshell, however, one of the major biological differences is estrogen levels in the brain and how fluctuation in estrogen levels (during the menstrual cycle) and the decline in estrogen levels (during perimenopause and after menopause). There is a small body of research that will hopefully grow that indicates that declines and/or fluctuations in estrogen can greatly increase ADHD symptoms, at puberty when estrogen levels start to fluctuate with menstruation, and throughout a woman’s adult life.

Cultural/Social Differences

As teenage girls with ADD (ADHD) enter their adult years the demands on them increase, making their ADD (ADHD) challenging as they struggle to cope with the demands of managing their own lives, working, and, for many, struggling to fulfill the roles of wife and mother. While both men and women with ADD (ADHD) must face these challenges, the impact of ADD (ADHD) upon women is sometimes greater due to differences in social expectations as well as hormonal differences between males and females. Let’s take a look at what some of those issues are for women with ADD (ADHD).

Being the support system instead of having a support system

For a woman with ADD (ADHD) her most painful challenge may be a struggle with her own overwhelming sense of inadequacy in attempting to fulfill the roles that she feels are expected of her.

Both on the job and at home, women are often placed in the role of caretakers. While men with ADD (ADHD) are advised to build a support system around themselves, women have access to such a support system. Society had traditionally expected women to be the support system.

Dual-career stresses

The struggles for women with ADD (ADHD) have been intensified with the emergence of "dual career couples." During much of the past two decades more and more women have been required to not only fulfill most if not all of the more traditional roles of wife and mother, but also to function efficiently and tirelessly as they juggle the demands of a full time career.

Single parenting

Divorce rates are close to fifty percent among all marriages in the United States. Divorce becomes even more likely when ADD (ADHD) is added to the list of marital stressors. Following divorce, it continues to be the mothers who are expected to be the parent. By adding ADD (ADHD) to the huge burden of single-parenting, the result is often chronic exhaustion and emotional depletion.

What can Women with ADD (ADHD) do to Improve Their Daily Lives? Give yourself a break!

Often the biggest struggle is an internal one. Societal expectations have been deeply ingrained in many women. Even when a loving husband says, "Don't worry about it," they continue to place demands upon themselves. Breaking out of a mold that doesn't fit can take time and effort. Psychotherapy with a therapist who really understands your ADD (ADHD) issues may be enormously helpful to shed impossible expectations that you may have of yourself.

Educate your partner about ADD (ADHD) and how it affects you.

Your partner may feel anger and resentment toward an ill-kept house or badly-behaved children, assuming that you "just don't care." They need to appreciate the full brunt of the impact of ADD (ADHD) in your life. Get your partner on your side, strategizing about ways to make your life at home more ADD-accommodating, and ADD-friendly.

It's only spilled milk!

Try to create an "ADD-Friendly" environment in your home. If you can approach your ADD, and that of your children, with acceptance and good humor explosions will decrease, and you'll save more energy for the positive side of things.

Simplify your life.

You are probably overbooked and chances are your children are too. Look for ways to reduce commitments so that you're not always pressed and hurried.

Don't hang around women who can't understand your problems.

So many women describe friends or neighbors who make them feel terrible by comparison whose houses are immaculate, whose children are always clean, neat and well-behaved. Don't put yourself in situations that will send you back toward impossible expectations and negative comparisons.

Build a support group for yourself.

One woman with ADD (ADHD) related that housework was such drudgery for her that she often couldn't bring herself to do it. One of her techniques, however, was to invite a friend, who shared similar tendencies, to keep her company while she completed some particularly odious task.

Build in "time-outs" daily.

Time-out's are essential when you have ADD (ADHD) and are raising children. It's easy to not find time for them, though, because they require planning. Make them routine so that you don't have to keep planning and juggling. For example, ask your partner to commit to two blocks of time on the weekend when they will take the kids away from the house without you. Arrange for a regular baby-sitter several times a week.

Don't push yourself into burnout.

One mother of two ADD (ADHD) children, who was doing a great job of parenting her children, was also able to recognize her limitations. With two such challenging children she arranged for summer sleep away camp for a month each summer. She also arranged for brief visits, one at a time, to

grandparents. This allowed her to spend time with each son without his having to compete with his brother.

Eliminate and delegate.

Look at things that you require of yourself at home. Can some of these things be eliminated? Can you hire someone to help you? Turn over certain tasks or activities to other family members.

Learn ADD-friendly child-management techniques.

On the outside looking in it may be easy for other parents to judge you if your children misbehave. But what any parent of a child with ADD (ADHD) knows is that they don't respond to the usual admonishments and limits in the same way that non-ADD (ADHD) kids do.

If you're raising a child with ADD (ADHD), you've got a super-challenging job. Get the best training you can find. There are numerous excellent books on behavior management techniques for children with ADD (ADHD).

Most important, look for a family therapist or parent trainer who understands how mothers with ADD (ADHD) are impacted. It's critical that the parenting advice you receive takes your own ADD (ADHD) into account! Here is another article on Moms and Kids with ADD (ADHD).

Get help for PMS or Menopausal Symptoms

They are likely to be more severe than in other women. Managing the destabilizing effect of your hormonal fluctuations is a critical part of managing your ADD (ADHD).

Focus more on the things you love.

There are many aspects of keeping a house and raising children which are rewarding and creative. Look for positive experiences to share with your children.

Look for people who appreciate the best in you.

Your world is probably full of people who are quick to judge you for your ADD (ADHD) struggles with disorganization and poor time management. It's important to actively seek out people who appreciate the best in you and who encourage you to be your best.

Don't measure your worth using someone else's yardstick!

When you march to the beat of a different drummer, others may think you're out of step. Don't get caught up in trying to meet the standards, or live up to the values of women who are very different from yourself. Instead of over-focusing on unmade beds and dishes left in the sink, take stock and celebrate things that matter more to you – such as warmth, enthusiasm, creativity, humor, sensitivity, and spirit!

Resources for women with ADD (ADHD):

Gender Issues and ADHD edited by Patricia Quinn, M.D. and Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D.

Understanding Women with ADHD edited by Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D. and Patricia Quinn, M.D.

Women with ADD by Sari Solden.

Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D. is an internationally recognized authority on ADHD and a frequent lecturer on the topic. She has a special interest in ADHD in woman and girls and was a 1999 CHADD Hall of Fame recipient for her work in this area. She is currently at work on a revision to her 1999 book, coauthored with Patricia Quinn and Ellen Littman, Understanding Girls with ADHD, which will be published later in 2014.