

ADHD: what it is, its impact on PhDs, and how to best support them

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Understanding ADHD

- ▶ Introduction:
 - ▶ ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) is a neurodevelopmental condition impacting the nervous system from childhood to adulthood.
 - ▶ Notably prevalent, affecting 3% of the world's population, ADHD poses significant challenges.

- ▶ Common Characteristics (symptoms) of ADHD Individuals:
 - ▶ Impulsivity
 - ▶ Hyperactivity
 - ▶ Distractedness
 - ▶ Difficulty following instructions
 - ▶ Challenges in completing tasks

Challenges of ADHD

- ▶ Common Challenges:
 - ▶ Time management
 - ▶ Concentration
 - ▶ Staying on topic
 - ▶ Rationality
 - ▶ Articulation

In spite of these challenges, individuals with ADHD also exhibit unique strengths, as we'll explore in the next slide.

Strengths of Individuals with ADHD

- ▶ Common Strengths:
 - ▶ Hyperfocus¹: extremely focused commitment to projects and tasks of interest, making individuals efficient.
 - ▶ Creativity
 - ▶ Enthusiasm²: bursts of speed, enthusiasm, and determination.
 - ▶ Innovation (impulsivity can lead to innovative ideas)

Note: No two individuals with ADHD will experience the same symptoms and traits/strengths.

¹Can also be a weakness if not harnessed properly.

²However, there are periods of low energy.

Impact on Doctoral Candidates and Responsibilities

Now that we know what ADHD is and its general impact, along with some of our strengths, we will move onto the more relevant topic of how it affects us (PhDs with ADHD), in particular:

- ▶ How are doctoral candidates with ADHD affected?
- ▶ What are the responsibilities we (the university and big academia) need to change, address, and adjust (within reason) to be more inclusive and to harness their strengths, rather than exploiting their weaknesses?

A Diversion: The Real Sad Truths

- ▶ If this were 2009 (or before), I, and any other student with ADHD would have been expelled from university **FOR HAVING ADHD**.

Personally, I was always so close to expulsion from elementary school for having ADHD.

- ▶ Big academia sees us as a nuisance, something they now have to include after the 2010 Equality Act, rather than genuinely support.

Now, let's delve into the specific impact on PhD researchers with ADHD.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD

ADHD challenges PhD researchers navigating through structured programs.

The more rigid, structured, and unrelaxed the environment is:

- ▶ the worse their ADHD symptoms will get,
- ▶ the worse their overall well-being will get,
- ▶ which, in turn, can and most likely will significantly affect academic performance.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

Academic programs being rigid and inflexible, forcing students to work in methods that have worked in the past (such as creating timetables, providing a road-map for scholarly work, and imposing strict deadlines) **ONLY** works for students **without** ADHD (**it can be stressful for them, but it can and will be done**).

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

The structured, inflexible regime and strict timelines will never work efficiently with PhD researchers with ADHD.

Imposing such conditions upon us is borderline cruel.

In essence, strict timelines and inflexible environments are daunting and, more often than not, will lead to increased difficulty and problems for PhD researchers with ADHD.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

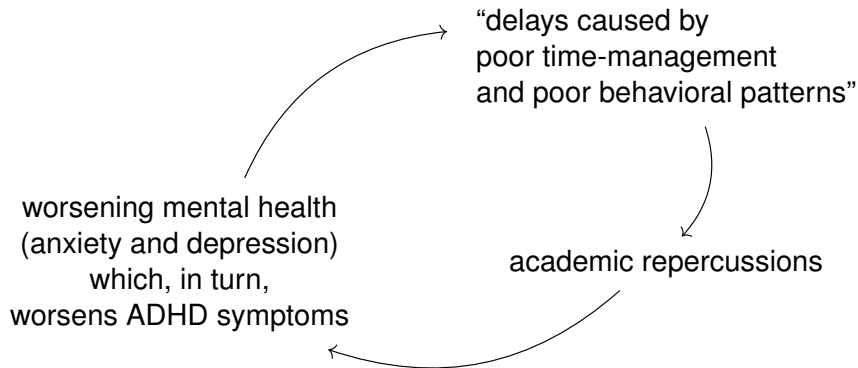
These rigid conditions can have dreadful academic consequences for PhDs with ADHD, affecting every part of their scholarly journey.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

The strict timelines and inflexibility of the university lead to the false appearance of “poor time-management” and “poor behavioral patterns,” which, in reality, are simply caused by ADHD (worsened by the strict and inflexible environment).

This ends up creating a vicious cycle (see next slide).

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)



Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

Collaboration is one of the most essential tasks of any PhD program (and in academic research, in general).

Key aspects of collaboration include:

- ▶ Group work, where each student engages in their own research.
- ▶ Coming together and discussing individual research.
- ▶ Finally producing a collaborative cohesive project.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

When it comes to working with PhD researchers with ADHD, it creates unique challenges to the dynamics of the group.

Such challenges may include:

- ▶ Inconsistent contributions (due to focus issues), leading to an imbalance in workload distribution and affecting the whole group.
- ▶ Tension among members can arise from hasty decisions or outspokenness (resulting from impulsivity).

This may end up affecting the overall relationships between PhD students.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

Doctoral students must maintain professional relationships that foster collaborative learning and research.

Challenges faced by PhD researchers with ADHD in professional relationships may include:

- ▶ Impulsivity and lack of focus leading to misunderstandings or conflicts.
- ▶ Challenges such as missed deadlines and subpar work.
- ▶ Strained relations with supervisors, impacting progression and overall research group productivity.

Impact on PhD Researchers with ADHD (cont.)

Negative interactions and conflicts with PhD researchers with ADHD lead to decreased opportunities for collaboration and reduced morale.

Social challenges can then have ripple effects on both personal academic career goals and the greater research community.

Personal Impact

- ▶ I experienced delays caused by “poor time-management and poor behavioral patterns.”
- ▶ Subsequently, my commitment and capability were questioned, impacting my progression.
- ▶ In reality, it was because of my ADHD and the inflexibility of schools and universities that caused chaotic situations which could have been easily diverted.

More on the impact

Rationality and articulation are other huge challenges for PhD researchers with ADHD, and this causes a significant emotional toll.

It's as if our brain is a separate entity, and has a say on what to focus on.

If we struggle to focus on a *seemingly simple* task (be it, academic or non-academic), it's because our executive function isn't working, not because we're lazy.

The stigma

- ▶ There has always been a stigma around invisible disabilities.
- ▶ ADHD, in particular, is one of the most stigmatised conditions.
- ▶ Because ADHD is a lifelong condition with continuous symptoms (that persists into adulthood): everyone around you may think your symptoms are just your personality; that you are simply 'lazy.'
- ▶ Symptoms of ADHD, which everyone experiences to some degree, might not seem severe to those without ADHD symptom levels, leading to a lack of recognition.

A dismissive comment ADHDers often hear is: “Everyone gets distracted sometimes.”

The stigma (cont.)

- ▶ ADHD is often misunderstood as an inability to focus, whereas it is more accurately described as a challenge in controlling what to focus on.
- ▶ The first documented case of ADHD was in the 18th century. So this is not new.³
- ▶ It wasn't until the '90s that ADHD was widely accepted as a legitimate diagnosis, thanks to neuroimaging studies revealing structural differences.⁴

³<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360641701002507>

⁴<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355617717000807>

Unhelpful and dismissive “advice”

- ▶ “Just set an alarm!”
Oh wow, an alarm! I bet no one with ADHD has ever tried that before.
- ▶ “Why can’t you just try leaving a bit early so you’re never late?”
Uh-huh...
- ▶ “You need to be more consistent!”
Right... did you miss the explanation of ADHD I just gave?

It’s just not that simple.

This kind of advice might work for neurotypicals, but for people with ADHD, it’s dismissive and harmful.

It forces us into masking—hiding our struggles to appear ‘normal’—which only leads to exhaustion and burnout.

To summarise what we learned so far:

- ▶ ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting individuals from childhood to adulthood, characterized by symptoms like impulsivity, hyperactivity, and difficulty with attention and focus.
- ▶ The rigid academic environment exacerbates ADHD symptoms, impacting well-being and academic performance.
- ▶ Social challenges and conflicts can lead to decreased collaboration opportunities and reduced morale.
- ▶ ADHD also poses challenges in rationality, articulation, and faces societal stigmas.

In addressing these challenges, a concerted effort from both parties is needed.

Supporting PhD individuals with ADHD (cont.)

- ▶ Acknowledging the unique challenges faced by PhDs with ADHD is imperative.
- ▶ Offering flexibility on timelines can create a more accommodating environment.
- ▶ Building open and honest communication with advisors and peers creates a support system, making it easier for students to navigate challenges.
- ▶ Engaging in collaborative discussions allows for the development of a personalised academic approach that considers the unique challenges posed by their ADHD.
- ▶ Students can benefit from personalised strategies.

Supporting PhD researchers with ADHD (cont.)

- ▶ Scheduling regular low-pressure check-ins between PhD researchers with ADHD and their advisors is also important. Here, you can assess progress, discuss challenges, and adjust strategies as needed. This helps foster a supportive and proactive academic environment.
- ▶ Other staff members and students within the university need to go through training to increase their understanding of ADHD. This will enhance communication and collaboration within the academic community; hence making it a more inclusive environment.

Conclusion

- ▶ ADHD does not mean you are incapable.
- ▶ You don't need to be fixed; academia needs to adapt.
- ▶ Your brain is wired differently, and that's not a weakness.

If you're a PhD with ADHD, know that you are not alone. Your struggles are valid, and you can succeed.

References

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