



Understanding your ADHD diagnosis

A guide for newly diagnosed adults

You just got diagnosed with ADHD as an adult. Now what?

First — this isn't new. You've likely had this your whole life; it just wasn't caught. A lot of adults, especially those who were quiet, high-achieving, or good at compensating, get missed as kids. Getting diagnosed now doesn't mean anything is suddenly wrong with you — it means you finally have a name and an explanation for things you've probably been struggling with for years.

Why does it look different in adults than in kids?

The hyperactive “can't sit still” image is mostly a kid thing. In adults, ADHD tends to show up as:

- Chronic lateness or trouble estimating how long things take
- Starting projects with enthusiasm, then losing steam
- Losing keys, phone, wallet — constantly
- Feeling mentally “restless” even if you're not physically fidgety
- Zoning out in meetings or conversations
- A lifelong pattern of “I know I'm capable, so why can't I just get it together?”

That last one is common — and it often comes with a lot of shame that built up over years before diagnosis. That shame isn't a personal failing; it's the natural result of struggling against something you didn't have a name for.

Why does this happen — what's actually going on?

Your brain's dopamine and norepinephrine systems — the chemicals that help with focus, motivation and follow-through — work a bit differently. It's not a willpower problem. It's closer to being nearsighted: you're not failing to try hard enough to see, your eyes just work differently, and glasses help.

What actually helps

1. Medication — usually the biggest lever. Stimulant medications (methylphenidate or amphetamine-based) work for most adults and often make a noticeable difference within days to weeks. Non-stimulants are an option if stimulants aren't a good fit for you (e.g. history of substance use, certain heart conditions).

2. Systems, not willpower — external structure works better than trying to force focus: alarms, calendars, body-doubling, breaking tasks into small pieces, and apps that track things for you.

3. Therapy — ADHD coaching or CBT tailored for ADHD can help address years of self-esteem hits and build practical routines.

One more thing

A lot of adults feel relief mixed with grief after diagnosis — relief because it finally makes sense, grief for the years spent thinking you were just lazy or broken. Both reactions are completely normal. You're not behind, you're not broken — you're just now working with the right map of your own brain.

This handout is for general education and does not replace personalised medical advice from your treating clinician.

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