

‘As the symptoms were listed, I thought: that’s me!’

As October is ADHD Awareness Month, we look at why women with ADHD are more likely to slip through the net, missing out on assessment and treatment.

It’s estimated that up to 75% of women living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are undiagnosed because they don’t meet the boisterous, hyperactive stereotype of ADHD behaviour. Research shows female symptoms can be more subtle and internalised, such as daydreaming or difficulty concentrating. For many women, the situation comes to a head in midlife when hormonal changes further complicate undiagnosed and untreated symptoms.

A new campaign called Staring Back at Me, initiated and funded by Takeda UK, aims to raise awareness about ADHD in women. Jen Rossiter and Clare McAleese are two of the campaign’s 11 ambassadors. Both were diagnosed with ADHD later in life and are sharing their stories in the hope that they help others recognise the symptoms, and see for themselves the positive impact a diagnosis can have.



Jen Rossiter, a 53-year-old business owner from Berkshire

When did you realise you had ADHD?

When my daughter was diagnosed with ADHD, I sat in the psychiatrists office with her, and as the symptoms were listed, I thought ‘That’s me!’ As I learnt more, it has become clear I’ve been displaying the symptoms all my life. Non-stop talking, fidgeting, unable to concentrate unless I’m really interested...

What were your symptoms?

I’ve lived with high anxiety all my life, but didn’t even realise. It was so normalised to me, I didn’t think there was any other way to live. I don’t know when to stop and have huge urgency, impulsivity and am unable to relax much.

I’ve called myself an achievement addict – with ADHD there is a high risk of addiction, because it gives you the dopamine hit, which is what we are all after. My hyperfocus is a strength as well as a weakness. If something interests me, I’m in 100%. Put me on a project and I’ll master it within days. I’m also very good at dealing with chaos. But I have probably tolerated stuff that wasn’t good for me for longer than I should, and that affects me as well.

My emotional regulation is poor at times and I have low self-esteem, even though I am a high achiever.

How has life changed since getting a diagnosis?

Through understanding my symptoms, strengths and struggles, I’ve got to know myself. It’s given me an incredible sense of identity and understanding of who I am. It’s given me reasons behind why I do things. I think I’m superwoman and can do everything! My strengths are risk-taking, innovative thinking and dealing with chaos and complex problems. My struggles are often overestimating what I can achieve – I feel I’ve got energy to do much more than there are hours available in the day.

How do you manage ADHD now?

I manage my symptoms by running, meditating and having good strategies around planning and organising. Nonetheless, I still forget appointments and get utterly lost in hyperfocus. I have numerous crazy ideas which I don’t always follow through on and am often awake at night, obsessed with the next idea or get fixated on something. I am definitely a workaholic and find it difficult to stop. I manage this by always doing some form of work every day to get a sense of accomplishment. I also take medication, which is extremely helpful.

Are you involved in helping others with ADHD?

Since my diagnosis I’ve been on a two-year journey from awareness to advocacy. In September I’m launching The Big 6, a coaching and mentoring programme for neurodiverse (ND) women in leadership in partnership with the University of Northampton. There’s a gender and ND crisis in the UK. There is a massive way to go, and this is only just beginning!



Clare McAleese was diagnosed aged 52. She works in financial services and lives in West Yorkshire

When did you realise you had ADHD?

We had our son assessed as things were spiralling at school for him. We sat down to complete the form together and I recognised most of the symptoms. There is strong scientific research that ADHD is hereditary, so there is a high chance that if you are the mother of a child with ADHD you may have it too.

The main reason I followed up on the diagnosis was that I was experiencing terrible bouts of anxiety. I was constantly feeling

‘I often feel like I have to work harder and longer to achieve results others seem to do with ease’



overwhelmed, and felt like my to-do list was never-ending.

Time blindness is one of the symptoms which impacts me in various ways, I am renowned for being late. I have problems planning and prioritising tasks, and also difficulty appreciating how complex a task maybe, which can lead to me taking on too much and left feeling overwhelmed.

Had you masked ADHD behaviours previously?

I would say self-esteem issues from school turned me into a people-pleaser. I'm a massive procrastinator, putting off tasks which would only take a few minutes and also have difficulty completing tasks, as I have a perfectionist tendencies and always get hung up on the details. I internalise feeling overwhelmed which has often led to awful anxiety.

At work, the office is open-plan and I would find myself tuning into other people's conversations and ending up leaving late so I could catch up when it was quiet. I often feel like I have to work harder and longer to achieve results others seem to do with ease.

'My diagnosis of ADHD has enabled me to look back at my life through a different lens and make sense of it'


How has life changed since getting a diagnosis?

I see my diagnosis of ADHD as a positive. It's provided validation of what I'd suspected for some time and has enabled me to look back at my life through a different lens and make sense of it. Learning more about ADHD and how it affects me has helped me put in place my own coping strategies to navigate the challenges. I was pleased to find that we ADHD'ers have 'spiky profiles'. Each weakness has an opposite strength. For example, time blindness can also equate to the ability to hyperfocus. Knowing this means I can avoid things I struggle with and leverage my strengths, such ability to join dots which others can't see.

I now do my best to prioritise self-care, going for walks, doing yoga and meditation. I get up earlier so I feel ahead of the day – and use tools and techniques to help me feel more organised and reduce stress.

Do you think ADHD in midlife women is becoming better understood?

It's definitely becoming better understood, and the Takeda campaign is a great example of this. But there is still work to be done. For example, teachers being better educated to spot the signs in girls. Also medical professionals being better informed so they can recognise the signs in women of a certain age. I also think it would be good for doctors to be better informed about ADHD and how symptoms can be exacerbated by the menopause.

I'm keen to share my experience by creating support for women who know or think they may have ADHD. I want to give them the tools that weren't available for me when I was struggling. As a result, I have created an online course called '5 Steps to Unravel Your ADHD Brain, Regain Clarity and Thrive', together with an online community called the Female ADHD Network. 

staringbackatme.org.uk