



THE UNDERDIAGNOSIS OF ADHD IN WOMEN OF COLOR

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About the Issue

Underdiagnosis of mental illnesses, especially ADHD, is a problem for all women. However, this issue is especially prevalent in women of color, as they must deal with the intersection of systemic sexism and racism in ADHD diagnosis practices. Research has shown that children of color are less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than white children. Being raised by an English-speaking parent also makes children more likely to receive a diagnosis. Additionally, "Racial/ethnic minorities are also less likely to be using medication to treat the disorder by the end of elementary and middle school" (Morgan et. al, 2013). This means that many women of color go their entire childhoods thinking their experiences are normal, or that they're struggling in school because they're just stupid. Because of the societal stereotype of what someone with ADHD looks like, they are not able to recognize their symptoms, so the mental illness often goes unnoticed until early or late adulthood, or even possibly their whole lives.

ADHD Symptoms: Men vs. Women

One aspect of this issue is that the stereotypical image of someone with ADHD is a cisgender, white, hyperactive male. Women tend to present ADHD differently, as the chart below illustrates. As such, teachers, parents, and even psychologists don't always think of ADHD as a possible diagnosis for girls who are struggling in school.

5 Ways ADHD among Women Is Different From Men:

- 1 Women usually tend to introspect rather than hyperactivity
- 2 Women are under-diagnosed compared to the men
- 3 Women have different coping strategies
- 4 Hormones tend to influence the impact of ADHD among women
- 5 ADHD among women usually appear uncontrolled



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5 Ways ADHD among women is different from men (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://ezcareclinic.com/debunking-9-myths-about-adhd/>

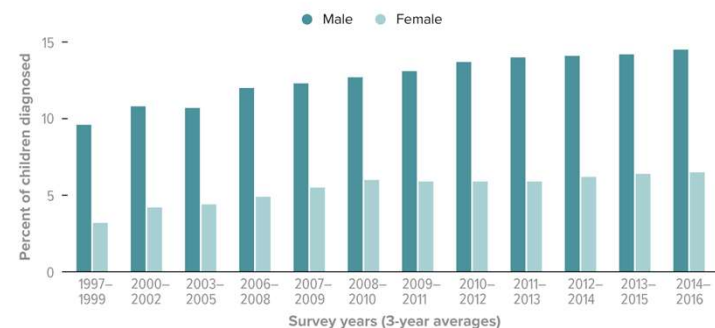
Why This Issue Matters

There are many reasons why the underdiagnosis of ADHD in women of color is an issue. From an economic perspective, ADHD can cause high accident rates, work loss, and a burden on school systems who have to deal with children with ADHD. While there is the cost of treatment for people with ADHD, these other issues can be mitigated through coping mechanisms and possibly psychiatric medications (Matza et. al, 2005). However, this isn't an option for people who don't even know they have ADHD, of which women of color are a high population. A diagnosis is needed in order to access medication to treat ADHD, and people who are unaware they have an issue are not going to seek out coping mechanisms to fix said issue.

More importantly, this lack of a diagnosis has a drastic effect on the lives of girls and women who have ADHD without knowing it. They know that there's something about them that's different from the norm, but without a diagnosis they internalize that otherness as something being wrong with them. They try not to draw attention to these undesirable qualities, and they develop elaborate coping mechanisms to keep themselves afloat, thinking that everyone else processes the world the same they do. Society expects women to be on top of things, and so these women try their best to stay on top of things, all the while struggling much harder than the rest of the population who either doesn't have ADHD to deal with or who have medication/professional help to assist them. A diagnosis can not only lead to addressing some of the symptoms of ADHD itself but also it can allow these women to breathe a sigh of relief at finally having a reason for why they are the way they are. Just a diagnosis can help boost the low self-esteem so many women with ADHD have (Taylor and Keltner).

Working as a community to educate about the underdiagnosis of ADHD in women of color will break down stereotypes about what someone with ADHD looks like and empower these women to work toward a better future for themselves. This education will be valuable from both personal and economic standpoints, saving money and building self-esteem.

Boys and girls diagnosed with ADHD in the US, 1997–2016



SOURCE: CDC

KNOWABLE MAGAZINE

Boys and girls diagnosed with ADHD in the US, 1997-2016 (2020) Retrieved from <https://knowablemagazine.org/article/mind/2020/adhd-in-girls-and-women>

Recommendations

Based upon my research, I recommend:

- Women of color who resonate with any of the symptoms of ADHD mentioned should research symptoms of ADHD to inform themselves of common symptoms and women. They should then speak with a doctor if they feel they may have ADHD, as well as sharing this information with their friends and family to spread this knowledge.
- Parents, teachers, and health care professionals learn about ADHD in women and systemic racism in ADHD diagnosing so they are better equipped to recommend children to see a doctor and to advocate for them if they believe they're being discounted based on race or gender.
- As a UCF population, we continue to support groups such as Active Minds – who work toward ending the stigma surrounding mental illness. Additionally, CAPS should work to break down the stereotype of what someone with ADHD looks like, reaching those in our diverse student body who may have had a diagnosis pass them by in elementary and middle school.

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