



Tips for  
**WOMEN**  
with ADHD

The Nitty Gritty Guide  
to Living with ADHD  
Successfully

THE QUEEN OF ADD  
**TERRY MATLEN, MSW**



Terry Matlen, ACSW  
<http://www.ADDconsults.com>  
terry@ADDconsults.com

## **Tips for Women with ADHD**

By Terry Matlen, MSW, ACSW

### **You Aren't Alone**

According to the prestigious Mayo Clinic, it is estimated that 7.5% of school-aged children have ADHD. More than 70% of these children grow up to be adults with ADHD. In other words, there are between 4.5 to 5.5 **million** women in the U.S alone with ADHD. \*

If one thinks of the core symptoms of ADHD described in clinical journals and books, they would most likely include distractibility, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Since the understanding of adult ADHD is still in its early stages, and the study of women with ADHD is even less understood, one rarely reads about the other two core symptoms often seen in women: *disorganization and inattention*. These are the obvious ones that help explain why women with ADHD struggle with seemingly simple tasks such as picking out clothes, keeping their home in order, handling paperwork at their jobs, and maintaining healthy relationships. But there are numerous other ADHD symptoms that aren't usually talked about, but which can be observed in countless women.

### **FAQs**

Have you wondered all these years if you are the only one who faces these situations?

- Why can I see your mouth moving but can't hear any words?
- Why do I have panic attacks in the mall?
- Why does my skin crawl when I am touched in certain ways?
- Why does the thought of going to Disneyworld make me feel nauseated instead of excited like everybody else?
- Why am I unable to put together a single outfit when I look through my closet filled with blouses and skirts?
- Why can I obtain a college degree, yet can't figure out what to cook every night, let alone remember to get the ingredients while at the grocery store?
- Why, in social groups, am I unable to get the words out that are floating around in my head?
- Why does the sight of a pile of dirty laundry make my heart palpitate?

Why do you have such "odd" reactions, you ask? Take a look at the list of symptoms below that are often not listed in the ADHD literature. Perhaps they might give you some insight as to additional struggles you may have that your doctor or therapist hasn't addressed:

### **Physiological Symptoms**

- Hypersensitive to noise, touch, smell
- Clumsy with poor coordination; always bumping into things
- Difficulty falling asleep and difficulty waking up the next morning
- Tire easily, or, conversely, can't sit still
- Experience severe PMS

### **Feelings**

- Low self-worth
- Easily overwhelmed
- Hypersensitive to criticism
- Emotionally charged; easily upset
- Irritable
- Tendency to ruminate

### **Time and Data Management Issues**

- Poor sense of time; often run late
- Start projects but can't seem to finish them
- Take on too much both personally and professionally

### **Cognitive Skills**

- Difficulty making decisions
- Get confused when more than one person is talking
- Can't filter out sounds
- Needs extra time to process what is being said
- Can't remember the theme of a movie within minutes of leaving the theatre
- Forget the details of a book after having just read it
- Splintered skills: brilliant in some areas but severely challenged in others

- Poor sense of direction; can't read maps or blueprints
- Struggle to visualize things (out of sight, out of mind)

### **Social Skills**

- Difficulty remembering names
- Say things without thinking, often hurting others' feelings
- Appear self-absorbed
- Don't seem to hear what others are saying
- Talk too much
- Talk too little; can't figure out how to enter a discussion
- Don't "get" jokes
- Can't say "no"

### **Academics**

- Poor math and/or writing skills
- Problems with word retrieval
- Poor handwriting
- Have difficulty with boring, repetitive tasks

### **Addictive Behaviors**

- Shopping
- Eating
- Gambling
- Sex
- Internet
- TV
- Movies/videos

Without proper treatment, women with ADHD can live a lifetime of self-loathing, under achievement, anxiety, and often even clinical depression. Women need to be more proactive and find the help they need in order to stop the cycle of misdiagnosis and "sub-optimal" treatment. Finding clinicians who understand ADHD in women is imperative. Hiring an ADD coach, attending conferences, reading books and finding support are all important in helping women get their lives back and addressing the roadblocks that have kept them back for so long.

### **The Nitty Gritty Guide**

Below are "Survival Tips" that can also be helpful in dealing with every day situations, but in the big picture scheme of things, it's important to

- Accept your ADHD brain. Work WITH it instead of against it.
- Celebrate your gifts
- Simplify your life
- Eliminate over-commitments
- Set reasonable goals
- Prioritize

- Find support

## **Specific Survival Tips**

### **Meals**

- Consider carry-out as an option. Let go of the pre-conceived notion that you must have a three-course meal on the table every night. There are many healthy carry-out options now available
- Not sure what to make? Write down daily menus on index cards. Ask your family for ideas, then choose a card depending on your schedule for that day and what you have in the pantry

### **Household**

- Bite the bullet and hire a cleaning crew, even if it's just once a month. This is not a luxury!
- Choose messy and tidy zones. Face it; it's nearly impossible to keep the entire house immaculate. Why try? Let some rooms be messy areas, keeping more visible rooms tidy.

### **Relationships Family Parenting**

- "See it coming and have a plan". If you know you are about to lose it, have a place you can go to "chill out". If you know your child can't handle stimulating situations like grocery shopping, leave him/her home.
- Learn communication strategies, like using "I" messages. Solve problems together, saying, "this is the problem, how can we solve it" instead of finger pointing.
- Take time away from the kids- either with your spouse or by yourself- to re-energize. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't have much left for your family.
- Pick your battles with your children. Is it really that important that their socks match?

### **Personal Tips**

- Do things now or write it down in your planner or Palm
- Can't fall asleep? Jot down your worries, brainstorm, inventions, etc. on a pad of paper next to your bed so you can let go of your thoughts.
- Prioritize tasks. Think: What is most important? What can't wait? Do those first.
- Use timers to remind yourself to get moving and/or to stop what you're doing.

### **Work**

- Figure out what time of day you are most productive and tackle the most complicated tasks then.
- Figure out your work-style. Do you like to multi-task or do you do best by finishing one project at a time?

### **Final Words**

Although ADHD can interfere with daily living in a big way, it isn't a death sentence. Learning coping mechanisms and strategies can take you far in your journey from just surviving to embracing it. Celebrate your differences, for you truly are unique. You may not be the world's best chef, but maybe you are a gifted poet, a loyal friend, or a creative artist. Though research studies haven't yet proven this, women with ADHD tend to be the most sensitive, creative, warm, and funniest people. So don't compromise your core being. As Judy Garland once said, "Always be a first-rate version of yourself instead of a second-rate version of somebody else."

\*(Barbarese et al., 2002; R. Barkley, personal communication, August 18, 2004).