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How adult ADHD can affect love, sex and relationships

It is thought that 1.5 million adults in the UK have ADHD. However only 120,000 are formally diagnosed. If diagnoses are on the rise, it seems education about the disorder is on the decline. Here is what I wish someone had told me about sex, love and adult ADHD.

My name is Caroline and I am an adult woman with ADHD.

It sounds strange announcing that you are neurodiverse like this.

But there is a reason for it.

Women are less likely to be diagnosed as men. Our ADHD is often missed because it is thought that it doesn't present the same way. A survey published in the Journal of Attention Disorders reported of 10,438 children, 3.62% of boys and just 0.85% of girls were diagnosed.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1087054715613441>

<https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-020-02707-9>

There was also a myth that you could grow out of ADHD. But here I am at 35 very much neurodiverse.

ADHD is a neuro developmental condition where have trouble regulating your energy and have difficulty concentrating. The condition affects so much more than concentration. It is thought that you can have three different types of ADHD. This is inattentive, hyperactive or combined ADHD.

Symptoms can include:

- Making mistakes
- Having difficulty organising tasks
- Being unable to sit still
- Constantly fidgeting or moving
- Being unable to wait for your turn
- Acting without thinking
- Interrupting conversations
- Little or no sense of danger

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/symptoms/>

Why does it matter?

ADHD affects a lot of different areas of my life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in my relationships and sex life.

In recent years, support services have increased for ADHD. However, when I was diagnosed in rural Ireland in the 90s, there was nothing. My ADHD remained unmanaged and I had no idea what to expect as an adult.

If I was given the proper information, then I would at least be able to explain why some things are harder for me. I've tried to get through things which aren't designed for me as a neurodiverse person. In the end, I've been left overwhelmed and approaching burned out.

To have a reason why you behave a certain way is huge. There is power and relief in understanding your mental health. It takes a weight of embarrassment and shame off your shoulders. Instead of behaviour being unexplained and potentially a problem, it can be communicated to your partner. Not only communicated but solved together.

Unmanaged ADHD can be serious. We are at higher risk of suicide, alcohol and substance abuse disorders and even prison. Thanks to our risk calculation issues and dopamine seeking, we can have higher STDS and unwanted pregnancy numbers.

There are 4 ways that ADHD can affect your sex drive

1 - Hypo sexuality.

I suffer from hypo sexuality. This is defined as a low sex drive. I find that my ADHD symptoms such as lack of concentration, losing interest quickly and distraction affect this. It's not that I don't love my partner but focusing on sex is difficult for me. It may not seem like a big deal but my relationships have ended as a result of this. I also have a lot of shame and guilt around not being 'up for it' as much as I should be.

It's not always the case. In the early days of a new partner, I can fall into the 'love buzz' a little too much. Just to mention, I'm lesbian so my partners are usually female and all have been neurotypical. When we start a relationship, we are usually flooded with dopamine. This is the happy feeling, which we produce naturally. ADHD people have a lower level of dopamine so we are constantly looking for ways to top it up. The new love buzz gives me a way to do this. I can become hyper focused on the person.

Dopamine study: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22294258/>

It can help me to feel like having more sex. This is the same for neurotypical folks too. Who doesn't have more sex at the start of a relationship?

But, what causes the fight is when I am no longer getting that dopamine fix off the person. I don't fall out of love with them but the way I express my love changes. It depends on how important sex is to the other person I find I spend a lot of time explaining myself. I cannot train my brain into just 'going with it.' Even on date nights, I'll find a way to avoid sex as my brain just doesn't want to do it.

In turning down sex, I know I've caused hurt because I haven't been able to explain why. Communication is key with hypo sexuality. The feelings for the rejected party can be hurt, embarrassment and internalised rejection. I on the other hand feel a mix of guilt, shame and internalised embarrassment that I can't just do it. This goes on and on because guilt, shame and hurt are not aphrodisiacs.

Neglected partners study:

<https://psychology.uiowa.edu/sites/psychology.uiowa.edu/files/groups/nikolas/files/Ben-Naim%20et%20al%202017.pdf>

2 - Hyper sexuality

If hypo is a lack of then hyper is an excess of. Some ADHD adults can have the opposite of my problem. Sex creates dopamine and endorphins which get the brain's neurotransmitters going. So some people can use sex to self-stimulate dopamine.

We also struggle with risk perception. This means we may not always see red flags in people or situations. So in the dopamine rush of doing something naughty, we don't see potential risks. I feel sometimes I ignore them subconsciously so I can keep the buzz going. We may engage in things we don't always want to. It's important here to note that mindfulness is a great practise for hyper sexuality. Asking if you want to do it, why you want to do it and how you think you will feel about this in the future can help.

3 - Hypersensitivity

Another factor that plays into my hypo sexuality is that I am hypersensitive.

Everything can play a factor from noise, texture, stimulation and smells. All of this can make sex overwhelming for me.

Something that feels amazing for the neurotypical person may not be the same for us. I know noise is a problem for me. I need music to be playing to cover anything from breathing to skin on skin sounds.

Testing things is a great way to get round hypersensitivity. Identify what may be a problem and communicate with your partner why. Together you may be able to find your solution to the problem and switch it out. Why not have a safe word or gesture that can help you to raise the alarm if you are feeling overwhelmed in the moment.

4 - Orgasm

ADHD is not a lack of concentration but a dysregulation of it. Nowhere is this more unfair than not being able to concentrate in bed.

Sex is more than the big finish but sometimes, it can feel frustrating to not be able to get there. While there are no toys especially for ADHD adults, there are some that may help you to overcome what I call my mind buzz. I'm often so busy thinking about everything that I cannot quieten down to focus. Toys can help to bring the main event closer giving us less time to get distracted.

How I do cope?

1 - Communication

Your partner is not psychic. This may be self-explanatory but I wish someone had told me that before now. Asking, explaining and talking can stop hurt feelings, guilt and shame from manifesting.

2 - Know your symptoms

Research is key, as is knowing what your ADHD looks like. If you recognise that something is a problem, then you can work on changing it.

3 - Check your environment

If there are factors in your environment causing distress, work on finding an alternative if possible.

4 - Risk

Consent is a massive thing. Make sure what you are doing is safe, your partner is respectful and you are happy to proceed.

5 - Sex toys

Enough said.



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About us

'Undressing Disability' is a global campaign which aims to raise standards in sexual health and sexual awareness for disabled people. Issues around sexuality and sexual frustration are frequently raised by disabled people who feel that they have less opportunity and ability to explore their sexuality than others. Through a lack of understanding, education and a general lack of services, disabled people frequently cannot access the support that would make it possible for them to make the sorts of choices about their lifestyles that most of us take for granted. As part of our campaign we run the Love Lounge, an online forum providing free advice on all things sex, love and disability. We also have free downloadable resources. As a user-led charity, our aim is to change the way people view disability, which often involves removing the 'fear factor' that so often surrounds the subject. We support businesses to be more inclusive by providing disability awareness training, British Sign Language workshops and accessibility audits, amongst other things.

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CHANGING SOCIETY'S VIEWS ON DISABILITY