

In adults, ADHD rarely looks like restlessness. It is quieter, often invisible — less about fidgeting and more about a persistent struggle to regulate attention, organise tasks, and follow through consistently.

WHY ADULT ADHD IS OFTEN MISSED

- MASKING AND COPING**
Many rely on last-minute pressure or overcompensation to get through school and early work life
- MISLABELLING**
Symptoms are mistaken for laziness, carelessness, or lack of discipline
- GENDER DIFFERENCES**
Women often show less visible symptoms, leading to underdiagnosis
- CULTURAL FACTORS**
Stigma and low awareness delay help-seeking
- EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION**
Difficulty planning, prioritising, starting, and completing tasks

COMMON SYMPTOMS IN ADULTS

- IMPULSIVITY**
Interrupting, hasty decisions, risky behaviour
- CHRONIC DISORGANISATION**
Struggles with maintaining order in daily life
- HYPERFOCUS**
Intense concentration on interesting tasks, often at the cost of others
- EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION**
Irritability, mood swings, sensitivity to criticism
- TIME BLINDNESS**
Poor sense of time; deadlines feel distant until they are urgent

The invisible layer of stigma

In India, the gap between effort and outcome is often widened by cultural attitudes. Symptoms are easily dismissed as distractions caused by excessive screen time or poor time management. Psychiatric consultation is still approached with hesitation, and ADHD in adults remains under-recognised. As a result, many spend years trying to fix what they believe are personal shortcomings, without identifying the neurological basis of their difficulties.

Why women are often overlooked

Gender adds another layer to the story. Men are more likely to be diagnosed early, often because their symptoms are outwardly disruptive. Women, on the other hand, tend to present with inattentive patterns that are easier to overlook.

Their hyperactivity is often internal — experienced as a racing mind rather than physical restlessness. Many develop compensatory behaviours such as over-preparing, making exhaustive lists, or putting in extra hours to avoid mistakes. These strategies can mask symptoms for years, delaying diagnosis well into adulthood.

ADHD IN ADULTS IS OFTEN MISTAKEN FOR STRESS

UNNIKRISHNAN S @TPuram

At 32, Ananya had what most people would describe as a good life. She worked as a product manager at a fast growing fintech startup in Thiruvananthapuram, lived in a swanky apartment and maintained a wide circle of friends. On paper, her life reflected the markers of millennial success, with a résumé that traced a steady climb through prestigious degrees and rapid promotions. Yet her days rarely unfolded as neatly as her achievements suggested.

Deadlines slipped despite long hours. Meetings blurred as her attention drifted at crucial moments. Her inbox filled with half-written replies she intended to finish but never did. At home, tasks piled up in quiet disarray — laundry left half-folded, groceries forgotten, bills paid just in time or slightly late.

To colleagues, she was a "creative firebrand," someone who could pull off brilliant solutions under pressure. In private, she cycled through guilt, anxiety, and bursts of intense productivity that rarely lasted long enough to feel like control. She described her mind as "a browser with twenty tabs open, all refreshing at once."

For years, she believed this was simply who she was — disorganised, easily distracted, perpetually catching up. Stress, she thought, explained the rest. It was only when a colleague casually mentioned adult ADHD that something began to shift. Months later, after a formal evaluation, she received a diagnosis: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). For the first time, her struggles had a name.

Condition that lingers

Ananya's experience reflects a reality that often goes unnoticed. ADHD has long been associated with hyperactive children — typically boys who struggle to sit still in classrooms. That narrow image has obscured a more complex truth for many: the condition does not end with childhood.

"ADHD isn't outgrown; it evolves. Only 10-20% of children completely outgrow it, while 50-80% continue to experience symptoms as adults. Hyperactivity often diminishes, but inattention and executive dysfunction persist. Factors like severity, comorbidities, and environment influence this trajectory. Effective coping strategies can mask symptoms, but the underlying condition often remains," said Dr CJ John, senior psychiatrist at Medical Trust Hospital in Kochi.

In adults, ADHD rarely looks like restlessness. It is quieter, often invisible — less about fidgeting and more about a persistent struggle to regulate attention, organise tasks, and follow through consistently. Many appear composed on the outside while navigating constant mental noise within.

For Ananya, the shift became clear only in hindsight. As a student, she had relied on urgency. The night before an exam was enough to trigger intense focus, allowing her to perform well despite last-minute preparation. Structure was imposed externally — by school schedules, deadlines, and parental oversight.

The workplace demanded something different: sustained attention, long-term planning, and steady execution. The strategies that once worked began to falter. ADHD, she realised, was not an inability to focus. It was an inability to regulate focus. She could spend hours immersed in stimulating work, yet struggle to complete routine tasks that required consistency rather than urgency. The contrast was confusing — not just to others, but to herself.

Over time, the gap between effort and outcome began to take a toll. "It is not the symptoms alone, but how they are perceived that causes harm," said Dr Gopal Bhatia, consultant in psychiatry at Narayana Hospital, Ahmedabad.

Many adults with undiagnosed ADHD grow up believing they are lazy, unreliable, or simply "not trying hard enough." The emotional weight of these labels can be as debilitating as the condition itself. This disconnect frequently leads to anxiety, depression, and burnout. In many cases, individuals seek help without realising that ADHD may be the underlying driver.

The moment of recognition

For Ananya, clarity came not through work, but at home. While she managed to meet professional expectations through sheer effort, her personal space told a different story — unfinished projects, scattered belongings, and what she called "doom piles" impossible to organise. The diagnosis brought both relief and grief. Relief, because her struggles were not a personal failure. Grief, for the years spent questioning herself.

Treatment, experts say, is rarely about a single solution. "A thorough clinical assessment is essential, focusing on behavioural patterns and personal history. Treatment often combines therapy, medication, and practical interventions. With the right approach, meaningful improvement is possible," said Dr Bhatia. Managing ADHD in adulthood often

Awareness has brought down stigma

Awareness on adult ADHD is slowly increasing, though misconceptions persist. "Celebrities speaking about ADHD have, to some extent, helped reduce stigma. More people with self-diagnosis are now seeking professional help," said Dr John. At the same time, ADHD is increasingly being understood not just as a deficit, but as a different way of processing the world — often associated with creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving. In the case of Ananya, this shift has been gradual. Six months after her diagnosis, she has begun to adapt rather than resist. She uses noise-cancelling headphones to reduce distractions and structures her workday around periods when her focus is strongest. The challenges have not disappeared. But the shame has begun to recede. She no longer sees her mind as broken, but as different.

means rethinking how productivity is defined. Instead of forcing themselves into rigid systems, many benefit from building structures that align with how their minds work — breaking tasks into smaller steps, using external reminders, or working in environments that support focus. It may also involve open conversations at the workplace about flexibility

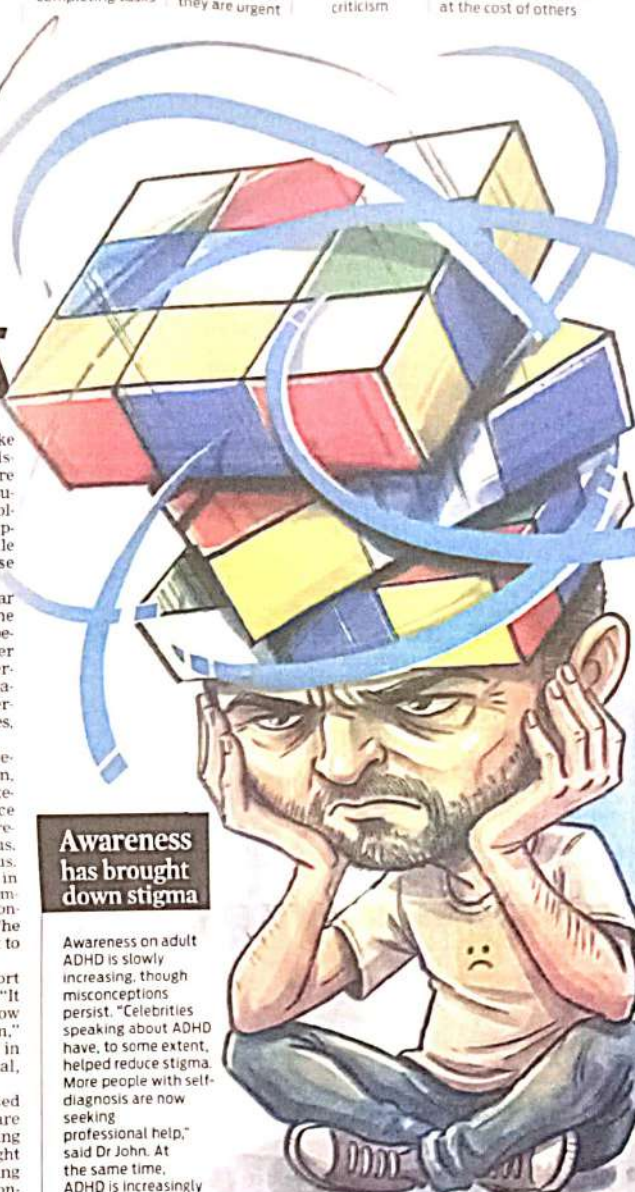


ILLUSTRATION: MANDAR PARDIKAR

Diagnosis

- Clinical assessment by a psychiatrist or psychologist
- Detailed history, including childhood behaviour patterns
- Use of screening tools such as ASRS
- Evaluation of impact across work, home, and relationships

Treatment and management

- Medication:** Stimulant and non-stimulant options to improve attention and impulse control
- Therapy:** CBT focused on organisation, time management, and emotional regulation
- Coaching:** Practical, personalised strategies for daily functioning
- Lifestyle:** Sleep, routine, and structured environments support symptom control

When to seek help

- Persistent difficulty managing daily responsibilities
- Repeated patterns of missed deadlines or disorganisation
- Ongoing anxiety, burnout, or low self-esteem
- When coping strategies stop working

and realistic expectations. Such adjustments are not about lowering standards, but about enabling consistency. The impact of ADHD extends beyond professional life. Forgetting important dates, losing focus during conversations, or struggling to follow through on commitments can strain relationships. These behaviours are often misinterpreted as indifference. In Ananya's case, impulsive decisions and periods of withdrawal created tension, reinforcing self-doubt. Understanding the condition can

shift these dynamics. When partners and family members recognise that these patterns are not intentional, it creates space for empathy. Communication improves, and expectations become more realistic.

Ananya still has days when her mind feels like a browser with too many tabs open. The difference now is that she understands why. More importantly, she is learning how to manage it — closing a few tabs, prioritising the rest, and moving forward with intention rather than self-doubt.

NAME CHANGE

I PIUSH TATED, S/o [Rajmal G Tated], Global Nakhshatra Apt, 1802 B1 Block, Ponnaiyapuram, Coimbatore - 11, have changed my name to PIUSH R TATED for all future purposes. Affidavit dated (13/04/2025) sworn before Notary [S M Prabhakaran, B.A., B.L., Enr No. 1349/92], Coimbatore. PIUSH TATED

RAJEEV COL
Applications are invited for the post of PROFESSOR ASSISTANT. Eligibility: Attractive remuneration & experience. The eligible and interested email to rajeevgroups@gmail.com

ADHD isn't outgrown; it evolves. Only 10-20% of children completely outgrow it. Hyperactivity often diminishes, but inattention and executive dysfunction persist. Dr CJ John, psychiatrist, Kochi