

**Making Sense**  
**A Guide to Living with**  
**Adult ADHD**



**Alinda Gillott**

positive   
about integrated healthcare

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**Author**

Dr Alinda Gillott  
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

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will be used to benefit the local service

# About ADHD

## What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition, which typically starts in childhood and, for most people, continues into adult life.



## The symptoms of ADHD include:

- **Inattention** – difficulty concentrating for very long or finishing tasks, disorganised, easily distracted, forgetful, unable to listen when people are talking
- **Hyperactivity** – fidgety, unable to sit still, talking excessively, always on the go, feeling of inner restlessness
- **Impulsivity** – acting quickly without thinking about the consequences, interrupting other people, difficulty waiting turn

Most people can have these sorts of difficulties at times, but for individuals with ADHD, the symptoms are there most of the time and can seriously affect their everyday life.

Not everyone has the same pattern of ADHD symptoms. Whilst many individuals with ADHD have difficulties in all three areas of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity (called 'ADHD combined type'), some individuals mainly have difficulties with inattention (sometimes described as 'ADD' or 'ADHD inattentive type'). Because ADHD is a developmental condition, symptoms can change over time. Adults often describe inner restlessness and feeling fidgety rather than being hyperactive and unable to stay in their seat.

## How ADHD impacts on day-to-day life



### Impact in childhood

- Difficulty concentrating on schoolwork
- Difficulty remembering things needed for school
- Frequently losing things
- Disruptive in the classroom
- Difficulty keeping friends
- Frequent accidents and injuries

### Impact in adult life

- Difficulty keeping attention on daily tasks and with finishing tasks
- Frequent job changes or job losses
- Difficulty managing personal relationships
- Unsafe driving – accidents; speeding
- Difficulty managing money
- Difficulty with organisation and time management

### Is it real?

Yes! For many years people doubted ADHD was a real condition, and felt it was just an excuse for bad behaviour or poor parenting. Research has now shown that ADHD is a real condition, which can be helped through treatment and support<sup>1</sup>.

### How many people have ADHD?

Research has shown that around 2-5% of children have ADHD<sup>2</sup>. As children develop, symptoms can change, and some children 'grow out' of ADHD, or seem to be less affected by it. Most children with ADHD continue to have symptoms as adults<sup>3</sup>, which means around 2% of the adult population.

1. Faraone SV, Biederman J, Spencer T, Wilens T, Seidman LJ, Mick E, & Doyle AE (2000). Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in adults: an overview. *Biological Psychiatry*, Jul 1;48 (1):9-20
2. Simon V, Czobor P, Balint S, Meszaros A, & Bitter I (2009). Prevalence and correlates of adult attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: meta-analysis. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194(3):204-211
3. Faraone SV, Biederman J, & Mick E (2006). The age-dependent decline of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: a meta-analysis of follow-up studies. *Psychological Medicine*, 36(2):159-165

## What causes ADHD?

The exact cause of ADHD is not fully understood. We do know that ADHD tends to run in families, so there is likely a genetic link. Research has shown that having a family member with ADHD increases the likelihood of other family members having the same condition<sup>4</sup>. Frequently adults think about whether they might have ADHD when their child is diagnosed as they notice the same symptoms in themselves.

Chemicals in the brain (called 'neurotransmitters') also seem to be affected in individuals with ADHD, particularly dopamine and norepinephrine. These neurotransmitters affect how messages to the brain connect, or switch on and switch off, impacting behaviours such as focusing attention and controlling impulses.

There also appear to be differences in the parts of the brain that control activity and attention in individuals with ADHD. The frontal lobes, which act as the brain's 'brakes' and control executive functioning, appear to be affected in ADHD.



### Executive functioning

The executive functions relate to mental tasks such as paying attention, planning activities, short-term memory, solving problems, controlling actions (inhibition), thinking flexibly, getting started on tasks, doing more than one task at once, and tracking progress on tasks. The ability to control emotions is also affected. Difficulties in executive functioning are frequently seen in ADHD and can impact on daily life.

### Additional issues

Frequently adults with ADHD can experience other difficulties (called 'co-morbidities') such as mental health problems, personality disorder, sleep problems, substance misuse and offending behaviours. Other neurodevelopmental conditions may also be present, such as Tourette syndrome (and other tic disorders), autism spectrum conditions, dyslexia, and developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia).

Often adults with ADHD find it difficult to manage their emotions. They can experience frequent mood changes, find it difficult to cope with stress, and can be quick tempered.

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4. Thapar A, Holmes J, Poulton K & Harrington R (1999). Genetic basis of attention deficit and hyperactivity. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 174, 105–111

# Being assessed for ADHD



**If you think you might have ADHD, ask yourself these questions:**

- Do you have difficulty concentrating, even on something you enjoy?
- Do you leave important tasks until the last minute?
- Are you easily distracted?
- Do you do things without thinking (impulsive)?
- Do you have difficulty organising yourself?
- Are you often late even though you try to be on time?
- Do you often find it difficult to sit still or feel restless inside?
- Are you often busy doing things, but never seem to get anything finished?
- Do you often find it difficult to wait your turn in conversation or in a queue?
- Do you often find that you lose track of a conversation?
- Do you often find yourself forgetting to do things?
- Do you find it difficult to manage your emotions?

There may be lots of reasons you find these things difficult, but these are all also symptoms of ADHD

## How do I get assessed for ADHD?

Being assessed for ADHD is an important part of understanding your difficulties and getting the support you need. It is important to be assessed by someone who knows about ADHD such as a Psychiatrist, Clinical Psychologist or Nurse Specialist, who has been trained in the assessment of ADHD.

Assessment for ADHD must include assessment of other difficulties that may better explain your symptoms such as mental health problems or other developmental conditions.

## What will happen during the diagnostic assessment?

Different clinics may have slightly different ways of carrying out an assessment. Elements may include:

- **Screening questionnaires** – you might be asked to fill in questionnaires about your ADHD type symptoms and how these symptoms affect your daily life
- **A developmental interview** - questions about what you were like as a child as well as difficulties you experience now



**Tip:** bringing old school reports to the assessment can be useful and help to remind you of what you were like when you were younger

- **Interview or information from a parent or partner** – it can be really useful to ask a parent or partner about their experience of the difficulties you are reporting
- **Psychological assessment** – you may be asked to meet with a psychologist for assessment. They can look in more detail at difficulties such as attention, memory, planning and organising



## Okay, so I've got ADHD, what now?



*"It made me understand why I am the way I am"*

Bev, diagnosed at age 34 years

This booklet will help you to better understand and manage your ADHD. Understanding your condition can help you feel more positive and develop new ways to overcome the difficulties.

It might also be useful for you to show this booklet to other important people in your life such as your partner, parents, friends, and work colleagues. Helping them to understand your ADHD will help reduce any misunderstanding or frustration they may have about your difficulties, and develop some ways of getting the most out of life with you.

Getting a diagnosis of ADHD may provoke mixed feelings: it may be a relief to finally feel understood. However, there may also be feelings of sadness, anger or regret for not being diagnosed earlier and mourning for lost opportunities or feeling you have not fulfilled your potential.

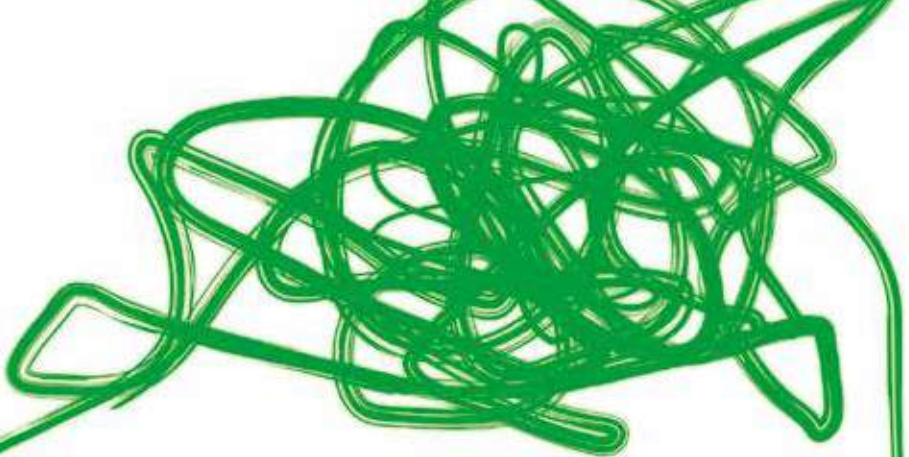


*"Without sounding cheesy, getting a diagnosis has changed my life because now I am getting the right help"*

Joe, diagnosed at age 18 years

It is important to recognise that these sorts of feelings are common after diagnosis and you may need some support to manage the feelings. Getting diagnosed with ADHD might feel like the end of a long journey, but is actually only the start of getting the help and support available to achieve the things you want to do.






## Growing up with ADHD

Life can be challenging growing up with ADHD. You may have been diagnosed during childhood, or perhaps you didn't receive your diagnosis until you were an adult. Either way, if you have ADHD, you have always had these symptoms.

Looking back, you may feel you didn't get on as well as you could have done at school. Often children with ADHD experience difficulties with their schoolwork, and don't do as well in exams as they are expected to do. Behaviours in the classroom such as daydreaming, blurting out answers, and interrupting other children, can result in lots of negative attention from teachers. At home your behaviour may have also been frustrating to family members. Friends may have found your energy and distractibility difficult to cope with, and may not always have wanted to play with you.

Understanding that these things were due to ADHD and not bad behaviour or poor parenting is an important step forward. As adults we have better ability to understand and have more control over our lives.

 *"I was always hyperactive [as a child], wouldn't accept things, wouldn't listen"*  
John, age 24 years

 *"my mum and dad always used to say to me – will you slow down Paul, will you sit down for a minute"*  
Paul, diagnosed with ADHD at age 37 years

## Making the transition to being an adult with ADHD

If you were diagnosed with ADHD as a child it is likely that you had to go for regular medical appointments and may have been encouraged to take ADHD medication. Some children do appear to 'grow out' of their ADHD, whilst for others symptoms continue throughout their lives. Because it is a developmental condition, often ADHD symptoms change over time. As children with ADHD grow, behaviours such as hyperactivity and impulsivity can settle for some individuals.

Often adolescence is a time when you start to develop your own identity and want to become more independent. You may rebel against having ADHD and decide to stop taking the medication. For some young people this is okay, and they can carry on their lives without ongoing treatment. Some young people find over time that they are having difficulty progressing with the things they want to do, such as university or work. If this sounds familiar, you may want to think about support options as an adult living with ADHD.

## A brief word for partners

Sometimes being in a relationship with a person with ADHD can be challenging. Difficulties starting and completing tasks, mismanaging household finances, and difficulties with communicating can put stress on a relationship. Don't despair – there are ways to overcome these challenges! Learning about ADHD and understanding your partner's difficulties are the first steps towards making a difference in your relationship. Developing strategies together to overcome some of those difficulties will also help to get the most out of the time you spend together. Remember – adults with ADHD can be energetic, fun and creative – just some of the reasons you were attracted to them in the first place!

## Being a parent with ADHD

Being a parent can be tough for anyone, and can be even more challenging when you have ADHD! You may also have a child who has ADHD or another neurodevelopmental condition such as autism.

It can be difficult trying to organise and manage a family when you have difficulty organising and managing your own life. Developing strategies to overcome your own difficulties will have a positive effect on your parenting and family life. You may also want to seek additional advice and support around parenting.

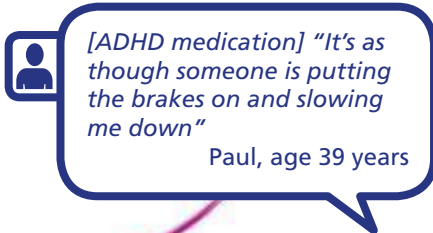


*"[Scott is] very forgetful, very disorganised...I am starting to accept it's ADHD... it's hard to remain angry for too long when you know these things have a good reason"*

Sonia, wife of Scott



# Getting help for adult ADHD



[ADHD medication] "It's as though someone is putting the brakes on and slowing me down"

Paul, age 39 years

## Medication

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends medication as the first form of treatment for adults with ADHD.

The most common medicines used to treat ADHD are known as 'stimulants' and the most commonly used stimulant is methylphenidate. Methylphenidate is available as short acting tablets which are usually taken 2-3 times daily, or as long acting tablets taken once daily. Because stimulants are in your body for a short period of time, it is possible to be flexible about when you take them. Although most people find that when medication is effective they want its benefits all the time, some adults do not want to use medication all of the time and may take breaks at weekends or for longer periods.

Where stimulants are not suitable, or not wanted, different types of medication ('non-stimulants'), such as atomoxetine, are also used. These are usually taken once daily. Unlike stimulants, non-stimulants take time

to build up in the body and need to be taken every day. Non-stimulant medication is often recommended when the individual has another condition, such as autism, or substance misuse.

Your doctor will talk to you about the best type of treatment for you and will work with you to get the dose right. This can take time, individuals vary in the amount of medication they need. Your doctor will also want to monitor your physical health while taking medication, including your sleep, appetite, weight, pulse and blood pressure.

## Substance misuse

Many young people and adults with ADHD, particularly when they are not diagnosed or not receiving treatment, misuse substances. Common substances used or misused in ADHD include nicotine, alcohol, cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, and prescription drugs. Often individuals with ADHD report that these substances help to 'dampen' symptoms of ADHD and they feel calmer. For others it's about risk taking and sensation seeking. Sometimes a contradictory effect is observed to that expected with a drug. For example, rather than feeling hyped up on amphetamines, some individuals with ADHD notice that it helps them to focus and concentrate.

If you misuse substances it will be important for your doctor to understand some of the factors related to your substance use such as significant life events, daily stressors, and social relationships. Understanding and treating your substance use will be important to consider alongside any medication you receive to treat your ADHD. You may find that you no longer want or need to use these substances once you get the right treatment for ADHD. Your doctor may have a concern that if stimulant medications are prescribed you may be at risk of misusing these, or passing them on to others. Other medications do not carry these risks and may be more suitable for your treatment.



*"It [alcohol] slowed me down and put me at ease. What would normally set my emotions off quickly, it would really dampen me down"*

Paul, diagnosed with ADHD  
age 37 years

## Offending behaviour

As a result of difficulties controlling ADHD symptoms, particularly hyperactive-impulsive symptoms, some individuals with ADHD end up in trouble with the authorities or police due to their behaviour. Some children with ADHD receive a diagnosis of conduct disorder or oppositional defiance disorder. Truancy, shoplifting, vandalism and fighting can be common early behaviours. For some this can lead on to further offending, resulting in involvement with the criminal justice system.

Frequently criminal behaviour is not planned, but as a result of impulsive acts such as aggressive outbursts, opportunistic theft, and damage to property. Difficulties controlling impulses and thinking of alternatives (problem solving) can increase these sorts of behaviours. Peer pressure can also be a factor.

Getting diagnosed with ADHD and engaging in treatment can help to reduce these sorts of behaviours, and help you to access the support you need.

# Strategies to manage your ADHD

Whether or not you take ADHD medication, you may want to develop different strategies to overcome difficulties you experience due to ADHD. These strategies can help you to feel more in control and progress with the things you want to do.



*"It's not that I don't have ideas or have thoughts, the problem is that I have too many"*

Scott, age 42 years

## Managing daily tasks

Because of your ADHD you may never have developed skills in organising yourself. As a child your parents may have needed to do this for you and as an adult, a partner may have taken over many of these tasks. Difficulties in organising yourself, remembering things, and being on time, isn't about being lazy or stupid. It's about having ADHD, and you can develop strategies to manage these tasks better for yourself.



## It is important to develop daily routines so the strategies become habit:

- 1. Use a diary and/or wall calendar** - write appointments on it as soon as you make them. Make a habit of looking in your diary every morning to see what you have planned to do that day.
- 2. Make a task list** - just keep one list. Keep it small and manageable. Tick off items when you have done them so you can track your progress. Include reminders about paying bills, making phone calls, and buying food.
- 3. Create a home filing system** - use folders or dividers to store different types of paperwork such as bills, receipts, bank statements, and medical letters. Use labels and different coloured folders so you can find what you need easily. Have a regular clear out of papers you no longer need to keep.
- 4. Develop a '10-minute tidy' routine** - rather than feeling overwhelmed at all the tasks you need to do, just spend 10 minutes each day on tasks such as sorting the post, filing paperwork, picking up laundry or pots. This might not sort all of the things you need to do, but it will help you feel more in control – and it's only 10 minutes!
- 5. Become more aware of the time** - minutes can feel like hours, hours can feel like minutes – always make sure you have a watch or clock nearby and keep checking it regularly so that you haven't become distracted or late for an appointment.
- 6. Set reminders** - use visual reminders such as coloured post-it notes on the fridge or front door, or the alarm on your mobile phone to remind you of tasks to do that day.
- 7. Keep important things in set places** - always leave your keys, phone, wallet and other important things in the same place every day so you don't waste time looking for them.
- 8. Deal with it now** - as soon as you get a letter, email, or phone message – respond to it now, rather than saying you will do it later and then forgetting to do it (if you can't do it now, put it on your daily task list or calendar).



**Tip:** Smart phones can be useful for keeping track of your appointments and task list - **but always keep a back up in case you lose it!**

## Managing friendships and relationships

Many individuals with ADHD have successful friendships and relationships. Like all relationships, there can be difficulties at times.

Common social difficulties for adults with ADHD can include difficulty paying attention during conversation, difficulty taking turns, blurting things out, and changing the subject. Forgetting to meet up, forgetting special occasions such as anniversaries and birthdays, and being late to meet can also be a frustration for friends and partners. Within a relationship it can be difficult to manage responsibilities such as running the home and paying bills. It is not unusual for a partner to feel a bit like a parent in the relationship, having to take responsibility for finances, planning, and organisation of the household.

It is possible to improve social skills by learning conversational and listening strategies. Using an electronic diary or calendar can help you to remember social occasions and using an alarm can help you meet up on time.

Within relationships it can help to work out your different strengths, and divide up tasks based on these. Strategies such as using time planners, task lists, having weekly planning meetings, or daily 'catch-up' sessions can be really helpful.



*"[I said to my girlfriend] if we start going out, I'm warning you that it's going to be a rollercoaster!"*

John, age 24 years

## Managing emotions

Often individuals with ADHD notice their moods can change quickly. You may notice that you become angry or tearful quickly. You may not know why your mood has changed, or later feel it has been an overreaction to the situation. This may lead to feelings of embarrassment or guilt, or feeling that you are not in control of how you feel.

Some of the difficulties you have experienced may be due to struggling with ADHD symptoms without realising you have the condition. You may have developed some reactive responses to situations you haven't known how to understand or cope with. Being diagnosed with ADHD can be a huge relief and a new way forward for understanding and managing your difficulties. Getting the right medication can be one part of managing your emotions.



## Strategies to manage your emotions:

- Take a breath – stop yourself from impulsively reacting
- Walk away – come back to the situation when you feel calmer
- Take your mind off it – do something else such as making a drink or watching TV
- When you feel calmer, think through what has happened, and how you can deal with it

You may also find it useful to see a counsellor or psychologist to help you to better understand and manage your emotions – you can talk to your doctor about getting a referral for this type of support.

## Managing sleep

Sleep can be a real difficulty for many adults with ADHD. You may find that you have lots of energy through the day but when it's time to lie down and go to sleep – you can't! You might find that you just lie in bed thinking about anything and everything. Once asleep, waking up the next day can also be a real difficulty.



**Tip:** alcohol is a stimulant and may actually keep you awake! Having a warm milky drink will be more likely to help you settle to sleep



## Strategies to sleep better

- Keep a regular bedtime - this will allow your body to get used to the routine of sleep
- Avoid taking naps during the day
- Try not to be too active before bed - activities such as exercising can help you sleep and burn off energy, but try to stop these a couple of hours before you go to bed
- Try to avoid a big meal or lots of drinks before bed - this can make it more difficult for you to settle or may cause you to wake in the night
- Try to avoid stimulants before bed such as caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate), nicotine, and alcohol
- Winding down activities such as listening to music or the radio quietly, or reading a magazine or book where you are not too engaged in the story, can help with settling
- If your thoughts are keeping you awake, distract them by repeating a boring word in your head (such as 'the' or 'and')
- If you can't settle to sleep - get up! Go to another room and relax until you feel tired and ready for sleep again



**Tip: Try internet banking** - organising your money online means you can access your account day or night, with less paperwork to keep track of

## Managing money

Money management requires budgeting, planning, and organisation, which for many adults with ADHD can be a real challenge.

Keep track of your every expense, no matter how small, for a month. Write it in a small notebook you can keep in your bag or pocket. This will help you to look at areas where you may be wasting money (such as meals out or take-aways when you could cook at home more cheaply) and highlight unnecessary impulsive purchases.





*"Every time I go into a shop I buy something that's not needed and most of the time I come out without the thing that I went in for"*

Vicky, age 36 years

## Strategies to manage impulse shopping

Impulsivity in ADHD and shopping can be a dangerous combination! This can lead to unnecessary spending and debts. These strategies can help to manage shopping differently:

- Shop with cash only - leave your bank cards at home
- Have only one bank card to keep track of
- When you go shopping, take a list of what you need and stick to it
- Keep a running total whilst shopping (you can use the calculator on your mobile phone)
- Stay away from places where you know you're likely to spend too much money
- Throw away catalogues that come in the post as soon as they arrive so they are not a temptation
- Delete 'junk' emails trying to sell you products you don't need



*"Pound shops are the worst. I've worked out on average I spend £9 when I go in for one bottle of pop"*

Vicky, age 36 years

## Parenting

It can be difficult trying to organise and manage a family when you have difficulty organising and managing your own life due to ADHD. Here are some steps you can take to help you feel more in control:


**Set up a daily routine** - All children respond well to routine, and this will help you too. A daily plan helps to structure the day and provides predictability. Put a wall calendar up where everyone can see it and use it, such as on the fridge.

**Organise your home** - Use drawers and storage boxes around the house. Clear them out regularly so clutter doesn't build up, especially when the children have grown out of clothes or toys. Make it clear that when things are used, they must go back into their proper place when finished with.



*"Being a parent with ADHD you have wacky ideas, you decide to drive all the way to Birmingham for a McDonalds, you drive to Skegness for a pair of sunglasses"*

Vicky, age 36 years

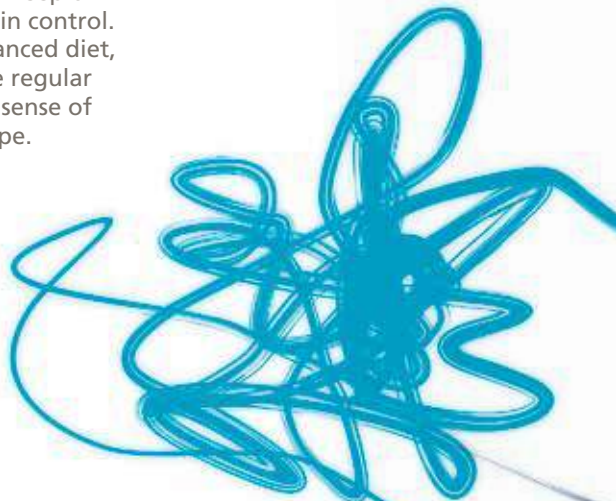
 *"school routine was disastrous, always late, never on time, never organised, my house was a tip"*  
Vicky, age 36 years

**Get Support** - You don't have to do this on your own! There may be a partner or family members around who can help you. It may also be helpful to access additional support through health, education and social care agencies. Meeting other parents who have ADHD or who have a child with ADHD can also be helpful to share experiences and tips and provide emotional support.

**Look after yourself** - For any parent it is important to look after yourself. If you are on ADHD medication, taking it regularly will help you to keep on top of tasks and feel more in control. Allowing time to eat a balanced diet, get plenty of rest, and take regular exercise, will increase your sense of wellbeing and ability to cope.


## Finally... remember there are lots of positives to having ADHD


As a person with ADHD you can live things up due to your energy and enthusiasm, kindness and sympathy, creativity and unique problem solving skills. These can also be important qualities to bring to the workplace. It is important to focus on the things you can do as much as the things that challenge you. Now you know you have ADHD, you can learn to overcome challenges, develop new skills and relationships.



 **Bev's top 5 things about living with ADHD:**

1. spontaneous
2. child like energy
3. creative
4. fast paced mind
5. sensitive to other people

 *"you have wacky ideas"*  
Scott, age 42 years

 *"I'm a funny guy, I make people laugh"*  
Joe, age 20 years

 *"being spontaneous - I love that about me"*  
Bev, age 34 years

# Useful books and resources

## Resources

**Addiss** (national attention deficit disorder information and support service)  
[www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)

**Adders** (online information service)  
[www.adders.org](http://www.adders.org)

**NICE guideline**  
<http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG72/NICEGuidance/pdf/English>

## Books

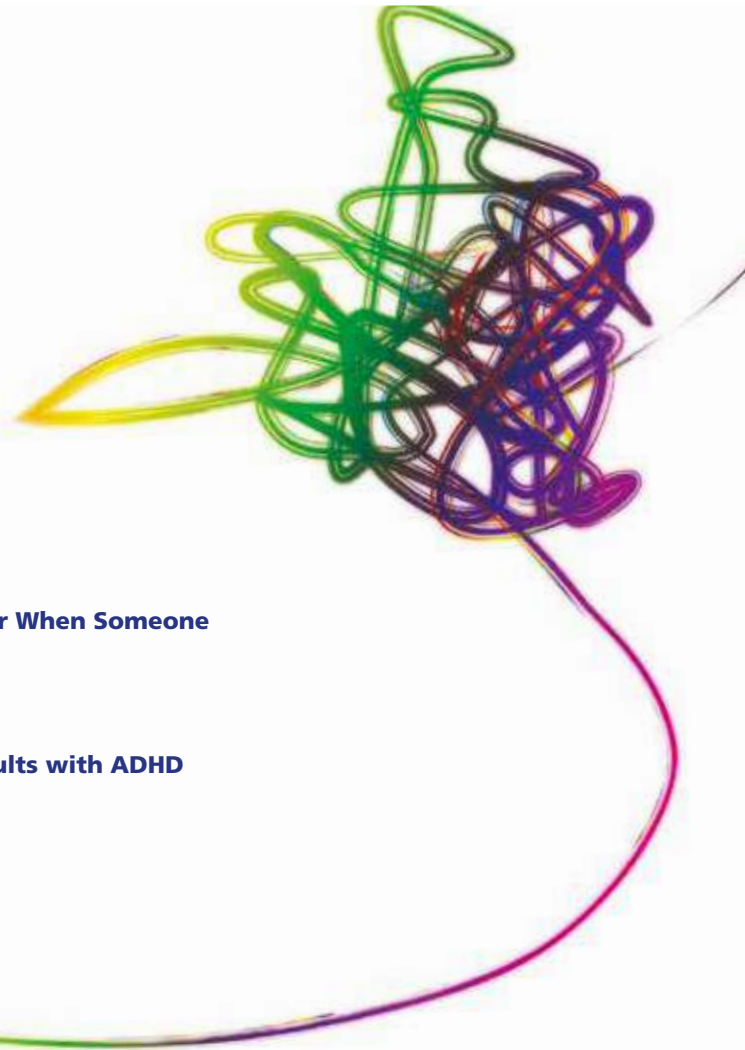
Barkley, R (2010)  
**Taking Charge of Adult ADHD**  
Guilford Press

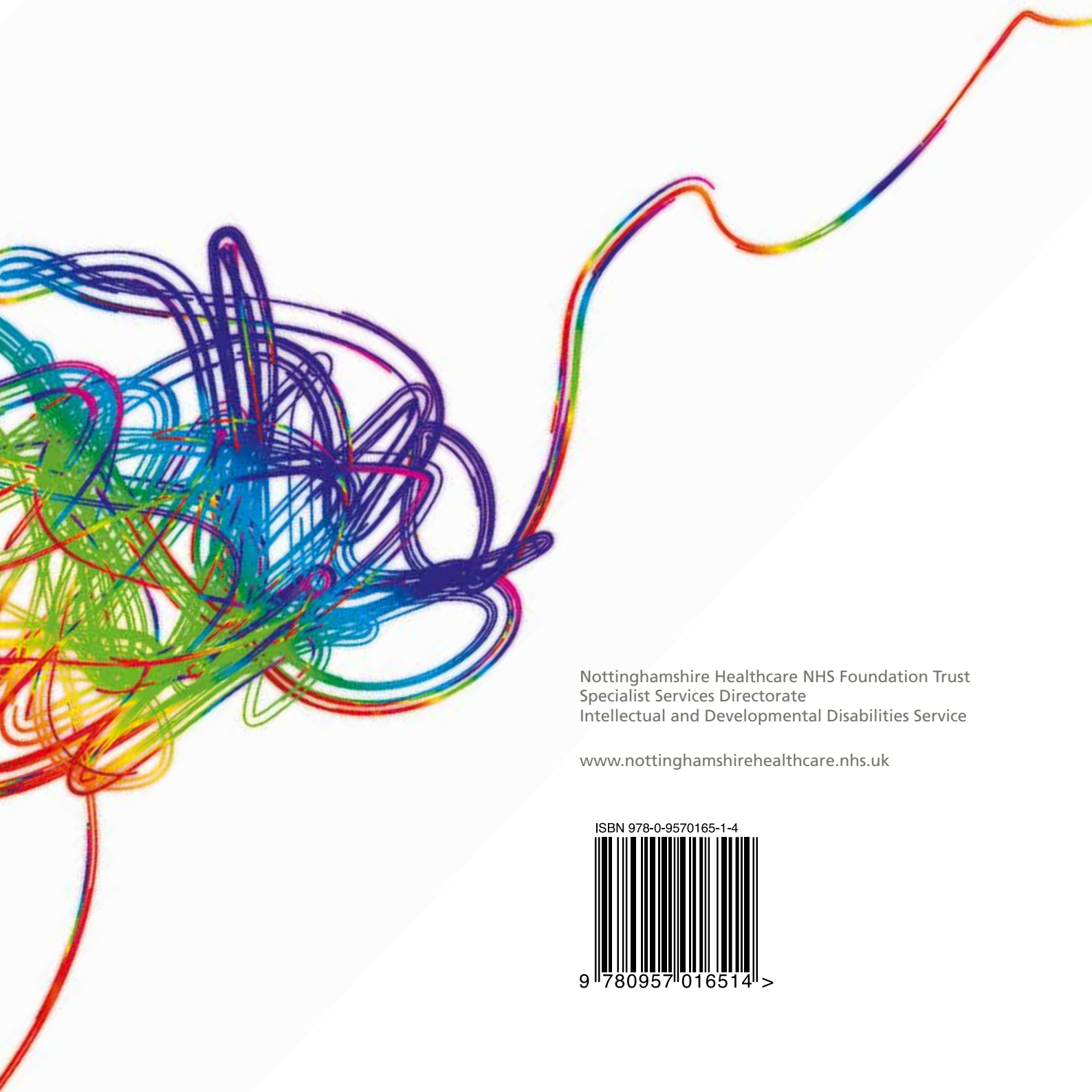
Kelly, K & Ramundo, P (2006)  
**You mean I'm not Lazy, Stupid or Crazy:  
A Self-Help Book for Adults with ADD**  
Simon & Schuster

Laver-Bradbuy, et al. (2010)  
**Step by Step Help for Children with ADHD:  
A Self-help Manual for Parents**  
Jessica Kingsley

Pera, G (2008)  
**Is it you, me, or adult ADD? Stopping the Roller Coaster When Someone  
You Love Has Attention Deficit Disorder**  
1201 Alarm Press

Tuckman, A (2009)  
**More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD**  
Specialty Press





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