

# Reframing ADHD: How Attention Shapes Adult Dynamics

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**ABSTRACT:** Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, commonly known as ADHD, is a prevalent psychiatric disorder. There are three different subtypes of ADHD: hyperactive, inattentive, and combined. This paper examines the impacts of ADHD on interpersonal relationships, particularly focusing on communication, social skills, and emotion regulation. Evidence suggests that studies involving children are far more detailed than those involving adults, leading to a notable gap in understanding adult development. This study analyzed data obtained from a survey developed to assess the experiences of adults with ADHD. As shown, ADHD has a remarkable influence on countless lives. By examining the obstacles adults with ADHD face, researchers can better understand how to support the development and maintenance of healthy relationships over time. The data revealed that individuals with combined-type ADHD may experience greater difficulties in their relationships compared to the other subtypes. The analysis further revealed that individuals with ADHD recognize social cues and body language, but experience difficulty in responding appropriately.

**KEYWORDS:** Intrapersonal Relationships, ADHD, Emotions, Communication, Regulation.

## ■ Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is prevalent among children, and studies have determined that it persists into adulthood in over half of the cases. ADHD affects a person's ability to focus and manage their impulses. From an early age, the ability to form and maintain relationships is greatly restricted in patients with ADHD. Extensive research has been conducted on children over the past years; however, research on adult relationships is minimal. ADHD has proven to significantly impact relationships from a very young age.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to analyze the issues adults with ADHD face in social settings while focusing on their understanding of social cues by gathering data through a survey with real-life examples.

## ■ Literature Review

ADHD directly impacts overall well-being, including the ability to organize tasks and make decisions. This disorder is relatively common, as around 5-7 percent of the population globally is affected by ADHD.<sup>2</sup> It can significantly impact daily living tasks, mainly through difficulties with maintaining focus and frequent forgetfulness. ADHD is separated into three different subtypes: inattentive, hyperactive, and combined. Hyperactive symptoms include constant excessive movement, difficulty remaining seated, and making impulsive decisions or actions. Inattentive symptoms include difficulty paying attention, organizational issues, or time management. Combined symptoms include difficulty paying attention, impulsive decisions, struggles with organization, and constant movement.<sup>3</sup>

One similarity among the three subtypes is their significant impact on relationships. Relationships are the basis of human nature; individuals thrive on relationships, and without stability, life can become less fulfilling. Research suggests that ADHD impacts the ability to converse in public settings, as individuals

with ADHD often get distracted.<sup>4</sup> For example, during conversation, those with ADHD lack the ability to pay constant attention, which leads to ignorance or interruption throughout the discussion.<sup>4</sup> A common issue faced by those with ADHD is impulsivity and a deficiency in understanding non-verbal signals. This includes a tendency to interrupt conversations, which, due to impulsivity, can discourage others from wanting to pursue relationships or friendships.<sup>5</sup> Children with ADHD often face challenges in building and sustaining friendships with their peers, with 50 to 60 percent affected.<sup>6</sup> Often lack of understanding and awareness impacts their understanding of social cues.<sup>4</sup> This creates challenges in relationships, as those with ADHD struggle to comprehend emotional dynamics and the feelings of others.

Additionally, those living with ADHD sometimes lack the emotional connection necessary to understand the viewpoints of others, which can be limiting. Because of this disconnect, individuals without ADHD may find the behavior of those with ADHD, especially those at a younger age, slightly off-putting, as their interpretation of society is different from their neurotypical counterparts. Those experiencing ADHD often overestimate their understanding of interpersonal skills from a very young age.<sup>7</sup>

ADHD can make it extremely difficult for one to grasp their environment, as they are often preoccupied with their attention deficit issues, leaving them less proficient at receiving nonverbal signals than others. Individuals are often hyper-focused on the completion of certain tasks, resulting in forgetfulness or completely ignoring their surroundings.<sup>4</sup> This can, in turn, cause them to overlook social cues entirely, as even focusing on the conversation itself becomes a challenge.

While these findings may carry into adulthood, research is primarily conducted on children. Current studies on adults with ADHD are significantly scarcer than studies on children;

thus, research examining how ADHD impacts adults in social roles is virtually nonexistent. This paper targets the complications that adults with ADHD face in social settings and their understanding of social cues.

It is crucial to understand how ADHD affects social relationships in adults, as it is currently known to hinder their ability to function effectively and engage in conventional social events. Understanding the challenges that individuals with ADHD face is necessary so that we can effectively intervene and help them create meaningful connections. Building on previous studies, this study hypothesizes that adults with ADHD face significant challenges in relationships and friendships due to difficulties in analyzing cues and regulating emotions.

## Materials

A laptop was the source for data collection and analysis. Google Forms was used for constructing and administering the survey for convenience. To get an appropriate and relevant population, the survey was distributed via CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), a non-profit organization for people with ADHD. This engaged a population that was credible.

## Methods

For data collection, an online-based survey was developed based on existing literature. Participants included adults formally diagnosed with ADHD and those without a formal diagnosis but whose symptoms were consistent with ADHD. The survey consisted of individuals with all three subtypes: hyperactive, inattentive, and combined. It also consisted of individuals who were diagnosed but were unsure of their subtype.

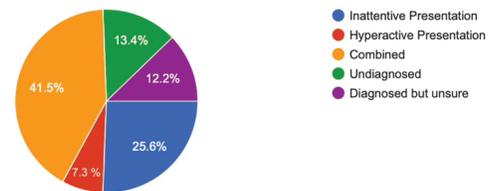
The survey was distributed to people via CHADD (a non-profit ADHD organization that requires membership for access to the survey). A convenience sample was taken, which resulted in a sample size of 81. To qualify for the study, participants must have been 18 or older and identified as having ADHD. The survey included 14 questions, including both multiple-choice and open-ended questions for primarily qualitative data. Participants completed a consent form prior to completion of the survey, ensuring complete privacy and confidentiality. The questionnaire was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to starting the study. The questions were primarily based on the biggest social issues that those with ADHD face, including their feelings when encountering a new group of people or their understanding of social cues.

The survey included participants residing in the United States. The participants had a mean age of 45.61 years old ranging from 19 to 79.

**Table 1:** Survey Questions Presented to Participants

Item No.	Survey Question
1.	Please state your age.
2.	Are you currently taking any kind of medication for ADHD?
3.	Do you work in the healthcare field?
4.	Which type of ADHD have you been diagnosed with?
5.	If you choose undiagnosed or diagnosed but unsure in the question above, please choose the answer that describes you the most.
6.	What are the biggest social challenges you face, please give examples?
7.	Do you feel you have a good understanding of social cues, similar to those without ADHD? Please give examples.
8.	Do you find yourself constantly wanting to interrupt conversations and/or difficult to not zone out of a conversation? Please give examples.
9.	Do you find yourself approaching a new group of people by trying to fit in, or rather gaining their attention?
10.	Do you find yourself reacting in situations, that those (who do not have ADHD) around you completely disregard?
11.	Do you find it difficult being empathetic in situations that it is necessary? Please give examples.
12.	How do you view friendship, like someone you can rely on or someone who you can only have a good time with? Please give examples.
13.	Do you feel like your peers treat you differently than others?
14.	Do you find that having ADHD affects your relationships significantly? Please give examples.

Which type of ADHD have you been diagnosed with?



**Figure 1:** Displays the responses for each subtype, including those who are undiagnosed as well as those who have been diagnosed but remain uncertain. The survey consisted of individuals with all three subtypes: hyperactive, inattentive, and combined, along with individuals who were diagnosed but were unsure of their subtype, and eight individuals were undiagnosed. This ensured that the data was not skewed or biased.

### Broader Social Interactions:

The survey focused on social interactions and real-life examples of issues that people with ADHD face. It included questions about social challenges they encountered and what they understood about social cues. The questions gave individuals the ability to share what they considered to be the most significant issue or challenge based on their personal experiences. These were designed to be open-ended and lacked specific guidelines, unlike other questions in the questionnaire.

### Specific Impairment:

Some questions were detailed and specific, including asking about the urge to constantly interrupt conversations, how to approach a new group of people, or the ability to be empathic. Those questions focused on a different impairment of ADHD. While each question may have been fixated on a specific topic, the responses were open-ended and varied based on experiences.

### ***Relationships:***

Other questions concentrated on the dynamics of relationships, involving those who had ADHD. Including how they viewed friendship, how they were treated by peers, and the impact of ADHD on relationships. These questions were directed to the influence of ADHD on all adult relationships.

### ■ **Analysis**

The data from each question were qualitatively analyzed. It was separated based on theme, and then each theme was analyzed. Similar answers were then further dissected, and summaries of each answer were written in a chart. Key examples were identified and included in this paper. Where relevant, quantitative sums were used to determine how many out of 80 dealt with the same issues or had the same beliefs.

### ■ **Results**

The analysis suggested three primary themes: social challenges, social cues, and relationships. ADHD is known to significantly hinder the ability to maintain relationships and thrive in social environments.

### ■ **Social Challenges:**

Common social challenges included time management, being on time, procrastination, and only completing a task when necessary. A recurring theme among many of the participants was issues with time, as their thought processes differed substantially from those of the average person. Their brain was often overwhelmed with the thought of completing the task; they felt lethargic and unable to move. One participant noted, "I can't sit down to complete tasks or assignments unless there's an insane amount of pressure to complete something quickly". This highlights the difficulty of completing a task when there is no intense motive.

In addition, the survey suggested that many faced difficulties paying attention during conversations in loud areas with music. They were so focused on filtering out the music that it impaired their ability to concentrate on the conversation. A constant fear was that, because of this difficulty, participants would not be able to fit in, and many noted anxieties about this situation. For example, 60 out of 80 participants stated a constant sense of concern about not fitting in. Contrary to popular knowledge, individuals with the disorder were aware of their tendency to overshare.

Organization was also a prevalent issue among most individuals, as the simple thought of organization completely exhausted the mind. The situation overwhelmed them; this led to stress over where to start and which task to tackle next, instead of focusing on cleaning. This generated the idea of seeming unorganized and messy to their peers. One participant explained, "They see my disorganization, and I feel that they get frustrated and want to take over some tasks. It usually makes me feel insecure". The data showed the individuals were aware of their disarray and even felt others were judging them for it. Responses from peers made it extremely difficult to properly communicate or create a lasting relationship.

Furthermore, many overthink responses during a conversation in large groups, forcing them to stay silent. Large groups were another struggle for individuals as they required a lot more energy, shifting between topics with no clear flow, which made it difficult to create a flow in conversation from beginning to end. Sensitivity also made conversations very demanding, as a participant recognized, "I am very sensitive and tend to view negative things as being said about me." Even if the negative comment was not made about them, they have shifted to a reactive mode, no longer staying focused on the topic. The participants noted that they were well aware of their difficulty in conversation and therefore assumed people spoke negatively about them. This provoked their ability to pay attention and properly engage in the conversation.

### ***Social Cues:***

Around 50% of the individuals agreed to understanding social cues, while the other half mentioned struggling with such cues. For example, one participant mentioned, "I get confused by the social cues, and at times I need to ask the other person what they mean exactly." While another participant noted, "Yes, I'm good at reading people". These two quotes symbolize the difference in functional challenges those with ADHD face. It reveals that each individual can face completely different issues having the same mental disorder. Many endorsed correctly interpreting facial expressions, tone of voice, reading a room, analyzing the emotions of people, and seeing if someone around them was nervous or anxious. However, understanding these emotions, many found themselves surrounded by too many emotions to cope with. They reported that reacting was extremely difficult, as they were overwhelmed. Each participant struggled with some portion of a relationship, whether that may have been reading a room or finding the correct words to communicate. Although their basic problem may be different, they caused the same result of not being able to properly maintain a relationship.

Most individuals without ADHD believe those with the disorder lack emotional understanding.<sup>8</sup> However, they lack the understanding of how to respond to the situation. For example, one participant mentioned, "While I can pick up on social cues, such as subtle gestures or tones of voice, I often overanalyze them or feel overwhelmed by how to respond". Individuals get anxious, constantly feeling judged by their surrounding peers, who seem to have no understanding of the event taking place. ADHD can lead to social anxiety, as the participants noted, due to previous experiences and trauma from their past. The primary issue was that, by the time they determined how to respond, the time to respond had already passed. Comprehending emotions was not difficult, but it was rather difficult to stop oneself from obsessively rereading the behavior. From an external perspective, it might seem like individuals with ADHD struggle to understand emotions. However, in some cases, they may simply find it difficult to respond appropriately, often feeling judged or misunderstood.

### **Relationships:**

A common theme among the participants was that relationships often felt like a task, rather than a source of enjoyment and reliability. While friendship was seen as someone to rely on and enjoy, staying in contact was difficult. They often went prolonged periods without contact, such as forgetting to respond to texts or calls, as they struggled with communication. This then led to overcompensation, followed by a realization of the complexities of maintaining a relationship. For instance, one participant explained, "I might randomly reach out to everyone I've ghosted and check in and overcompensate for my absence; however, the second that the active engagement is expected of me or the nice favors and effort I put in becomes expected, I suddenly cannot do it." This forces the creation of a never-ending cycle, as preserving relationships feels like a job with a constant, overwhelming feeling.

Another typical misunderstanding was that individuals with ADHD did not realize when they were interjecting in conversations.<sup>9</sup> However, participants from the survey noted that they interrupted conversations, as they felt the need to express their thoughts before they were forgotten. Frequently concentrating so hard on remembering what to say, rather than paying attention to the actual conversation, makes them seem uninterested or ignorant. While many of these participants resorted to excessive talking, many believed they were unaware of what they were doing. However, they were well aware and even comprehended the body language cues that indicate discomfort from others. Despite understanding the situation, they simply could not regulate their speech due to impulsiveness.

Overall, over 88% of participants agreed that ADHD significantly affected social roles. Participants explained that relationships felt emotionally draining and extremely overwhelming. They found it difficult to fully connect with others due to the significant expectations that come with it. One participant explained, "I also feel like I am analyzing people or expecting the worst in people (like expecting them to fail me)." Partially because of previous experiences and their existing fear of past awkward social relationships, the data suggested many were unable to trust those around them. This forced a wedge between each relationship, whether it was desired or not. Participants also suggested that a supportive, dependable partner is extremely important, as many require a person to rely on.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the survey was to understand how ADHD affects adult social relationships and to what extent. The data suggested that most participants believed that ADHD significantly impacted relationships in several ways. Most participants noted that they often felt surrounded by expectations that felt impossible to uphold. The research also suggested that some participants understood everything happening around them, while simply unsure of how to express themselves, forcing them to stay silent. Individuals also stated that they were aware of interjecting statements but were simply unable to stop themselves. The respondents experienced a sense of judgment for each response they gave, which made them overthink everything. Based on the data, an inference is made regarding

how individuals can be helped. People need to understand that individuals with this disorder require blunt and unambiguous answers. Peers, family members, and psychologists all need to create an environment that shows them that their answers and behavior are not constantly being judged. Others must treat these individuals' emotions similarly to the way they treat everyone else. Treating individuals with ADHD with patience and respect when they struggle to adapt or respond will help reduce their social anxiety.

### **Limitations:**

Some limitations include the limited sample size, with a little over 80 responses, but this is a respectable sample for qualitative analysis. Due to the limited sample size, the three different ADHD presentations did not have an even split. Since there was not enough information, a clear conclusion about the differences among presentations could not be drawn. Several of the participants were undiagnosed, and the responses were limited to the United States. However, removing the undiagnosed participants would not have led to a different conclusion. Other limitations include a lack of physical communication, as the survey was completed online. Due to the survey being conducted online, any misunderstandings regarding the questions or responses provided by participants could not be addressed, confusing both sides. This survey was completely anonymous and collected little data about the actual participants' protection; participant gender and race were not assessed. While this approach minimized potential risks, it also limited the ability to examine demographic differences or assess the representativeness of the sample. Given that this study has a small sample size, some limitations are an increased risk of bias, higher variability, and limited generalizability. In subsequent studies, a greater sample size, along with deeper questions specifically focusing on social relationships, would be useful. Future studies should aim to study the differences in behavior among the three different presentations and the gender differences.

### **Conclusion**

The results suggested that neurotypical individuals often doubted the level of understanding of those with ADHD, as some can comprehend social cues, and most understand the emotions experienced. However, they are simply unsure about what to do with the information they just grasped. Many individuals refrain from responding in conversations due to a fear of being judged based on their answers, often overanalyzing the situation long after the moment has passed. This may lead to these individuals appearing uninterested, shy, or unaware. This is especially true during extremely emotional situations, as the overload of emotions makes it difficult for them to respond and focus on each feeling. When emotionally intense situations arise, individuals with ADHD may stay quiet, not reply, or overreact. While neurotypical individuals may view this as being apathetic, they do not understand that the person with ADHD may be experiencing a sensory overload. It may be useful for family members, peers, and others interacting with individuals with ADHD to explicitly state how they want them to react or what they need from that person.

## ■ Acknowledgments

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## ■ Authors

Veda Sheth is a high school student whose experiences living with a neurodivergent individual inspired an interest in learning about ADHD and supporting those who live with it. This passion prompted her to create a project aimed at helping adults with ADHD by providing access to resources and community support. Veda is also the host of the Instagram podcast ADHDconnects, which explores how industrial-organizational psychology can improve the workplace for individuals with ADHD. Through these initiatives, Veda strives to promote inclusivity and create a community where everyone can thrive.