

REFRAMING: THE WOMEN'S KEY TO ADHD SUCCESS

by Ellen Littman, PhD

For women, the true significance of their ADHD diagnosis may best be understood in the context of the gender roles that govern their behavior. Even today, most women have an ingrained awareness of the sociocultural ideals of femininity that serve as a template for appropriate behavior. Women with ADHD often feel compelled to strive for these ideals despite the fact that they call upon just those executive functions that challenge most of those with ADHD. Regardless of how successfully they compensate for their difficulties, many women with ADHD perceive that their adequacy is frequently called into question. Despite immense investments of time and energy, they may feel intensely stressed and still thwarted in their efforts. Fearing rejection for their differences, they may choose to isolate themselves with their shame and self-criticism. While the interplay of ADHD symptoms, hormones, and cultural expectations is complex, feeling trapped in a losing battle is a matter of perspective. And perspective is something that can be changed.

Our culture defines women in relation to others, and measures them by their success in this context. The idealized women's role as home manager requires multiple task coordination in a highly distracting and often unpredictable environment. Tasks are often vaguely defined, repetitive, uninteresting, and lacking external incentives or supports. The expected context is one of attuned caretaking, expressed in a calm and pleasant manner, with careful attention to the physical appearance of self and home. Women with ADHD accept this job description as a given, and are demoralized by the implication that the motivation and ability to achieve in this arena should be instinctive. These demands require the specific executive functioning abilities that are problematic for those with ADHD. Nonetheless, women with ADHD are determined to pursue this nearly impossible "job from hell" as their mission.

Society still supports a woman's obligation to accommodate others, and women with ADHD valiantly sacrifice their needs in their attempts to serve others--until their own unaddressed needs ultimately overwhelm them. Endeavoring to make connectedness a priority, women with ADHD may agree to, or even initiate, social engagements without thought of self-protection. Striving for acceptance, women with ADHD regularly take on more than they can manage. Even when their physical and/or emotional boundaries are being violated, they may not feel entitled to object. Sadly, they can become their own harshest critics, often assigning themselves negative, dismissive labels in reaction to perceived failures. Plagued by a continual sense of demoralization, it is not surprising that most women with ADHD struggle with low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness.

Perhaps it is not a question of success so much as the emotional cost of succeeding.

Women with ADHD are determined to compensate so as to fulfill the standards that they feel define success as a woman. They may be rigidly hypervigilant about controlling their behavior, investing extraordinary amounts of energy in the goal of maintaining a seamlessly 'appropriate' facade. This "mask of competency" may prove effective in the short-run, but it comes at a heavy price: as they pursue the perfectionistic demands they deem necessary, they are constantly burdened by anxiety and exhaustion. Struggling to do what appears effortless for other women, they feel like impostors, fearing discovery at any moment.

On one hand, this may appear to constitute their definition of success: they have proven that they can do what other women do. On the other hand, that very success obscures the internal chaos with which they battle. When we are directed to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, we miss the essence of who he is. Similarly, when their struggle is hidden, their experience cannot be validated, and they cannot truly be known. Instead, it reinforces the cultural stereotypes--that women are caretakers who should not have to ask for help. It is this discrepancy between successful public performance and private inner turmoil that undermines the lives of even the most successful women with ADHD. The irony lies in the fact that the search for validation of their public self deprives them of the opportunity to receive validation for the hard-earned triumphs of their private selves.

Science has definitively demonstrated that the basis of ADHD is neurobiological, and not characterological. More and more clinicians recognize ADHD as a variation in brain wiring that contributes to some being differently-abled, but not disabled. It is true that those with ADHD march to the beat of their own drummer. Whether it is labeled as a function of difficulty conforming or as 'outside the box' creative problem-solving is determined by the lens through which it is viewed. Some can embrace their uniqueness, but others fear the consequences of veering off the conventional path. They assume that the judgements of others will be critical, and they will again be misunderstood. Reframing ADHD involves believing in your inherent worth as you are, and feeling entitled to pursue what actually works for you. Rejecting conformity and instead constructing goals that fit your world view lead to acceptance of a more realistic sense of potential, and a far more positive self-concept.

The key to reframing is this: you can't direct the wind, but you can adjust your sails. That is, you cannot change the outside world, but you can reframe the way in which you interpret expectations and choose to respond to them. This involves questioning what had previously been assumed or accepted without question. Learning to look through an ADHD user-friendly lens will allow you to accept yourself as you are, and not to aspire to an unrealistic and unhealthy societal ideal. By learning to appreciate the importance of your own values over society's demands, you can develop a unique yardstick by which to measure yourself. This yardstick is designed to define your goals based on utilizing your strengths while acknowledging

your difficulties. You can reassess the best ways for you to balance your needs vs. others' needs, and work vs. play. You will be able to renegotiate your relationships, feeling entitled to ask for what you need, and to jettison those relationships where it isn't possible to get anything you need. You will also be able to create or identify ADHD-friendly environments where you will be appreciated and thrive. With greater self-respect and compassion for your challenges, the glass will gradually appear half-full rather than half-empty, and you will realize that you've come to value yourself. Empowered by a new confidence, the possibility of fulfilling your dreams will come into focus.

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