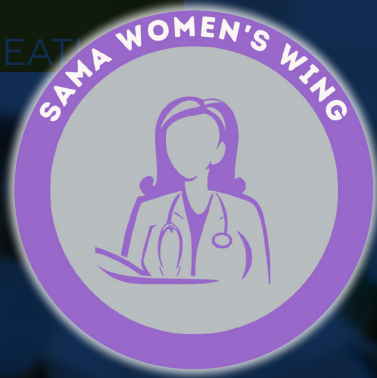




From the desk of the Women's Wing

ADHD in women – undiagnosed and misunderstood

SAMA Communications

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is not just a childhood condition. And it doesn't only affect boisterous schoolboys.

The SA Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP) is spotlighting a struggle that many women and girls have endured for decades: living with undiagnosed or misunderstood ADHD.

Dr Wisani Makhomisané, SASOP member and specialist psychiatrist, says that for too long, ADHD has worn a masculine mask, depicted as a disorder of noisy, impulsive boys bouncing off classroom walls.

"But this stereotype has hidden a different, quieter experience, one lived by women and girls who internalise their symptoms and are often overlooked, misdiagnosed or dismissed entirely."

"ADHD in women is not less severe. It's just less visible"

"ADHD in women is not less severe. It's just less visible," says Dr Makhomisané. "These women are not lazy, disorganised or overemotional. They are living with a neurodevelopmental condition that has been poorly understood through a gendered lens."

ADHD is diagnosed in boys at nearly twice the rate of girls. [Global data from the CDC](#) reveals diagnosis rates of 14.5% in boys, v. 8% in girls. These disparities grow with age, with women often waiting 4 - 5 years longer than men for a diagnosis.

"In SA, ADHD remains underdiagnosed in general, but particularly so in adult women," says Dr Makhomisané. "Many are first misdiagnosed with anxiety, depression or even borderline personality disorder. Their ADHD is only recognised much later, often after years of ineffective treatment and self-doubt," she says.

"Women are also more likely to be prescribed sedatives or antidepressants before ADHD is even considered. The

result? Mismanaged care, fragmented support and rising comorbidities, including eating disorders and mood instability."

Dr Makhomisané says that, unlike boys who may display externalised hyperactivity, girls tend to internalise their struggles. They are often seen as dreamy, anxious, sensitive or perfectionistic – qualities that are mistaken for personality traits or emotional immaturity, rather than symptoms of a neurodevelopmental disorder.

"Trying to meet societal expectations of being emotionally composed, high-achieving and socially pleasing, many girls develop sophisticated coping strategies, masking their symptoms through overachievement, rigidity or people-pleasing. This masking is mentally exhausting, often leading to burnout, low self-esteem and a painful sense of never being 'enough'," says Dr Makhomisané.

"Motherhood can bring this struggle into sharp relief. Executive dysfunction turns everyday caregiving into an overwhelming experience. Emotional overload becomes routine, while guilt and shame grow in silence."

ADHD manifests differently in females, often leaning toward inattentiveness and emotional dysregulation. Here are the signs:

ADHD in girls, often misinterpreted as immaturity or anxiety:

- easily distracted, forgetful and frequently misplace items
- difficulty completing tasks, organising or managing time
- emotional sensitivity and frequent mood shifts
- verbally impulsive and hyper-talkative.

ADHD in women:

- chronically overwhelmed, forgetful and procrastinating
- low self-esteem and masking behaviours
- emotional dysregulation, especially rejection-sensitive dysphoria
- co-occurring anxiety and depression.

"For women living with undiagnosed ADHD, daily life can feel chaotic or overwhelming, but instead of getting support, many try to hide or manage their symptoms with unhealthy coping strategies that seem successful but are draining," says Dr Makhomisané. "These inefficient coping behaviours hide the real challenges, delaying diagnosis or support, and leading to burnout, anxiety or depression because the woman blames herself instead of understanding that her brain works differently, and needs different strategies."

These unhealthy strategies include emotional withdrawal from fear of criticism or rejection, engaging in impulsive escapism such as binge shopping or making risky decisions, overcommitting and people-pleasing, and masking and perfectionism to compensate for executive dysfunction.

"We urge healthcare professionals, educators and families to become more attuned to how ADHD presents in women – not as loud behaviour, but as persistent overwhelm, perfectionism and emotional burnout."

Treatment options include medication along with psychotherapy to build emotional regulation, reframe self-critical thoughts and enhance day-to-day management and functioning. Effective lifestyle changes, such as exercise, nutrition, mindfulness and good sleep hygiene, strengthen both physical and mental health.

"If we can shift the lens, we can transform lives," says Dr Makhomisané. "We need gender-sensitive diagnostic tools, increased public awareness, and support systems that meet women where they are, not where outdated stereotypes place them."



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Letters to the Editor page aims to give members the opportunity to comment on, query, complain or compliment on any matter, topic, incident, event or issue in their particular field or with regard to general healthcare, which you feel should be shared with your colleagues and fellow readers.

Please note that letters:

- should be no longer than 500 words
- can be published anonymously, but writer details must be submitted to the editor in confidence
- must be on subjects pertinent to healthcare delivery
- should be submitted before the 6th of the month in order to be published in the next issue of *SAMA Insider*.

Please email contributions to: Diane de Kock, dianed@samedical.org.

