
Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University

CSP 500: Introduction to Counseling/Mental Health Intervention

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Resiliency in Women Facing Adult Diagnosis of ADHD or Autism

Introduction

Many women who receive an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism) diagnosis go undiagnosed until adulthood. As a woman facing an adult diagnosis, multiple risk factors increase in likelihood including addiction, self-harm, and unhealthy relationships. Despite the high likelihood of risk factors and limited research on preventative strategies, women who face adult diagnoses of ADHD or Autism grow in resilience. Resilience is demonstrated in women facing adult diagnosis in multiple ways including an increased sense of self and agency as well as increased levels of self-compassion.

Literature Review

Women Diagnosed with ADHD/Autism as Adults:

Many women who receive an ADHD or Autism diagnosis go undiagnosed until adulthood despite showing symptoms. Multiple studies reviewed and explained how statistically young boys are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD and Autism than young girls. In the school setting, young boys get diagnosed with autism at a rate of (5:1) compared to young girls. This ratio changed to (2:1) as adults, meaning many young girls are not being diagnosed until adulthood. Another study by Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. (2016), stated that 12 out of 14, or 85.7% of participants faced misdiagnoses during childhood. The studies listed give insight into how the phenotype descriptions for people diagnosed with Autism and ADHD often align more with stereotypical behaviors that are often more noticed in young boys rather than young girls. Because of this misinterpretation of phenotypes and symptoms, these studies also examined how women who received a diagnosis as an adult had struggled earlier in life and often went unnoticed. After understanding how the misrepresentation of ADHD/Autism has evolved,

multiple important factors come to light including; how women who have been diagnosed as adults share similar experiences of “camouflaging behavior” or struggling with internalizing behaviors, the comorbidity of ADHD/Autism and substance abuse, self-harm and unhealthy relationships, and how receiving a diagnosis and understanding their neurodivergence has led to a stronger sense of self-compassion and resilience. (Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. 2016; Baldwin, S., & Costley, D. 2016; Cottone, D. M., & McCabe, P. C. 2019; Cridland, E. K., Jones, S. C., Caputi, P., & Magee, C. A. 2014)

Camouflaging and Internalizing:

Camouflaging within the neurodivergent community can be seen as engaging in behaviors that help someone appear to pass as neurotypical. Camouflaging often happens more often in young girls rather than young boys because of societal pressures to fit in. Multiple studies shed light on a societal issue of young girls feeling pressured to fit a mold of what being a “typical girl” looks like. Because of camouflaging, many young girls hide what would be perceived as symptoms and instead internalize their behavior which can lead to struggles with substance abuse, mental health, unhealthy relationships, and self-harm. (Beck, J. S., Lundwall, R. A., Gabrielsen, T., Cox, J. C., & South, M. 2020; McQuaid, G. A., Lee, N. R., & Wallace, G. L. 2022)

Risk factors: Adult Diagnosis and Substance Abuse, Unhealthy Relationships, and Self

Harm:

Due to challenges that arise from masking and internalizing behaviors, many women who receive a diagnosis of ADHD/Autism as adults share having struggled with emotional regulation

and comorbid mental health issues. Multiple studies look into how risk factors of substance abuse, unhealthy relationships, and self-harm can arise. (Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W. 2016; Margherio et al. 2020; Mochrie, K. D., Whited, M. C., Cellucci, T., Freeman, T., & Corson, A. T. 2020; Swanson, E. N., Owens, E. B., & Hinshaw, S. P. 2014)

Margherio Et Al. explains that many people who struggle with ADHD experience difficulties with emotional regulation and how “alcohol use may serve as a means of coping with or avoiding the experience of negative affect or as a means of amplifying pleasurable emotions” (Margherio et al., 2016). Based on the data it is seen that substance abuse as a result of struggling with emotional regulation is a risk factor associated with an adult diagnosis of ADHD or autism.

When looking at risk factors associated with unhealthy relationships, Bargiela, S., Steward, R., & Mandy, W showed a prevalence of sexual abuse and intimate partner violence within relationships when surveying women who experienced an adult diagnosis of Autism. The study interviewed 14 women and talked with them about how facing an adult diagnosis was difficult for them. During the interviews, sexual assault was seen in 9/14 participants, and intimate partner violence in 8/14 participants.

Because of the combination of risks of victimization, substance abuse, and struggles with emotional regulation there was also a higher reporting of self-harm and higher rates of anxiety and depression. One study looked at the prevalence of self-harm and suicide attempts within the population of young girls with ADHD. Based on the study it showed, “internalizing symptoms during adolescence emerged as a significant partial mediator of the ADHD-suicide attempt linkage.” (Swanson, E. N., Owens, E. B., & Hinshaw, S. P. 2014). Based on the research of multiple studies, it is clear that there is a link between struggling with symptoms of ADHD or autism and comorbid mental health struggles.

Resilience & Self-Compassion:

Resilience looks at how people are capable of adapting and overcoming the adversities life hands them. Both Masten, A. S. (2001) and (Werner, E. 2012) explain that the strength of overcoming adversity leads to higher resilience and more positive outcomes later in life.

Resilience can be strengthened with protective factors. Each protective factor strengthens a persons ability to persevere and adapt as they face challenges throughout life.

Although there appears to be an abundance of risk factors associated with Women who receive a late diagnosis of Autism/ADHD, there are also some key protective factors that highlight how resilience has formed. A few studies (Dvorsky, M.R., Langberg, J.M. 2016; Wilson, R. B., Thompson, A. R., Rowse, G., Smith, R., Dugdale, A.-S., & Freeth, M. 2023) show how when receiving a diagnosis, many women gain a stronger sense of agency, self-compassion and acceptance of themselves.

Although Dvorsky and Langberg's (2016) research is mostly aimed at how children with ADHD can become more resilient, it is able to look at promotive factors that highlight the importance of building individual character traits. Dvosky and Langberg (2016) look at how positive self- perception aids in resilience. This ability to strengthen self- perception can be supportive to a person who struggles with social support. Because women who face adult diagnosis may not have had supportive social support, it is important to look at how intrinsic characteristics can be strengthened in order to build resilience.

Similarly, Wilson et al. (2023) discusses the strength in self compassion that is empowering after subjects face a diagnosis. This research looks at how obtaining a diagnosis can provide an increased understanding of ones self. After receiving a diagnosis, clients are able to

begin unmasking which can lead to more self-acceptance. Based on this research it can be inferred that the ability to grow in self-agency and self-compassion directly aids in resilience.

Methods

Procedures

To gain an understanding of the topic, research was done in multiple ways. Research was sourced through the Chapman Library through EBSCO and ProQuest. Topics of research included women with autism, women with ADHD, protective factors, resilience, adult diagnosis, and gender differences.

Interviewee

Ali is 43 and currently lives in San Diego with her wife and two foster children. Ali grew up in southern California, an only child with two parents. When she was eight years old, her parents got divorced and she shared her time with her two parents. Ali shared that she loves her dad and always got along with him. Ali struggled to get along with her mother after her mom got remarried. Ali's stepfather was emotionally abusive and she shared that although it never became physical, she lived in fear that it would one day. Ali always knew that she was different than most kids. She shared that she was called "overly emotional" and "too sensitive" by both friends and family members. Ali shared that she believed something was wrong with her and that she couldn't think and act like other kids.

In school, Ali was able to pass tests and be moved into honors classes but explained that she struggled to get by. She always blamed herself and said that she was lazy and unmotivated despite being an academically strong student. As she got older school became more challenging and Ali went from being seen as a "gifted" student, to barely passing her classes. She grew up

not understanding what the disconnect was between her abilities and her perceived effort. Because of her growing struggles with school and relational issues at home, Ali turned to marijuana and drinking at a younger age. Ali shared that she would often engage in people-pleasing behaviors to make friends and get into relationships. Looking back on her adolescence, Ali sees that she struggled with feeling accepted and was seeking love from others to feel accepted and “good enough.”

The same struggles of not feeling good enough followed Ali throughout her early 20's. Ali shared that undergraduate university felt like torture and was barely able to get a passing GPA needed to graduate. After university, Ali struggled to keep a job and faced “failing” for the first time after getting fired from two different jobs. The overwhelming feelings of failure and not being good enough led Ali to seek validation and acceptance in other ways. Ali shared that she developed an addiction to experiences that would offer a dopamine release including marijuana use and sex. During this time Ali shared that she jumped from relationship to relationship and was trying to gain approval and love from others to feel happiness.

It wasn't until Ali was in 40s that she received a diagnosis of ADHD. Ali learned about how ADHD can appear differently in women by watching TikTok and asked her doctor for an assessment. Receiving a diagnosis changed Ali's life. She shared that getting information on ADHD and starting medication felt like the pieces of her life finally clicked together. After starting a treatment plan for her ADHD with a psychiatrist, Ali was able to find a job that worked for her and felt more in control of her life. Now that Ali has tools to support herself she can see that some of her perceived weaknesses are now strengths. Ali shared that her ability to build relationships and connect with others is a strength she never appreciated until she started therapy. Ali also shared that she can regulate her feelings more and now understands when she is having a

big emotional response to something. Overall, receiving a diagnosis and finding a treatment plan that works for her helped Ali feel whole for the first time in her life. Looking back Ali wishes she could have received a diagnosis earlier but is glad that she gets to be a voice to others who may be struggling. If Ali could talk to her younger self or someone else struggling with what she struggled with she would tell them, “I promise, there is nothing wrong with you.”

Findings

Based on the interview and research, two major themes of resilience in Women diagnosed with Autism or ADHD later in life can be found. When looking at the protective factors that support resiliency in Women facing a diagnosis, part of the resilience comes from gaining agency. The strength and agency that comes from accepting, and understanding what the diagnosis means to the person forms strength and resilience. Resiliency is also built from forming self-compassion. Self-compassion can be formed from many ways including increased mental health support or coping mechanisms.

While sharing her story, Ali was able to express how obtaining her diagnosis felt like a door was opened for her. Throughout her whole life, she felt as if something was wrong with her. She struggled and felt like she wasn't fit to handle life the way others around her were. This is similar to Wilson et al. (2023) where researchers found that when subjects received a diagnosis, they were able to begin to treat their symptoms with kindness and grace instead of facing struggles with self-criticism. When Ali was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 40, and started medication and therapy for the first time, it felt like her life finally made sense. She was able to gain a sense of agency from having a diagnosis. Through her diagnosis, Ali was able to reclaim parts of herself that she was ashamed of and start seeing her self-identified weaknesses as

symptoms that she could now address and make sense of. Through understanding her diagnosis, Ali also shared that she now sees some of the superpowers that can come from having ADHD.

Now I look at the relationships I leaned on and see it not as a crutch, but as a super power. I never realized before that my ability to feel deeply and connect with others, could be seen as a strength.

This is discussed when Dvorsky and Langberg (2016) look at the impact of self perceptions and how clients who are able to recognize their ability to accomplish tasks improves their resiliency. Ali shared that she has always felt like even though she has struggled in many ways, she has also always been able to connect with others and has always been complimented on the energy she has. Now that she knows more about how ADHD is presented in women, she can understand all the different parts of her that are unique and can see them as strengths.

After understanding what it means to have ADHD or autism, an increased ability to engage in self-compassion aids in resiliency. Wilson et al. (2023) discusses how one of the key themes in aiding resilience is the ability to grow in self compassion and autonomy. Based on these findings, Ali shared that because she knows what the common symptoms of ADHD are, she can better understand herself, her actions, and her feelings. This aligns with what is discussed by Wilson et al. (2023) The research shows that receiving a diagnosis impacts and enhances self kindness (Wilson et al 2023).

Getting my diagnosis saved my life. I know understand that everything is a spectrum and if I know what to do when I am experiencing something hard, it becomes so much less hard. Nothing was ever wrong with me.

With the support of her psychiatrist and therapist, she shared that she can give herself more grace and understanding when she is struggling. Her ability to engage in self-compassion has helped

support her through her challenges with ADHD. Self-compassion is a skill that can be improved upon. When looking at protective factors that aid in resilience, it is clear that coping strategies and mental health supports aid in building self-compassion.

Discussion

Implications

This information is vital for School Psychologists because of the disproportionate ratio of (5:1), there is a clear need for more child finding in schools. Statistically, we know there is a population of young girls who are struggling in ways that often go unnoticed so there needs to be more effort put into child finding particularly with young girls who may have ADHD and Autism. There also needs to be more education on what supports there are for young girls struggling as well as ways to support school psychologists in identifying autism and ADHD.

For clinicians, this information is also vital in developing methods of assessing for Autism and ADHD. Because there are different phenotypes based on gender, there are differences in the ways clinicians recognize and diagnose. To best support clients struggling, there need to be clear ways to recognize symptoms that may be going unnoticed due to gender differences. Clinicians also can gain an understanding of how to support the mental health of their clients by understanding the struggles their clients may be experiencing and how that may impact their well-being. More supportive and encouraging mental health practices may be supportive as well as educating clients on understanding how their diagnosis may be impacting their mental health.

Future Research

Due to limited research on resiliency in women facing an adult diagnosis of Autism or ADHD, there needs to be both more qualitative and quantitative research. Many resources deeply explore problems and risk factors, there needs to be more research on protective factors for women facing a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD. In addition, there is a need for more research on the benefits of mental health support for women facing a diagnosis of ADHD or Autism that aids in Stronger self-agency and self-compassion.

There is also a new need for academic research on ADHD and Autism in women. Due to the power of social media, many women have access to learning about ADHD/Autism and discovering that they may be struggling and need a diagnosis. Because the information is on social media it is often not backed by research and instead focused primarily on personal narratives and experience. Because of this, there needs to be more academic research that is peer-reviewed to support the new rise in ADHD diagnosis.

Limitations

The research is limited in that there is a lot of research depicting and explaining risk factors for those diagnosed with autism and ADHD later in life but lacks research on protective factors. Due to this limited research, some conclusions can be made on what aids in resilience but there isn't enough research to fully support conclusions. Because there is little research on the population, when looking at additional factors including; socioeconomic background, race, and ethnicity, there is almost no research in the area. There is also limited research on gender differences within ADHD and autism and therefore conclusions were made based on the

information obtained, however, more research on gender differences is necessary to support the population.

Self-Reflection

I feel extremely grateful that I was able to meet and talk with Ali. I felt moved by what she has experienced and how she has persevered. Hearing stories from women who are in their 40's and beyond inspires me because often what we hear from the media only talks about young women. I felt inspired knowing that life can change at any age and that we get to decide if we ever stop learning and growing. Hearing Ali's story also motivated me in the learning I am doing at Chapman. I was a gender studies major while in undergrad and have always felt passionate about empowering women. Hearing about how so many identities can intersect makes me even more excited to start my work in schools.

After Ali shared her story she asked me some questions about why I was interested in the topic. I shared with her that one of the reasons I am passionate about hearing women's stories is because I struggled with my mental health as a student but often went unnoticed because I was described as shy and overachieving. I shared that my experience is what led me into schools as a teacher and why I decided to attend graduate school. I felt very connected with what Ali shared about regarding feelings of failure and not being "enough" or "worthy" of love and acceptance. Although my feelings may come from a different place, I see commonalities with the societal pressures placed on women and how those pressures can lead to mental health struggles.

As a school psychologist, I want to help reframe the way we address gendered differences when assessing students with disabilities. I want to be a part of the change and make sure that I create a safe place for all students to share their concerns, including those who may not normally fit the mold. I also believe part of the change needed is in dismantling gender norms as a society.

I know I can do my part to challenge norms and I aspire to use the power I will hold at schools to challenge those norms as well.

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