





# The 'F' word

When friends seem to be few and far between, ADHD could be the underlying culprit playing havoc with your friendships and social life

Words Emma Green

**W**e all know that friendships play a pivotal role in boosting the quality of our lives – whether that's through providing support, companionship or a sense of belonging. What is less known, though, is the direct hand that our friendships have in our life's potential quantity. Researchers at Brigham Young University correlated data from 148 longitudinal studies and found that those with strong social ties have a 50% greater chance of life longevity than those with weaker connections.

As important as it is to have a strong support system around us, for many with ADHD, their attempts at trying to build and maintain friendships over the years are too often a solemn tale riddled with mishaps, disappointments and disillusionment. With an estimated 3-4% of the adult population having ADHD, how can this demographic learn to navigate a domain that so often eludes them?

## ADHD and social development

As children, we learn social skills, such as listening, making conversation and reading non-verbal cues through observational learning, usually by watching and copying others. Children with ADHD, however, often struggle to master these essential skills due to the challenges

that arise from the core symptoms of their condition – impulsivity, inattention and hyperactivity. Impulsivity can manifest in behaviours such as blurting things out without thinking, dominating conversations or constantly interrupting others. Inattention can present as being easily distracted, showing disinterest or struggling to stay on topic during a conversation. Hyperactivity, meanwhile, can appear as being overly talkative, too loud or coming across as boisterous or aggressive.

While ADHD affects everyone differently and can depend on the type that someone has, certain deficits in executive functioning, such as difficulties in regulating emotions or reading social cues, can make it even harder for children with ADHD to interpret and manoeuvre social dynamics effectively. Children with ADHD often struggle to relate to their peers of the same age, preferring to socialise and play with younger children. This may be due to the later maturation of certain brain structures in those with ADHD such as the cortex, which is responsible for attention, planning and complex thought processes.

Because of this delay in development, children with ADHD are quite often misunderstood or worse, rejected by their peers. Research has indicated that not only are they more likely to have fewer friends and less satisfying friendships than neurotypical children, but they are



best friend's birthday," says Lucinda, who was diagnosed with ADHD inattentive type in her thirties. "It wasn't even that I forgot - I knew it was her birthday and that I needed to send her a card and a present but I kept putting it off. I felt so guilty that I then isolated myself and couldn't message her."

This forgetfulness might be a result of something called object permanence. People with ADHD are prone to forgetting about tasks, objects and even people that aren't immediately visible or engaging, a sort of 'out of sight, out of mind' phenomenon. For instance, they might forget to respond to messages or fail to reach out to someone for months at a time simply because the visual cue isn't a constant in their

## "ADHD children have fewer opportunities to practise and hone their social skills"

four times more likely to be victims of bullying too.

As positive relations with peers play an important role in a child's social development, this can create a vicious cycle of ADHD children having fewer opportunities to practise and hone their social skills, further delaying social functioning. Their repeatedly failed attempts at socialising can become associated with feelings of exclusion, humiliation and shame, potentially leading them to simply want to avoid it altogether.

### How ADHD can affect friendships

Social relations become even more complex as children enter their teens and then adulthood. Forming and maintaining friendships as an adult can be a challenge for most people, without the structure of school or extra-curricular activities

to facilitate this, but for those with ADHD, it can prove even harder. The skills required to maintain friendships, such as setting up plans and following through with them or remembering to check in regularly with friends, need effective executive functioning, something that those with ADHD are not typically great at. Furthermore, behaviours caused by executive dysfunction can be interpreted by others as flakiness, rudeness or simply a lack of care.

One example of this is forgetfulness. Memory issues are common with ADHD, usually resulting in missed birthdays and anniversaries, unanswered texts or forgetting key information such as the names of a friend's kids. This absent-mindedness can give the impression of being unreliable or uncaring, which can strain friendships over time. "I recently forgot my





immediate environment. As our lives become more digitalised and there is less physical overlap with friends, it's easy to see how friendships can often slip through the net.

Another related difficulty is inconsistency. ADHD can cause fluctuations in mood and energy, leading to periods where someone might socially withdraw and be unreachable for a while and yet at other times, they might be eager to socialise and engage with others. Inconsistency can also present as a pattern of last-minute cancellations, as those with ADHD can struggle to stick to plans that were made weeks or months in advance. This can be confusing for those on the receiving end and this unpredictability can make it hard

to sustain friendships. Even when they do manage to carry out their social commitments, difficulties with focus, attention and listening may hinder their friendships further. Oversharing, zoning out halfway through a conversation or constantly interrupting others can make it hard for friends to feel valued or heard.

Emotional dysregulation is also a common, but often overlooked, symptom of ADHD, although it is not a diagnostic criterion for the condition itself. Emotional dysregulation refers to difficulties in managing and regulating emotional responses, which often results in intense or disproportionate reactions to situations. It can present as heightened sensitivity, ruminating on a negative comment or perceived



## Improving social skills 101

In most cases, people with ADHD know what it is they should do to improve their social skills but struggle to implement them - another classic hallmark of the condition. Fortunately, social skills can be developed and strengthened through targeted practise and making small deliberate tweaks over time can make a big difference.

The first step is to cultivate self-awareness around how your ADHD behaviours affect your social interactions. You could do this by consciously monitoring yourself, recording conversations or roping in someone to gently point out any social cues you may have missed or any social faux pas you may have made without realising. Observing how others interact or watching their body language can help to give further insight.

Another necessary step is finding a trusted friend or therapist to act as a 'friendship coach' to practise your social skills with. Role-playing different social situations together or rehearsing 'social scripts' in a safe space can give you the necessary confidence to navigate everyday social interactions. Pick a skill you would like to work on, such as active listening or not interrupting others, and then enlist your designated coach to give you honest feedback on your performance.





## Making and keeping friends

### Avoid avoidance

It may be easier said than done but you need to put yourself out there on a regular basis. Socialising and the curation of friendships are lifelong habits that we must implement consistently. By setting yourself targets such as talking to a set number of people each time you're in a social situation, you can find a new-found purpose to keep trying.

### Consider disclosing your condition

Being upfront about your condition can help to prevent any misinterpretations of your behaviour and encourage others to be supportive, instead of feeling hurt or ignored by you.

### Find people with shared interests

Finding groups or clubs based on something you're passionate about - whether it's a sport, hobby, or volunteer activity - can make socialising feel natural. When you're engaged in something you love, it's easier to feel more comfortable starting conversations and finding others who share your enthusiasm.

### Block out time for socialising

Designating specific times, like Sunday evenings, for communication, can prevent relationships from fading. Set aside a few minutes each week to send texts or check in on friends. Even short messages like "Hey, just thinking of you!" can go a long way in maintaining connections.

slight for days on end, lashing out at others or rapid shifts in moods. This volatility can be misinterpreted as being overly dramatic or moody and friends may distance themselves as they're uncertain about how to handle the friendship.

Some people with ADHD may turn to masking as a coping mechanism for dealing with social difficulties. By suppressing or altering their ADHD behaviours, they can attempt to fit in socially and avoid negative judgments. "It can be quite difficult," says Lucinda. "You try to put on this best version of yourself which is exhausting, so then you withdraw because you don't have the energy to be that person anymore."

## How comorbidities further impact friendship

ADHD is associated with several mental health problems that can

make social interactions even more difficult. One example of this is rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD), a condition where individuals experience intense emotional responses to perceived rejection or criticism. Often affiliated with ADHD but not exclusive to it, RSD amplifies feelings of shame, disappointment, and insecurity in social interactions and can be an additional obstacle for those with ADHD in forming and maintaining friendships.

Kaylee, who was also diagnosed with ADHD in her thirties, knows this feeling only too well. "It's that dread of what other people think of you," she says. "You constantly think that people don't like you. Everything that you say or do, you think people will be talking and laughing about you behind your back."

If left unchecked, RSD can develop into social anxiety, which is a disorder characterised by an intense fear of social situations where someone may be judged,

**"Some people may turn to masking as a coping mechanism for dealing with social difficulties"**





criticised, or embarrassed. It's not hard to see why ADHD and social anxiety might go hand-in-hand - having to constantly worry about making social gaffes would be enough to make anybody want to avoid socialising with others. "It's almost as if I don't want to bother making friends because there's this expectation that it isn't going to work out - because most of the time, it hasn't," explains Lucinda. In some cases, those with ADHD may stick with or settle for friends who treat them badly because they figure it is better than having no friends at all.

Other conditions which are common with ADHD are low self-esteem and depression. They can further inhibit motivation to socialise with others or encourage withdrawal altogether. "I think with ADHD symptoms, there's a lot of shame and guilt attached to them," says Lucinda. "There's so much talk

about how humans are social beings so it's almost like a fundamental failing not to be able to socialise properly."

## Benefits of ADHD friendship

Despite the challenges, there is so much that those with ADHD can contribute to their friendships. Many often bring a vibrant energy, unique perspectives and positive traits such as spontaneity, creativity and enthusiasm to their interactions with others. "People with ADHD are usually interesting people as they will go down rabbit holes when they hyperfocus," says Lucinda. "So they're good to have on a pub quiz team as they know so much random crap. They can also be quite fun to have around because they're constantly seeking that dopamine hit."

Those with ADHD are also often described as empathetic and

accepting of others, as they know how it feels to be 'different' and misunderstood. "Those I know with ADHD, myself included, are very loyal," says Kaylee. "I might not always text you back but I will always be there for my friends."

The problem is because so little is known in the public consciousness about how ADHD behaviours affect friendships and socialising, those with ADHD don't always get the chance to share their unique strengths with others. "I have no animosity towards friends I've lost because of my poor friendship skills," says Lucinda. "If someone doesn't reply to texts or doesn't check in regularly, most people would assume that person doesn't like them or care about them. But if there was more awareness, people would know that ADHD behaviours aren't a reflection of how much they value you as a person - it's just a reflection of their condition."