

The quiet fight

Adult women who learn and think differently are left out of the conversation

Mixed-methods market research with 1,000+ women

Millions of women and girls in the United States have learning and thinking differences like ADHD and dyslexia. But they're left out of the conversation and the research. Less than 1% of neuroscience studies focus on women. **When experts only know what a condition looks like in men, women go undiagnosed.**

This leaves women who learn and think differently feeling unseen and unsupported. Their families, friends, doctors, and employers don't understand them. Many women end up blaming themselves when things are hard for them. This "quiet fight" permeates every aspect of their lives.



Why this matters

Learning and thinking differences are likely to occur at the same rate regardless of gender. But research focuses on males, and information often focuses on symptoms that are more common in males. Take ADHD, for example. Teachers are more likely to recognize a boy's symptoms and recommend services, while a girl's challenges go unaddressed.

The implications are dire. Women with ADHD are five times more likely to suffer from domestic abuse. They're four times more likely to have an unplanned pregnancy. And they have higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders.

Our approach

Understood conducted a multi-pronged stream of research in 2023.



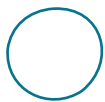
Quantitative study

Understood.org conducted a panel survey across a nationally representative sample of 1,100 adults ages 18+ from May 8, 2023, to May 11, 2023. It included 625 women and 375 men. Among this sample, 396 were identified as having a learning and thinking difference. Analyses were conducted using rigorous statistical techniques, and all quantitative insights are reported at a 95% confidence level.



Literature and landscape review

Focusing on gender, we performed an extensive scan of published and gray literature on learning and thinking differences among adults. We looked at academic sources as well as crowdsourced sources such as Reddit. We also reviewed existing interventions and products.



Qualitative interviews

Understood.org also conducted 10 qualitative interviews with women who learn and think differently in September 2023.

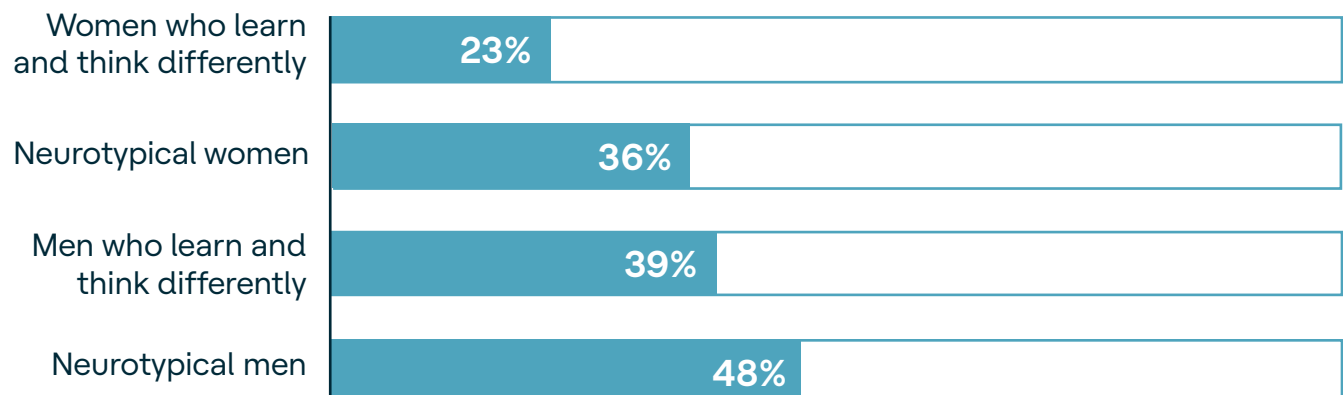
Findings

1. Well-being is an amplified problem for women who learn and think differently.

The quantitative survey found that overall, women report significantly lower well-being scores compared to men. This holds true whether comparing neurotypical women to neurotypical men, or comparing women who learn and think differently to men who learn and think differently.

Notably, thriving rates for women who learn and think differently were 13 percentage points lower than those of neurotypical women.

Percentage of individuals categorized as “Thriving” using [Cantril’s ladder](#), a validated measure of well-being



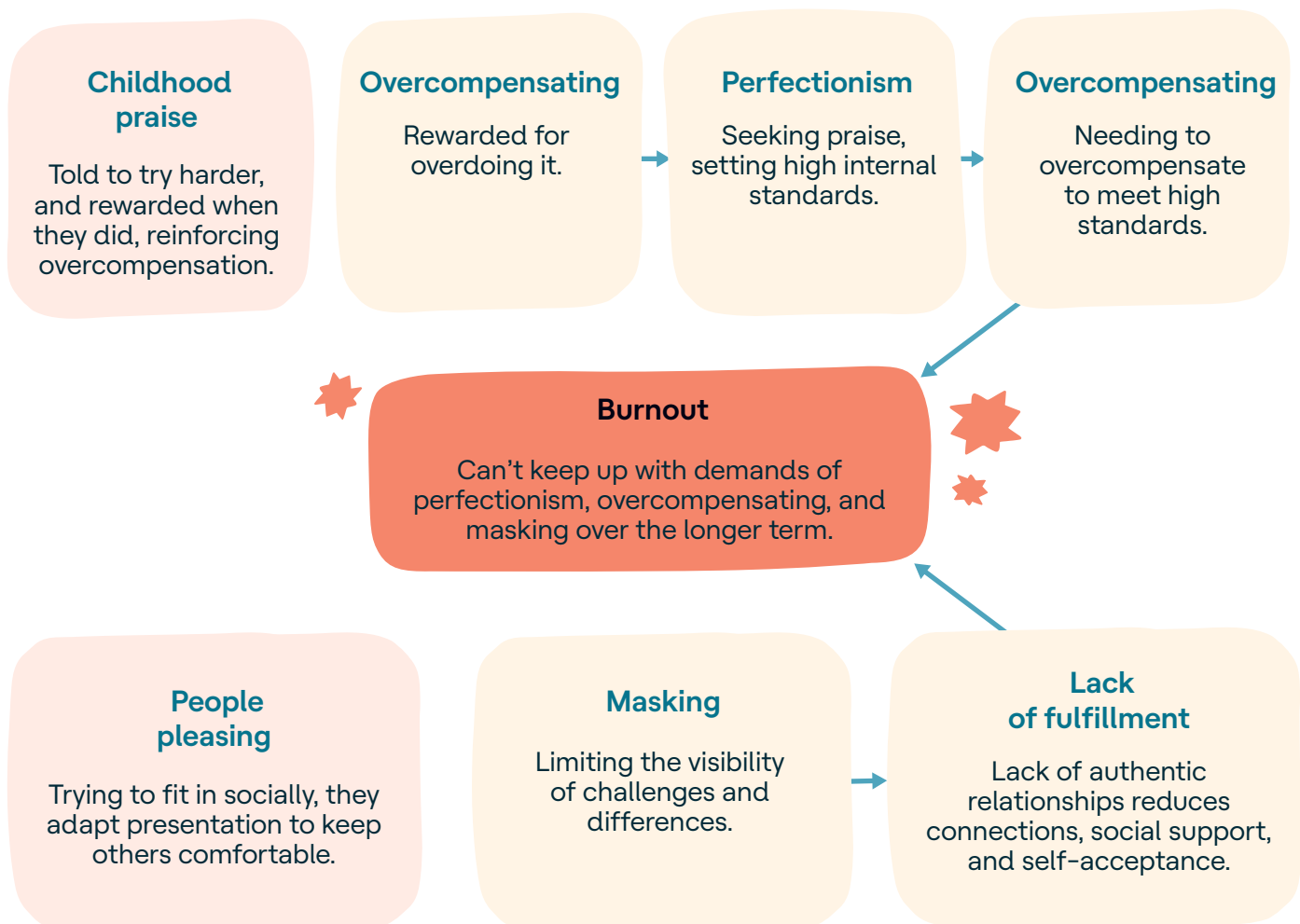
2. Women who learn and think differently “mask” at much higher rates. They blame themselves for not living up to other people’s expectations.

In the survey, 75% of all women reported that they’d presented themselves in a way that hides their true self. This is called masking. Among women who learn and think differently, even more are doing this, with 92% reporting masking. That’s 12% higher than men who learn and think differently.

In interviews, women who learn and think differently said that they began masking at a young age. Masking symptoms year after year makes it less likely that challenges will be noticed. If it’s not noticed, it won’t be diagnosed and addressed.

We also learned that women who learn and think differently are prone to perfectionism, overcompensation, and imposter syndrome. They’re expected to be good at organization and time management. But these skills don’t come easily to them. They feel a lot of shame and guilt about this.

How societal norms fuel self-stigmas that impact women’s well-being



3. **Women who learn and think differently have unique lived experiences that are different from those of men.**

Studies have found that girls and women are more likely to have the inattentive subtype of ADHD. In the lived experience portion of the research, women shared that the “little boy who can’t sit still” stereotype may prevent people from understanding ADHD in girls and women.



As a woman, I was very lucky to get diagnosed when I did. And it was only because I showed typically male symptoms of ADHD, like hyperactivity, when I was a kid. If I had been quietly inattentive, like one of my sisters, I would’ve gone under the radar.



— Woman with ADHD

4. **At work, women are hesitant to seek support for their learning and thinking differences. They appear to thrive more in flexible work environments.**

The quantitative survey explored disclosure and how people navigate their workplaces. Among women who learn and think differently, 37% said that they never told anyone at work or asked for support. Only 26% of men who learn and think differently said the same.

Having a flexible workplace correlated with higher well-being for women who learn and think differently. They had significantly lower burnout rates (12% lower) in freelancing roles compared to their non-freelancing counterparts. In hybrid work structures, women who learn and think differently reported less imposter-type feelings (15% lower) compared to their counterparts who work full-time in an office.

5. **There’s an urgent need and opportunity to support women through digital solutions.**

Digital tools to help with learning and thinking differences are built primarily for symptoms that are more typical in men. Many of the tools are oriented to children, specifically boys. Women and girls need tools that will help with the kinds of symptoms *they* have.

In sum

Generally, women have lower well-being than men. But women who learn and think differently are struggling even more. Many are stuck in a cycle of masking and shame, and there are few resources to help them.

How we're acting on this

We're building on the success of the Understood Podcast Network and the traction it's had with women. Our new podcast superfeed, the [MissUnderstood: ADHD in Women channel](#), brings together timely, niche perspectives from several new shows. Listeners will hear expert-vetted tips and candid conversations they can relate to. It's all designed to help women approach life with ADHD with a sense of belonging and reduced stress.

A note

We included 1,100 people in our quantitative survey. Among them, 36% were classified as learning and thinking differently. That means they either reported having a diagnosis, are pretty sure they learn and think differently, or have wondered if they learn and think differently. This rate is similar across demographics. There were no significant variations across gender, race/ethnicity, age, income, or work industry.

For more info

We'd love to discuss this research with you, hear about your research, and partner with you on new research. Reach out at knowledge@understood.org.



Other reference materials

In developing this research, the team at Understood referenced a wide range of field literature. Some are noted above. These others, while not cited, were helpful background.

Eyal, M. (2023, Oct 3). *Self-silencing is making women sick*. Time: Ideas.
<https://time.com/6319549/silencing-women-sick-essay/>

Matud, M. P. (2019). Gender and psychological well-being. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(19): 3531.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16193531>

Rutter, M., Caspi, A., Fergusson, D., Horwood, L. J., Goodman, R., Maughan, B., Moffitt, T. E., Meltzer, H., & Carroll, J. (2004). Sex differences in developmental reading disability: new findings from 4 epidemiological studies. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 291(16), 2007–2012. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.291.16.2007>

McGlaufflin, P. (2023, May 12). *Neurodivergence is a career maker for men like Elon Musk and Kanye West. Women aren't afforded the same privilege*. Fortune: Leadership – Diversity and Inclusion. <https://fortune.com/2023/05/12/men-elon-musk-kanye-west-women-neurodiversity-leadership-glass-ceiling/>