

# Opinion: Tear down the stigmas surrounding ADHD

By **Alena Wilson** - October 16, 2019

*(File photo illustration by Carol Kan)*

October is ADHD Awareness Month.

Alena Wilson, a third-year communications student, says learning differently should not be considered abnormal.

Eight months ago, I was diagnosed as an adult with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). After I failed exams and earned a GPA lower than I could imagine for myself, I went to ask for help.

I found myself in appointments for four months, taking tests, talking to specialists, filling out forms, and waiting—lots of waiting.

My journey after I was diagnosed was not easy either. I found out everything I'd been doing academically was wrong.

My project and time management, my exam-writing skills, my reading processes, and my notetaking all turned out to be faulty. I've had to begin re-learning habits and begging professors to be patient with me as I figured it out.

But over time, I found there was no bigger barrier than ableism. Society is inherently built to the advantage of neurotypical people. I am what one could call “anthropologically disabled.”

In a TED Talk by Salif Mahamane, he describes people with ADHD, like himself, as “potential hunting and gathering badasses.” The brains of people with ADHD are built and designed to pay attention to the littlest details. It explains why I will always look in the direction of a door opening, or why I can’t continue writing an essay if there is even one red squiggly line under a word.

This is why I don’t see ADHD as a disability. I am out of my habitat and I am required to assimilate. But, the society that I live in doesn’t see ADHD the same way Mahamane and I do. I am seen as a nuisance in class, messy, disorganized, easily distracted and forgetful. I am seen as someone who doesn’t try as hard as my peers or won’t be as successful as my peers.

I’ve seen the words, “Alena loves participating in class... She could succeed if she tried harder on independent work,” or “Alena could do much better in this class if she applied herself more,” on every report card.

I have always wondered how I could apply myself more. It took me 19 years to figure out that applying myself meant working the way my neurotypical peers do.

I’ve experienced systemic ableism most commonly from academic peers. People assume that I use notes provided by volunteers as an excuse to skip class or do nothing in class. Without the pressure of having to take notes, I am able to participate more in class. I am able to apply the things I have learned more, when I don’t need to worry about writing every little thing the professor says.

And, later being able to reflect on those notes helps me study more

effectively and write papers better. To my peers, my ways of learning and practicing my learning is wrong.

I am not perfect either. I grew up in this ableist society too, and I am still trying to get rid of my own internalized ableism.

My own mind still tries to convince me that I am broken, abnormal, and I will never succeed because I am not neurotypical. My own ableism has prevented me from achieving great things and taking risks. My internalized ableism has prevented me from self-acceptance and self-love.

I want to use my experiences as a newly-diagnosed woman with ADHD to encourage the estimated 1.1-million Canadian adults with ADHD to talk about their experiences and help educate the people who do not understand these struggles. I want to tear down the stigmas around ADHD. My story is one of many. So why are people still surprised when I open up about it?

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*File photo.*

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