



Understanding ADHD & AuDHD

A gentle, grounded introduction

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Important note

This resource is intended for educational and supportive purposes only. It does not replace professional medical, psychological, or therapeutic advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you are experiencing severe distress, persistent mental health difficulties, or are concerned about your safety, please seek support from a qualified healthcare professional or local emergency services.

Use these tools in ways that feel safe and appropriate for you. You are not required to push through distress or manage alone.

ADHD and AuDHD are often introduced through lists of problems.

Difficulty concentrating.
Poor organisation.
Emotional dysregulation.
Impulsivity.
Inconsistency.

For many people, these descriptions feel incomplete or misleading. They capture outward behaviours without explaining the internal experience... or why so many intelligent, capable people struggle in ways that seem to contradict their abilities.

This guide starts from a different place.

ADHD and AuDHD are not failures of effort, discipline, or character. They describe **patterns in how attention, emotion, energy, and time are processed and regulated by the nervous system...** patterns that interact continuously with environment, expectations, and safety.

For many adults, understanding this is the first moment where confusion gives way to coherence.

What ADHD & AuDHD actually describe

At their core, ADHD and AuDHD describe **differences in nervous system regulation.**

This includes differences in:

- how attention is allocated and sustained
- how quickly emotions activate and settle
- how sensory information is filtered and integrated
- how motivation becomes available
- how time is experienced and held in mind

These differences are not constant. They are **state-dependent...** meaning they shift with stress, safety, interest, fatigue, and context.

This is why many people feel capable one day and completely blocked the next, without understanding what changed.

ADHD is not an attention deficit... it is an attention difference

One of the most persistent myths about ADHD is that it involves a lack of attention.

In reality, many ADHD and AuDHD people experience:

- periods of deep, sustained focus
- intense absorption in meaningful tasks
- difficulty engaging with low-interest or abstract demands
- sudden shifts in attention driven by relevance or stimulation

This is not an absence of attention.

It is **interest- and meaning-gated attention**.

When something matters, focus often arrives effortlessly. When it does not, attention cannot be summoned reliably through willpower alone.

This explains why people can concentrate for hours on one task and feel completely blocked by another that seems objectively simple.

Executive function is about access, not intelligence

ADHD is often described as an executive function disorder.

This language can be misleading.

Executive functions... planning, initiation, prioritisation, working memory, inhibition... are not absent in ADHD. They are **inconsistently accessible**.

Access fluctuates based on:

- emotional load
- sensory environment
- perceived safety
- interest and meaning
- cumulative stress

This is why many ADHD adults are capable of:

- complex problem-solving
- strategic thinking
- creative insight

Yet struggle with:

- starting tasks
- remembering small steps
- following through on routine demands

The issue is not ability.

It is **reliable access under everyday conditions**.

Emotional processing is fast, embodied, and intense

Emotional experience is one of the most misunderstood aspects of ADHD and AuDHD.

Many people notice that:

- emotions arrive quickly and strongly
- the body reacts before words are available
- calming down takes time once activated
- reactions can feel “too much,” even when the trigger seems small

This is not emotional immaturity.

It reflects **fast emotional activation combined with delayed access to regulation**.

By the time the emotion is consciously recognised, the nervous system may already be in a protective state (fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown). At that point, logic and reassurance struggle to land.

Timing matters more than intensity

A crucial difference is not how strongly emotions are felt, but **when regulation becomes available**.

For many ADHD and AuDHD people:

- early warning signals are subtle or missed
- escalation happens quickly
- regulation strategies become accessible late

This creates a familiar pattern:

“I know what helps... but I can’t access it when I need it.”

This is not lack of insight.

It is a **timing mismatch**.

Sensory processing plays a central role

Sensory differences are common in both ADHD and AuDHD, though they are often under-recognised.

Many people experience:

- heightened sensitivity to sound, light, movement, or touch
- faster sensory overload in busy environments

- emotional changes linked to sensory strain
- exhaustion that improves when sensory input is reduced

This reflects a nervous system that:

- takes in more information
- filters less automatically
- takes longer to integrate input

Sensory overload does not stay in the sensory system. It often drives emotional dysregulation, cognitive fatigue, and shutdown.

Motivation is driven by meaning, not discipline

ADHD motivation is frequently misunderstood as laziness or lack of drive.

In reality, many ADHD people:

- want to act deeply
- care intensely about outcomes
- think constantly about what needs to be done

What's missing is not desire.

It is **access to initiation and sustained action**.

Motivation in ADHD tends to respond to:

- interest
- meaning
- relevance
- emotional connection

Pressure and shame may create short bursts of action, but they come at a cost... increasing stress and burnout risk.

This is why many people function best when something *matters*, and struggle most when tasks feel arbitrary or disconnected.

Time is experienced, not just measured

Time perception is another often-overlooked difference.

Many ADHD and AuDHD people experience time as:

- elastic or inconsistent
- distant until urgent

- difficult to hold in mind
- easier to respond to when externalised

Planning may be easy. Translating plans into timely action is often harder.

This is sometimes called “time blindness,” but it is less about not caring and more about **how future information is processed**.

Transitions are often harder than tasks

Many people find that:

- starting is harder than doing
- stopping is harder than continuing
- switching tasks is exhausting

Transitions require:

- disengaging attention
- shifting mental context
- recalibrating emotional and sensory state

This invisible effort is often misunderstood... by others and by the person themselves.

AuDHD: when ADHD and autistic patterns overlap

AuDHD refers to the co-occurrence of ADHD and autistic traits.

For many people, this means:

- high sensitivity combined with high mental activity
- deep focus alternating with overload
- strong need for structure alongside resistance to rigid systems
- intense care paired with rapid exhaustion

These overlapping patterns can:

- mask each other
- delay identification
- lead to years of misunderstanding

There is no single way to be AuDHD.

Masking and adaptation shape adult experience

Many ADHD and AuDHD adults grow up adapting to environments that do not fit their nervous system.

They learn to:

- mask differences
- push through discomfort
- rely on urgency
- suppress emotional and sensory needs

These strategies often lead to external success... at a significant internal cost.

Over time, this can contribute to:

- exhaustion
- emotional numbness or volatility
- loss of self-trust
- burnout

Many people only recognise the cost of masking *after* they collapse.

Burnout is a predictable outcome, not a failure

Burnout in ADHD and AuDHD is rarely sudden.

It develops through:

- prolonged overcompensation
- chronic self-pressure
- sensory and emotional overload
- lack of recovery

Burnout is not evidence that someone “can’t cope.”

It is evidence that the system has been coping **for too long without adequate support.**

Why understanding changes everything

Without understanding, many ADHD and AuDHD adults conclude that they are:

- inconsistent
- unreliable
- too sensitive

- not trying hard enough

This belief often causes more harm than the traits themselves.

Understanding ADHD and AuDHD does not remove responsibility or difficulty... but it **removes moral judgement from neurological difference.**

When people understand how their system works, they can:

- anticipate challenges
- design supportive environments
- reduce unnecessary self-blame
- ask for support without shame
- protect capacity before burnout

A note on diagnosis

This guide is not a diagnostic tool.

Some people find clarity through formal diagnosis. Others recognise themselves through self-identification. Both paths are valid.

Understanding is not about labels.
It is about **making sense of patterns.**

A different frame

ADHD and AuDHD are not disorders of effort.

They are differences in **regulation, timing, and access.**

When environments align with these differences, many people thrive.

When they don't, the cost is paid quietly... through exhaustion, shame, and self-doubt.

A final reminder

You do not need to recognise yourself in every description.
You do not need to decide anything immediately.

This guide is an invitation to understand... not to judge.

For many people, this understanding is the first moment where the fight with themselves begins to soften.

And that is often where real change begins.

