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Fact Sheet: ADHD & Depression – The Research & Reality

ADHD and depression frequently **coexist**, but they are **not the same condition**. This fact sheet explores why they overlap, who is most affected, and how to navigate challenges with **self-compassion and the proper support**.

1️⃣ ADHD & Depression – How Are They Connected?

ADHD and depression often occur together, but ADHD **does not cause** depression. Instead, systemic barriers, invalidation, and chronic overwhelm increase the risk.

What's Really Happening in the Brain?

Condition	Brain Effect
ADHD	Differences in dopamine regulation affect motivation, focus, and emotional regulation.
Depression	Differences in serotonin, dopamine, and stress hormones affect mood, energy, and interest in activities.
ADHD + Depression	Chronic frustration, emotional dysregulation, and systemic barriers increase the risk of depression.

📌 **Key Fact:** People with ADHD are **3 times more likely** to experience depression.

2️⃣ What is ADHD?

ADHD is a **natural neurotype**, not a flaw. It affects **how the brain processes information, regulates emotions, and engages with the world**.

ADHD Shows Up in Different Ways:

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Type	Key Traits
Inattentive ADHD	Daydreaming, hyper-focusing, struggles with organization and memory.
Hyperactive-Impulsive ADHD	Restlessness, movement-based processing, fast speech, acting before thinking.
Combined ADHD	A mix of both inattention and hyperactivity.

3️⃣ What is Depression?

Depression is **not just sadness**—it's an experience that **alters energy, motivation, and emotional regulation**.

Common Experiences with Depression:

✅ Feeling emotionally numb, drained, or disconnected
✅ Loss of interest in things that once felt exciting
✅ Trouble focusing (which can make ADHD feel worse)
✅ Sleeping too much or too little
✅ Constant exhaustion and overwhelm

4️⃣ Why Do ADHD & Depression Overlap?

ADHD brains struggle **not because they are broken** but because they are forced to function in systems that do not accommodate them.

1️⃣ Executive Function Challenges → Self-Doubt

- Being told you're "lazy" when **your brain works differently** can lead to shame and frustration (**Faraone et al., 2015**).

2️⃣ Masking & Rejection Sensitivity → Emotional Exhaustion

- Constantly trying to "act neurotypical" leads to burnout

3️⃣ Sensory Overwhelm & Nervous System Fatigue

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- Overstimulation and shut down cycles **can feel like depression** but stem from sensory and emotional overload

4️⃣ **Dopamine & Serotonin Differences**

- ADHD brains often seek **novelty and stimulation**, while depression **dampens interest and motivation**, creating distress

📌 **Key Fact:** ADHD **does not cause** depression, but a **lack of support, rejection, and chronic stress increases the risk**

5️⃣ ADHD vs. Depression – What's the Difference?

Feature	ADHD	Depression
Mood	Emotional shifts throughout the day	Persistent low mood or numbness
Motivation	High motivation for interesting tasks but inconsistent	Low motivation across most areas
Sleep	Trouble falling asleep, racing thoughts	Sleep disruptions (too much or too little)
Energy	Restless, fluctuating energy	Low energy, feeling physically heavy
Duration	Lifelong, but fluctuates	Can come in episodes or be long-term

📌 **Key Fact:** ADHD **mood shifts are reactive and short-lived**, while **depression lasts for weeks or months**

6️⃣ Who is More Likely to Have Both ADHD & Depression?

✅ **Women & AFAB Individuals** → More likely to **mask ADHD**, leading to emotional exhaustion
✅ **Inattentive-Type ADHD** → More likely to go **undiagnosed**, increasing self-doubt
✅ **People with Late or Missed Diagnoses** → Years of misunderstanding can **damage self-trust**
✅ **Those with Trauma or Chronic Stress** → ADHD brains are **sensitive to past experiences**, and invalidation increases depression risk

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📌 **Key Fact: ADHD itself does not cause depression**, but **lack of accommodations, chronic stress, and emotional exhaustion increase the risk**.

7️⃣ Navigating ADHD & Depression with Self-Compassion

Support Strategies That Work:

✅ **Accommodations** → Creating an ADHD-friendly environment instead of forcing conformity.
✅ **Rest & Sensory Regulation** → Preventing **burnout and shutdown cycles**.
✅ **Community & Connection** → ADHD brains thrive when they feel **understood**.
✅ **Therapies that Support Neurodivergence** → Beyond CBT, **ACT, DBT, IFS, and polyvagal-informed approaches** can be effective

📌 **Key Fact: Self-compassion is essential for thriving with ADHD & depression**.

8️⃣ ADHD Medications & Depression Risk

🔹 **ADHD medication reduces depression risk by 20%** .
🔹 **Treating ADHD early may help prevent depression**.
🔹 Some ADHD medications can cause **side effects like anxiety, appetite loss, or sleep disruption**, which can resemble depression.

📌 **Key Fact:** ADHD medications **support emotional regulation as well as focus**.

9️⃣ ADHD, Depression & Suicidal Thoughts

🔹 A **study on 627 college students** found that ADHD increases the risk of **suicidal thoughts** (.
🔹 Emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and repeated invalidation **increase mental health struggles**.

📌 **Key Fact: Mental health support is essential for ADHD individuals, particularly during life transitions**.

🔟 Final Takeaways

✅ **ADHD & depression are different but often coexist.**
✅ **The world isn't designed for ADHD brains—this contributes to depression, not ADHD itself.**
✅ **Masking, rejection sensitivity, and burnout are real struggles that deserve recognition.**
✅ **The goal isn't to "fix" ADHD—it's to create an environment where ADHD people thrive.**
✅ **Self-compassion, rest, and connection are just as important as therapy and medication.**

📌 **Key Message:** ADHD is not a disorder to be "managed"—it's a **valid way of being that requires different tools and supports** to thrive.