

Getting diagnosed after a midlife crisis, having multi-hyphenate careers, juggling around extra pairs of everything – Singaporeans diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder share their quirks and coping strategies. **Teo Kai Xiang reports. C2&3**

This is what ADHD looks like



(Clockwise from top left)
Mr Ahmad Nizam Abbas,
Mr Esmond Wee,
Mr Wong Siew Hong,
Ms Tahirah Mohamed and
Ms Winnie Wong are among
more than 60 people featured
in a new book about
differently wired minds.

A peek into differently wired minds

From buying multiple earplugs to getting diagnosed because of your kids, those living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD share quirks and lifestyle habits that define the condition



Teo Kai Xiang

For father-of-four Esmond Wee, 44, living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) means buying five pairs of earplugs – because he keeps misplacing them – to ease sensory overload.

Such sensitivity to noise and distraction is one common thread among those with ADHD, a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning.

Overstimulation in contexts that others might find tolerable perhaps explains why many with ADHD do their best work in the early hours.

Partly for the tranquillity, but also because that is often when procrastination guilt from executive dysfunction – another common ADHD symptom – finally boils over into action as deadlines loom.

Mr Wee's quest for solace is made all the more complicated by raising four children aged three to 18, the eldest of whom also has ADHD.

"If you notice your kid has to check out, that's a major sign he or she is dealing with sensory overload," says the marketing professional and music label co-founder, who got diagnosed with the condition in 2018. "For our daughter, it's very obvious, she needs to decompress by locking herself in her room."

Yet, it is his wife, freelance writer Sue-Ann Lee, 50, who shoulders the heaviest burden. "She's keenly aware that I have ADHD and that I need to excuse myself because, sometimes, the sensory overload is too much and I will explode in front of the kids," he says.

For the couple, clear communication is essential. Mr Wee compensates by taking on extra chores and whisking the children out of the house when his wife needs downtime.

"My kids see my inability to handle the sensory bit, but that in a sense brings us closer together," he says, adding that apologies and open discussions about feelings are teachable moments in the household.

Their family is one of many living with ADHD, the most common neurodivergent disorder in Singapore. It is said to affect 5 to 8 per cent of children and 2 to 7 per cent of adults here.

Mr Wee and 63 others share lessons learnt from a lifetime with the condition in a book by non-profit organisation Unlocking ADHD titled *Differently Wired Minds*, published as part of ADHD Awareness Month in October.

According to the Ministry of Health, between 2021 and 2024,

about 1,200 patients diagnosed with ADHD were seen annually at Singapore's public healthcare institutions.

And yet, this is a group often misunderstood because of outmoded attitudes towards mental health.

Experts say that despite growing public awareness, misconceptions remain.

"Many people still view ADHD as a childhood phase that will be outgrown or assume it results from inadequate parenting," says Dr Chee Tji Tjian, a senior consultant at National University Hospital's (NUH) department of psychological medicine.

This is compounded by stigma and beliefs that medications are harmful, says Dr Gangaram Poornima, a senior consultant at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

The consequence is that many perceive those with ADHD as lazy, careless or defiant, leading to many emotional scars for those who grow up with it.

Children are frequently criticised for behaviours they cannot control and experience an erosion of self-confidence and self-worth. They can come to internalise harmful labels and beliefs that they are inadequate, says Dr Chee.

Instead, normalising conversations about mental health and celebrating different cognitive styles – coupled with early recognition and support – can help those with ADHD to harness their strengths and lead fulfilling lives, he adds.

PEOPLE WHO DO TOO MUCH

For lawyer Wong Siew Hong, 63, one early case stands out when processing the impact of ADHD on his life. He got diagnosed with the condition at age 43, when things were "falling apart" as he contemplated divorce and struggled with suicidal ideation.

In 1996, Mr Wong was defending Malaysian national Ong Teng Siew, who was convicted of murdering an 82-year-old man and sentenced to death. After the trial, his client developed what appeared to be shingles and was diagnosed with Darier's disease – a rare genetic skin condition affecting one in three million.

Mr Wong, who describes himself as endlessly prone to distraction and fixating on details that might seem pointless at first glance, thought this was a rabbit hole worth diving into.

Back then, he was among the first subscribers to SingNet, one of Singapore's early internet services. Trawling through online medical discussion groups, he found a connection between Darier's disease and psychiatric disorders.

By arguing that the condition could establish diminished responsibility, Mr Wong convinced the Court of Appeal to order a retrial. That eventually spared his client's life.

Such out-of-the-box thinking and the relentless pursuit of seem-



Music label co-founder Esmond Wee, who was diagnosed with ADHD, with his wife Sue-Ann Lee and their children (from left) Elijah, 15; Scarlett, three; Ezekiel, 10; and Skyler, 18, who also has the condition. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ESMOND WEE

ingly irrelevant details represent what Mr Wong, who is now divorced, considers an ADHD "superpower" – even as he continues to struggle with executive dysfunction and motivating himself to complete routine tasks.

"I will never be able to do conveyancing, for example," he says, referring to the legal process of transferring ownership of a property. "It's too much routine work and my eyes glaze over. I like to look at things from another angle, another point of view."

"That's not necessarily a good thing, but it's served its purpose in a few situations in my life."

Also featured in the book is Ms Winnie Wong, 32, who believes there is some truth behind the

stereotype that people with the condition tend to be more fickle-minded, especially about their careers. This is because wrestling with executive dysfunction often leads to burnout and career pivots towards passions or pursuits better suited to one's neurodivergence.

Like many interviewed by The Sunday Times, her career defies easy description. She is a multi-hyphenate – a life coach and an artist specialising in kintsugi (the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery) who is also training to be a death doula, to provide support for those who are dying.

"Growing up in a very Asian household, you're always told to focus on one thing and do it well," says the former advertising and art

director. "I thought I had to continue pursuing this path, but I fell into depression and was fired from my agency. That forced me to find a creative outlet so I could heal from it."

Now, her approach is "throwing all the spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks", without being too stuck on the idea that people have to limit themselves to one thing. "You can mix mediums," says the communications graduate, who has also worked as a prop stylist and a freelance designer. "You can create a very 'niche niche' for yourself."

Another key lesson is learning to be kinder to oneself.

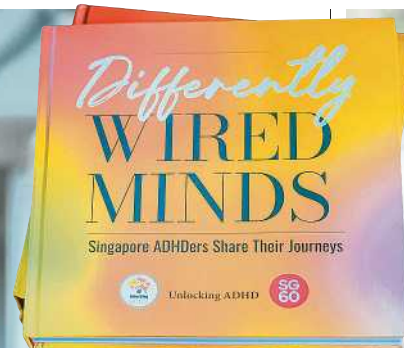
"The time you think you're procrastinating, you're actually mari-



Ms Winnie Wong, a kintsugi artist and life coach, believes that people with ADHD often wind up becoming multi-hyphenates as they seek to marry their passions and professions. PHOTO: SILK AND SALT IMAGES



Mr Ahmad Nizam Abbas (front) as a junior college student at age 18. He says his school results were a mix of top grades and low marks. PHOTO: COURTESY OF AHMAD NIZAM ABBAS



In *Differently Wired Minds* (above), a new book from the non-profit Unlocking ADHD, those living with ADHD, including (from far left) Mr Esmond Wee, Ms Winnie Wong, Mr Ahmad Nizam Abbas, Ms Tahirah Mohamed and Mr Wong Siew Hong, share candidly about how the condition has shaped their lives. ST PHOTOS: GAVIN FOO



Housewife Tahirah Mohamed (seen here at age three) has shown signs of ADHD since her childhood, but sought a diagnosis only after becoming a mother. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAHIRAH MOHAMED



A 1998 report in *The New Paper* about lawyer Wong Siew Hong's case. His client's life was spared because his fixation on details led him to zero in on a pivotal one. PHOTO: ST FILE

ADHD is genetic and most people are diagnosed during childhood, many receive diagnoses later in life because of the various ways it can escape detection.

Some who present primarily symptoms of inattentiveness are often dismissed as "daydreamers" or "shy". Others develop coping strategies that might work during childhood, but give way when the multi-pronged demands of life intensify during adulthood.

"Most of them have suffered in silence due to a lack of awareness or social stigma," says Dr Poornima.

Gender, too, plays a role, as girls tend to have "inattentive" symptoms that present less obviously than those of hyperactive boys, which remain the stereotypical image many associate with ADHD. A late-in-life diagnosis helps one to understand and contextualise lifelong challenges, and often comes with a sense of relief or validation, says Dr Chee.

However, it can also evoke profound grief over lost opportunities or unrealised potential. "Many adults mourn careers that stalled due to disorganisation, relationships that suffered from emotional dysregulation or decades spent believing they were lazy or incapable," he observes.

A LIFESPAN CONDITION

But the good news is there may not be a better time to be diagnosed than today.

"Compared with the 1990s, when ADHD was largely unknown to the masses or ADHD symptoms were predominantly viewed as a behavioural problem requiring discipline, today, it is increasingly recognised as a legitimate neurodevelopmental condition affecting attention, executive functioning and emotional regulation," says Dr Chee.

In his view, this paradigm shift has enabled teachers, parents and healthcare providers to identify symptoms earlier, as well as move away from punitive approaches towards more empathetic support strategies.

NUH data indicates that adult diagnoses are increasing as awareness grows, indicating that ADHD is a "lifespan condition" requiring sustained attention from healthcare providers and not merely a "childhood phase", says Dr Chee.

In 2023, NUH diagnosed 515 patients under 21 and 176 adults with ADHD, out of over 884 youth and 2,600 adults assessed.

Although awareness of ADHD has improved by leaps and bounds, its new visibility can be a double-edged sword.

Dr Chee notes a growing trend of people mistakenly identifying normal variations in attention or energy as ADHD. For example, some parents seek assessments for young children displaying age-appropriate levels of restlessness. Other adolescents and adults pur-

sue a diagnosis to explain struggles that result from other causes, such as stress, sleep deprivation or mood disorders.

"As public awareness continues to mature, the challenge lies in promoting a balanced understanding," he says.

This means recognising ADHD where it genuinely exists, while avoiding over-pathologising normal differences in behaviour.

For Ms Lee, who founded Unlocking ADHD in 2021, the progress made in recent years is heartening to see, as it means more discussions about what support should look like at schools and workplaces.

Unlocking ADHD has partnered multinational conglomerate Jardine Matheson to launch Singapore's first ADHD-focused facility, the Unlocking ADHD-Mindset Support Hub in Holland Drive. The company's \$1 million pledged over three years will enable the hub to support over 100 people annually with more than 1,000 hours of ADHD-tailored counselling services.

"ADHD is often misunderstood, and many individuals fall through the cracks due to stigma, delayed diagnoses and a lack of structured support," says Mr Jeffery Tan, chief executive of Mindset, a charity initiative from Jardine Matheson. "Through this partnership, we aim to close those gaps and build a safe, inclusive ecosystem where every individual can thrive."

As to what barriers remain unaddressed, experts say policymakers can strengthen the support ecosystem by expanding access to affordable assessments and treatments in the public healthcare sector. Assessments by private psychologists can cost \$2,000 or more, while an initial consultation with a private psychiatrist can cost upwards of \$300.

Subsidised rates for eligible patients are available at public institutions, but may come with longer wait times for appointments. An initial consultation at IMH costs \$32.86 to \$80.74 with subsidies, but requires a referral from a polyclinic or Community Health Assist Scheme GP clinic.

Workplaces can consider accommodations to help neurodivergent individuals thrive by discussing flexible work arrangements, providing distraction-free environments and using effective project management software.

Parents and friends can support someone living with ADHD by showing him or her understanding and patience and giving him or her structure.

This can be as simple as recognising that forgetfulness does not always indicate a lack of care. It might just be what ADHD looks like.

kaixiang@sph.com.sg

• Get a copy of *Differently Wired Minds* by donating \$150 or more to Unlocking ADHD, while stocks last.