



Teo Kai Xiang

It can be crushing to learn you do not have ADHD.

After consuming hours of social media content about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, some arrive at a clinic convinced that their struggles with focus, motivation and impulsivity finally has a name.

“These individuals can be devastated when told they don’t have ADHD and that their experiences with inattentiveness or impulsivity fall within normal variations,” says Dr Gangaram Poornima, a senior consultant at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

“In clinics, we spend considerable time helping them work through this strong identification with ADHD.”

At the other end of the spectrum is someone like Ms Lau, a 23-year-old who declined to share her first name. Ms Lau was first diagnosed at the age of 17, after a seven-year journey that began when her parents first sought help from a psychiatrist for her absent-mindedness and poor focus when she was 10.

That first doctor recommended a computer game to improve her working memory at Primary 5. When her symptoms persisted through her secondary school and polytechnic years, a second psychiatrist diagnosed her with ADHD. This was seven years later.

Ms Lau, now a local university student, looks back with frustration on how things could have turned out differently had she received the help she needed earlier.

These experiences – the growing number convinced they have ADHD, and the people who spend years struggling to cope with it – highlight the unusual double bind facing those living with the condition in Singapore.

On social media platforms such as TikTok, content about ADHD is everywhere. However, the condition remains poorly understood and is prone to stereotypes that trivialise it.

“Sometimes, we end up getting lumped in with the people who throw the term around loosely. Thus, people who don’t know any better just assume you’re saying it for the fun of it,” says Mr Chan.

The 26-year-old human resources worker received his ADHD diagnosis in 2023 after years of feeling overwhelmed in situations that others would find normal or bearable. He declined to share his first name as he does not want the condition to “mark” him for life and impact his career.

IS THERE OVERDIAGNOSIS?

Singapore’s healthcare institutions are seeing more Singapore residents, especially adults, come for testing.

“I am seeing more people coming forward with ADHD concerns, but that is not the same thing as overdiagnosis,” says assistant professor Celine Wong, senior consultant at the National University Hospital’s (NUH) department of psychological medicine.

More assessments do not necessarily mean “more ADHD” in society, notes Dr Wong. While there has been an uptick in adults and parents taking their kids for assessment, much of this stems from awareness catching up with reality.

Many adults were never identified in childhood and seek assistance only when their coping strategies fail during difficult life transitions like university, new jobs or parenthood. Growing awareness of the condition also means families seek assistance earlier.

Between 2021 and 2024, about 1,200 patients diagnosed with ADHD were seen annually at Singapore’s public healthcare institutions, according to the Ministry of Health. About 82 per cent of the patients were under 21 years old.

In 2023, NUH diagnosed 515 patients under 21 and 176 adults with ADHD, out of more than 880 youth and 2,600 adults assessed.

ADHD is the most common neurodivergent condition in Singapore, followed by autism spectrum disorders. It is estimated that ADHD affects about 5 to 8 per cent of children in Singapore.

“The growing trend in seeking ADHD diagnosis is largely positive, resulting from increased public awareness that helps end years of misery for many undiagnosed adults,” says Dr Poornima.

Data from elsewhere supports this. A March 2026 study published in the British Journal of Psychiatry found that data in Britain pointed to a trend of under-



Founded in 2021, Unlocking ADHD is Singapore’s largest group by and for people with ADHD. Social media is rife with content about the condition, but not everyone who displays the symptoms have it. PHOTO: UNLOCKING ADHD

‘Devastated’ to not have ADHD

It may seem like everyone has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in this digital age, but for those living with the condition, the reality is more complicated

diagnosis rather than overdiagnosis.

“Importantly, evidence points to unmet need, as many people with ADHD are not diagnosed,” writes the study’s 32 authors from across Britain. “Overall, we believe that the narrative of overdiagnosis of ADHD ought not be used as a pretext to deny individuals with properly diagnosed ADHD the support that they deserve.”

NEURODIVERSITY’S COMPLICATED HISTORY

The tension between lived experience and medical authority is not new.

Online communities that form around neurodivergence sometimes have a fraught relationship with the institutions that diagnose and treat them, and not without reason.

Shaky science is so commonplace that the two-million-strong Reddit forum r/ADHD has imposed a rule against users encouraging self-diagnosis.

Much of this stems from how the framework for understanding conditions like ADHD as “neurodiversity”, natural differences in how brains work, rather than defects to be cured, is remarkably recent.

In 1996, close to 60 people, most of them with autism, turned up at a campsite in New York for the first Autreat, an annual conference run by and for adults with autism.

“I feel as if I’m home, among my own people, for the first time. I never knew what this was until now,” said one attendee, according to a written account of the event by American autism advocate and Autreat founder Jim Sinclair.

Autreat was a landmark moment for a fledgling movement that sought to recast public understanding of neurodevelopmental disorders 30 years ago. At that time, the dominant voices were parents and experts focused on curing or correcting what they saw as divergent behaviours.

Advocates like Mr Sinclair demanded acceptance instead. His

seminal essay, Don’t Mourn For Us, railed against the parents who treat their child’s diagnosis as a tragedy because they mourn the “normal” child they lost to neurodivergence.

Much of the history of psychiatry can seem mediaeval when seen through this lens. Lobotomies were phased out only in the 1950s, while electroshock therapies were reformulated during the 1970s and 1980s – both in response to advances in medicine and patients’ rights movements.

Even the Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders (DSM), the basis of clinical diagnosis, is an evolving text.

The manual’s 2013 revision updated the diagnostic criteria for ADHD to allow for the possibility of ADHD and autism to coexist in the same person. That these two conditions frequently co-occur is now scientific consensus. The revision also raised the age at which symptoms should be visible from seven to 12.

These evolutions in scientific understanding have a real impact, and those living with ADHD who spoke to The Sunday Times say scepticism, even from medical professionals (especially those without training in neurodevelopmental disorders), is commonplace. This often results in many adults realising only later in life that their condition has a name.

Mr Alif Adam, a 31-year-old who runs a skincare and apparel business, was diagnosed in 2024, when a friend with ADHD suggested that he should get assessed for it.

Growing up, he was labelled “naughty” in school, which was

often presented as a moral failing of his parents “not being present enough”. Since his diagnosis, Mr Alif has been documenting his experience with treatment and medication on his TikTok account.

He notes that while there are many content creators in the United States speaking about ADHD, there are close to zero in Singapore, which boils down to a persistent cultural taboo about discussing mental health.

The paucity of neurodiversity-focused organisations here also speaks to how novel this sense of public awareness is.

Unlocking ADHD, Singapore’s largest group by and for people with ADHD, was founded only in 2021.

“Conversations that were once private are now more visible,” says its founder Moonlake Lee, 57, who was diagnosed only in 2018, a year after her daughter received her ADHD diagnosis. “That visibility can sometimes be mistaken for over-identification.”

WHY ADHD IS MISUNDERSTOOD

What makes ADHD especially prone to both over-identification and dismissal is that its core traits – inattentiveness and impulsivity – exist on a continuum. Everyone experiences them to some degree.

“One ongoing discussion is whether ADHD should be viewed as a strict diagnosis or as traits that exist along a continuum,” says Dr Wong.

Increasingly, more experts believe that the DSM’s diagnostic criteria for ADHD should be understood differently, writes one cri-

tique of the DSM published in the academic journal Neuropsychiatry in 2013.

“That is, inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity are behavioural traits that naturally occur on a continuum, much like intelligence,” write Dr Jeffery Epstein and Dr Richard Loren, of the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center in the US.

They argue that diagnostic thresholds to define “abnormal behaviour” are useful for identifying individuals with impairments, but do not adequately capture the complex and varied ways that these traits manifest.

For instance, some key advances in addressing ADHD have involved understanding how the condition presents differently in women and those with a quieter disposition.

Such nuances are often lost in online spaces.

“ADHD is a superpower, and you might have it too,” goes one 2024 TikTok video by a Singapore user, repeating a phrase now the subject of much contention from those with ADHD.

Some argue that it trivialises real disabilities and presents neurodiversity as akin to being a savant, while others embrace it as a form of self-empowerment.

A March 2026 study by researchers at the University of East Anglia in Britain found that 52 per cent of the TikTok videos they analysed on ADHD contained health misinformation.

To the study’s lead author, Dr Alice Carter, the platform’s algorithms compound the issue, potentially fuelling inaccurate self-diagnosis: “Once users show interest in a topic, they are bombarded with similar posts – creating powerful echo chambers that can reinforce false or exaggerated claims.”

“Since everyone sometimes has trouble paying attention, or sometimes has trouble standing still, or likes fidget toys, then everyone must have a little bit of ADHD,” says Ms Lau, summing up a sentiment she often encounters in Singapore.

In her view, society is “very

superficially aware” of what ADHD looks like, associating it with relatable traits like forgetfulness or “hyperfixating” on certain kinds of media, and in the process glossing over real but often-unreliable difficulties that define living with ADHD.

ADHD IN SINGAPORE

The high-pressure education system in Singapore, coupled with heavy social media use here, means concerns about ADHD are particularly salient.

Experts note that the competitive academic environment leaves many parents looking for answers when their children start falling behind in school.

At the same time, the rise of social media and “doomscrolling” have blurred the lines between a broader trend of shortening attention spans and having a neurodevelopmental condition.

Clinical assessments do account for all this. “We look for longstanding patterns since childhood (age 12 and below), impairment over time, and we screen for sleep problems, mood/anxiety disorders, substance use and burnout, all of which can mimic ADHD,” says Dr Wong.

Regardless, these conditions feed into the persistent myth that ADHD does not exist, and is merely a manifestation of broadly held difficulties of adjusting to modern life.

Ms Lee notes that many living with ADHD still hesitate to seek assessment because of misinformation and discrimination. As such, gaps remain when it comes to addressing this or any form of neurodivergence.

She points to the limited awareness of how ADHD presents across the lifespan, especially in adults, as well as the impact of the high rate of co-occurring conditions such as autism and anxiety disorders. There is also stigma in schools and workplaces, which discourages disclosure and accommodation.

For those living with ADHD like Mr Chan, this patchy, often-contradictory public awareness of the condition means that whenever he discloses his condition in the workplace, he is no longer met with scorn or derision. But neither is he afforded accommodations he believes are essential for someone with his condition.

Accommodations he finds most useful are asynchronous work arrangements, meaning collaboration between colleagues that does not have to take place at the same time or place, or meetings that have a written agenda shared beforehand to add structure.

“People don’t bring it up against us, but they also don’t go out of their way to understand it or make accommodations,” says Mr Chan.

Ms Lee says it boils down to this: “The real question is not whether too many people are identifying with ADHD, but whether those who need help can get it in a timely and responsible way.”

Since everyone sometimes has trouble paying attention, or sometimes has trouble standing still, or likes fidget toys, then everyone must have a little bit of ADHD.



MS LAU, 23, who declined to give her first name and was diagnosed with the condition when she was 17, on a sentiment she often encounters in Singapore