

# ADHD *for* SMART ASS WOMEN



How to Fall in Love with Your  
Neurodivergent Brain

# Tracy Otsuka

CERTIFIED ADHD COACH

Foreword by Edward M. Hallowell, M.D., author of *ADHD 2.0*

ADHD  
FOR  
SMART  
ASS  
WOMEN

HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR NEURODIVERGENT BRAIN

**TRACY OTSUKA**

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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## *Dedication*

**To my linear-brained banker man**

♥ ♥ ♥

**Hiring that pilot to fly that plane that trailed that banner that I absolutely could not afford was the best impulsive decision I've ever made.**

**XO, Scootles**

**And to my beautiful Mama**

♥ ♥ ♥

**It was the honor of my lifetime to be your daughter. Hummingbirds, butterflies, frogs, and the color yellow—you are here, there, and everywhere.**

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## *Foreword*

*Dr. Edward M. Hallowell*

Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Pied Beauty," written in 1877, begins:

*Glory be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim*

And like the sensibility of Tracy Otsuka, it is timeless, out of time, ahead of its time, bare, free, and without guile, pretense, or subterfuge.

Hopkins's poetry aims to celebrate life, to find all the beauty the poet can seize upon, and to call the reader to join in the resulting delight. Hopkins was drunk on life, spellbound by beauty, romantically in love with the transcendent, and called from beyond to proclaim to all the world the "couple-colours" he found beneath the shroud.

I'm a child and adult psychiatrist by training and a writer courtesy of muses unnamed. Fred Tremallo, my twelfth grade English teacher, saw some talent in me and gave me my head. Ever since then, I've been in love with stories and words, a love that sustains me in both of my jobs—one as a doctor, the other as a writer—and has led me to publish nearly two dozen books, mostly about the ADHD brain.

Tracy felt a calling herself, although she didn't label it that. She felt a sense of sacred presence firing within her before she knew what it was that caused her heart to skip a beat or a lump to come into her throat for no reason. She didn't know why she'd want to cry over nothing but would want to cry nonetheless. She didn't know why she wondered what made a turtle a turtle instead of a worm or a robin when others never wondered any such silly thing.

As if living a waking dream, she spent years experiencing life offhanded, neither left nor right, just her way, which, thanks to kind spirits like her parents and others she met on their journeys through life, she never knew as strange or odd or wrong, just her way, Tracy's way. She delighted in her childhood, loving yellow as a little girl, and all things like yellow, such as the sun, her mom, and Doris Day. Using the treasure-finder of an eye she was born with, she found the special, the eccentric, the

speckled, and the hidden in every moment of every day. Her inner Geiger counter registered earthquakes of delight all the time.

She didn't notice until later that not everyone else took to life the way she did. She performed the tricks we ask our ambitious young to perform, and she put the letters after her name that garner the world's respect. But she wanted something else, something more. However, it wasn't the *more* that greedy or superficial people crave. It wasn't a yearning for yachts, \$250,000 cars, or the adulation of crowds that she sought.

She sought a mission commensurate with her capacity to imagine one. She needed to make a difference in a unique way, in Tracy's way, and for that there was no blueprint, no agent, no important person's favor to curry.

So she relied on what she'd always relied on. She let her intuition and instincts be her guide. She stopped being realistic and pledged loyalty to her vision and imagination, as well as the values she naturally loved. She threw caution to the wind.

The rest reads like a fairy tale, and, as I told Tracy many years ago, she has become the Fairy Godmother of ADHD. She trusted what her special eyes could see, and she trusted what her deep sensibility could feel.

She then bravely shared her vision with the world. Bravely, because she risked ridicule, rejection, and defeat. But those were just words to her. What pulsed through her veins was a serum of conviction, vision, and passionate desire to give others the liberating knowledge she'd found.

I've seen similar characteristics of curiosity, courage, drive, and the need to do things their own way in other women with ADHD. For the thirty-plus years I've practiced as a psychiatrist, I've always had a special interest in girls and women with ADHD because they represent the most misunderstood and underdiagnosed group of all my patients. I also have ADHD and dyslexia, which I view as traits, not disorders, because if they're managed properly, they can become superpowers. And Tracy, more than others I know, has learned how to turn her own ADHD into a force that can help others who struggle with ADHD worldwide.

Today, she spends her life opening up the world to some very lucky people, mostly adult women, by teaching them about a way of being misleadingly called ADHD. Tracy discovered it sleepwalking, by which I mean she discovered it in random daydreams she can't even recall.

Some sleepwalk! Without training, preparation, or pedigree she stepped out a leader in ADHD, a freer of trapped minds, a validator of forgotten dreams, especially in women who had ADHD but didn't know it until Tracy spoke to them in a way they could hear and understand.

Like Hopkins, Tracy saw what others couldn't see, and she felt an

ecstasy others didn't feel. She made it her mission to share what she saw so others could see it too, and to share what she felt so others could tremble with the same jubilation that fired through her every nerve.

Long before others saw through the sackcloth and ashes that drape the conventional view of ADHD, Tracy beheld the beauty beneath, as well as the yearnings of the women trapped by society, upbringing, and most of all, total ignorance of what this misunderstood condition really is.

Tracy became the best kind of expert. She lived her knowledge into coming alive. She learned by watching, inspecting, listening, and inquiring. She didn't blindly accept what the experts said. She learned from the women who came to her gatherings, soon to be called podcasts, much of which she put into this book.

What's here emerged from the laboratory of lived lives. Tracy, wide-eyed, took it all in. Tracy, ears opened, listened especially to what was not said, what people held back, but Tracy could intuit. In so doing, she applied the talent she was born with but a talent even she didn't know she had.

She was born a seer, a visionary, a healer, but she knew none of this. Growing up, she thought of herself simply as a happy little girl who lived in a loving family in a nurturing and encouraging community. She doesn't even remember the flashes of insight and intuition that came to her so often she thought everyone possessed such a sixth sense.

One day she wrote to me, "I'd really love to hear your perspective on what makes me different (if you see a difference) from others in the ADHD space. I'm not a medical doctor, psychologist, or therapist but somehow, I've been able to change lives when often [the professionals] haven't been able to. Maybe it's my blind, irreverent optimism? I'm not quite sure. I do love people and I always see the best in them."

The unadorned innocence and humility in those words point up how naturally Tracy came upon her gifts, and how much she strove to help others grow into their best selves.

It is one of the many conundrums in life with ADHD that we tend to have great talent embedded in great struggle. Until recently only the struggle got much attention. The "deficit disorder" model of ADHD—pathology written into its very name—reinforced the image of ADHD as an affliction with few, if any, saving graces. This model of the condition only made the condition worse, much worse. To this day, mothers tell me that the doctor who told them about their child's ADHD presented it almost as if it were a fatal illness, or at best a chronic, debilitating disease that had no cure.



But Tracy knew better. She knew about dappled things and stipple trout that swim and she knew that by paying attention to those parts of a person's life, the dappled, stipple parts would grow and begin to crowd out the sickly cells.

She asked me if it was her "blind, irreverent optimism" that gave her the power to change so many lives for the better, lives that professionals with far more advanced training had failed to bring out of the doldrums.

I'm certain her optimism helped her. Her optimism is not the feeble-minded, lily-livered, look-on-the-bright-side-of-life attitude it's usually depicted as, but rather it's a muscular, trained-in-the-trenches-of-life, bring-it-on-baby confidence that proclaims for all the world to hear that we can handle whatever life throws at us.

But even more, it was her inborn instincts that led her outside the conventional and restricted views of ADHD to the truth, as so many have verified.

An angel of trust kissed her at birth. She trusted her voice within. She listened to what people told her and put their stories before what was written in the textbooks. Now, thanks to her and others, the textbooks are being rewritten.

She perceived the beauty in disarray. She saw the potential greatness in a mess. She could hear the harmony gathering within the cacophony. She could find the love in hatred and find value in a feud.

No, she is neither a dainty violet nor an orchid in need of special care. She's more a hearty weed, part East, part West, able to be buffeted about and come up smiling. She's smart as a whip, but modest as a monk.

That she loves people has helped her, but that people love her, and reveal themselves to her fully and without disguise, has helped her to help them even more.

As you read this book, please know that Tracy Otsuka had one purpose in mind in bringing you these words. She wanted to bring the truth about a condition incorrectly called ADHD to as many people as she could. She's focused on women because she is one; she knows women well; and the need is great as adult women represent the single most undiagnosed group.

She was born to deliver a message. You will see it bursting out on every page. You will see how well she understands the many nooks and crannies of ADHD, or to cite words at the end of the poem we started out with:

*All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; . . .*

Tracy knows the pied beauty, the myriad contradictions, the counter, spare, and strange of ADHD as well as, if not better than, anyone.

But most of all, what she brings to you here, and wherever she goes, is the well-disguised (so as not to put anyone off) but unmistakable gift called love. Tracy's own—vintage, bonded, and unsurpassed—love.

## *Introduction*

# How I Became the Fairy Godmother of ADHD Women

“Your number one job as his parent is to reduce his expectations, so he won’t be disappointed in life.”

The child psychologist looked me straight in the eyes as she leaned forward and hooked her pewter hair behind one ear. I stared back blankly.

“Ms. Otsuka, do you have any questions?” she asked.

Yes, I had a million questions about what she had just told me about my son, Markus. Reduce his expectations for life? At age twelve? Simply because he had ADHD? Her words burned through the air.

But I didn’t ask any questions. She had her mind made up, and I wasn’t going to change it. Instead I just shut down.

Markus had been diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, by a clinical neuropsychologist after enduring a battery of psychological, visual, and educational tests and undergoing various therapies for much of the last three years. My husband and I were confused by the diagnosis, so we had been working with this psychologist to learn more. She had come highly referred as *the* ADHD expert, but after she harshly scolded Markus and my daughter for playfully pushing each other in one of our sessions, I started to question her approach. Now she was suggesting we lower his expectations in life. Who in their right mind would ever suggest limiting a child’s potential for any reason whatsoever?

She clearly didn’t know Markus. Charismatic, confident, and incessantly curious, he wouldn’t stop until he had answers to all the questions that interested him. He feared nothing (except bugs) and walked around like an explorer staking his claim in the New World. He was driven and spent hours a week researching potential careers and the universities that would prepare him for those careers (starting at the age of nine). He had big dreams and high aspirations. Why would I ever quash his

ambitions?

But this wasn't what I asked the psychologist. Instead, I gathered my bag, walked out of her office, and never looked back.

Eight months later, my world changed again when I received the same diagnosis: like Markus, I also had ADHD. I received this diagnosis only after learning everything I could about the condition once Markus was diagnosed, eventually seeing in myself many of the same symptoms, then proactively seeking out an adult ADHD specialist to confirm my suspicions. This is how I realized that ADHD is often passed down from parent to child and that the condition doesn't primarily affect boys and men, as plenty of doctors still believe. Just as many girls and women have ADHD, and they often go undiagnosed for years or are misdiagnosed with mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder.

ADHD also manifests differently in everyone, and you don't have to exhibit the stereotypical symptoms that many people, including doctors, associate with ADHD—like fidgeting, misbehaving, or doing poorly in school. I was gobsmacked. How could I have made it through four decades of life and never considered that I might have ADHD? Pretty soon, I learned I wasn't alone: as many as 75 percent of girls and women with ADHD go undiagnosed.

Once I realized how many misconceptions there were about ADHD and how many women were undiagnosed or misdiagnosed—or were diagnosed, then told to lower their ambitions as a result—I decided to make it my mission to change the conversation around the condition. Because I was certain that I've been successful in life because of my ADHD, not despite it.

The truth is, I've felt different my entire life because I was always “too much.” I was “too chatty,” for example; my parents called me the “Burlingame Blab” after my hometown, Burlingame, California, because I'd tell family secrets to anyone who'd listen. I was also “too intent” on challenging the status quo. On a lark, I met my husband through a personal ad well before there was online dating. Despite telling him I wasn't interested in anything serious, I was the one who proposed because when I know what I want, I'm driven to make it happen—and what I wanted was to get married in a very specific place and I didn't want to wait another year to reserve it (see [here](#) for more of this story). I'm “too ambitious” and “too willing” to say exactly what's on my mind, like when I recently told a Zoom Room full of college professors that their teaching methods were terrible for neurodivergent students. Yikes. (*Neurodivergent* describes a person's brain, like mine, that processes or learns differently from what's

considered “standard.”)

Thinking through my diagnosis more carefully, I made an important connection: some of what others perceive as my ADHD “weaknesses” are exactly my greatest strengths. And my son is no different. You see, we’re not hyperactive, just otherworldly energetic. We’re not distractible, just incessantly curious. And yes, we can be impulsive, but some experts believe that creativity is simply impulsivity gone right (and one reason why many believe that Leonardo da Vinci, Vincent van Gogh, and Pablo Picasso all had ADHD). My ADHD diagnosis confirmed that I had been right about Markus and his big ambitions: given the right environment, he could accomplish his wildest dreams because I had. With two graduate degrees, I’ve passed the bar, worked as an attorney, and started three different companies. I have a thirty-year successful marriage and have remained happy and healthy throughout life. Today, I can see that my personal drive is a great form of hyperactivity and that my interpersonal intuition is the reason I can walk into a room and read how people feel before anyone utters a word, which has helped me successfully predict the mood of a group and ensure that everyone feels heard.

It’s not that I don’t have weaknesses. I’m never on time for anything that’s not business related, and I’m incapable of washing a load of laundry just once, because I forget about the wet clothes in the dryer for days. The smoke alarm is the only reason my house hasn’t burned to the ground, and I cannot balance a checkbook to save my life.

But despite my issues with time, memory, and money, I shouldn’t be pathologized for having a brain that works differently—and neither should you. The more I learned about ADHD, the more frustrated I became with how many misconceptions and roadblocks there are for those of us who are neurodivergent. At the same time, I was meeting so many accomplished, successful, and brilliant women with ADHD. How come no one was talking about and celebrating us?

This is how I decided to start the podcast *ADHD for Smart Ass Women*, so that I could help us all better understand our brilliant, creative brains. I had an additional motive to meet more women with ADHD. And what better way to find my people than by letting them know that I am their people? What I didn’t realize at the time, however, was just how many of “my people” were out there: in a little over a year, my podcast was ranked in the top half of 1 percent of all podcasts in the world on any subject. Clearly, there were many other women and some men who resonated with my strengths-focused view of ADHD.

Even more surprisingly, I started to receive messages from

psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, therapists, and other medical professionals from around the world who commended me on the quality of my work and told me that *they* were learning about ADHD from *me*. Some also said they had referred their ADHD patients or clients to my podcast. Then, one of the country's leading ADHD experts, psychiatrist and former Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Edward M. Hallowell—whom I interviewed on my podcast—called me “a marvelous fairy godmother liberating women from their negative labels and helping them lay claim to the wonderful life they can have.” This is how many women started calling me their fairy godmother, a title that has stuck.

With time, I began to realize the immense value of belonging to a community of like-minded ADHD women. My podcast, along with the online programs I subsequently launched for women with ADHD, was helping them recognize their own brilliance by seeing the same traits in other incredible women. Today, our community of ADHD women includes professors, scientists, doctors, lawyers, CEOs, entrepreneurs, contractors, artists, restaurateurs, writers, and everyone else who wants to tap into the strengths that ADHD has to offer and rewrite their own script. Meeting these women is inspiring and motivating. Throughout the pages of this book, I'll introduce them to you because it's important you meet them too.

What these women have in common is the shared belief that they are successful because of their ADHD, not despite it. They know that, given the right environment, they can take advantage of their natural strengths and interests. Many of these women are also action-oriented: They don't think about what they can't do or wish they could do. Instead, they go out and do it. And because they do it, you can do it too.

In my quest to learn all I could about ADHD, I eventually became an ADHD coach, which is a trained professional who helps people with the condition better manage their lives and symptoms. While there is no one regulating body that certifies coaches, most educational institutions that offer ADHD coach training have robust and specific criteria people must follow before becoming a coach. Some of the world's leading coaching organizations, like the nonprofit International Coaching Federation, certify ADHD training programs to help add credibility. Research shows that people who work with ADHD coaches end up improving their motivation, concentration, time management skills, self-esteem, and satisfaction with their school or work, in addition to other aspects of their daily function and life. This is one reason that many psychiatrists, psychologists, pediatricians, and other medical experts recommend working with an

ADHD coach. In the [epilogue](#), I'll give you guidelines on how to find a good ADHD coach.

I started taking ADHD coaching classes to better understand how my brain worked. While I never set out to become a coach myself, once I started taking the classes, I couldn't stop: I was so interested in putting together my own personal ADHD puzzle and understanding what makes my brain tick that I wanted to keep learning as much about the condition as I could. I also finally understood why life coaching had never worked for me: It wasn't that I was "uncoachable," as I had believed after my less-than-satisfying experience with a top life coach (see [here](#)), but that I wasn't being coached in the right ways, for my differently wired brain. At the same time, I began to see just how effective ADHD coaching can be and what a difference the right coach can make when added to our overall toolkit, which can also include medication, exercise, mindfulness, and other treatments and therapies. I also saw how often ADHD doctors insist their patients partner with ADHD coaches because these medical professionals understand the value of ADHD coaching.

After I became a coach and started working exclusively with female clients, I saw how quickly they improved after realizing the reason they'd been struggling their whole lives wasn't because they were flawed or not smart enough: they simply had ADHD. It was no longer an excuse, just a reason. Once this clicked, they were able to develop new workarounds and strategies that better leveraged their symptoms rather than allowing themselves to remain hamstrung by their traits. Through my podcast and the other ADHD groups I created, my clients were also able to connect with other successful, happy women with similar symptoms, which did the most work to dissipate the shame many felt. By seeing themselves in other successful women, many of my clients have finally been able to acknowledge and accept that they're not broken and they don't have some character flaw or moral failing. Instead, we women with ADHD have a unique brain that runs on a different operating system, like being a Mac in a Windows-driven world.

***Instead, we women with ADHD have a unique brain that runs on a different operating system, like being a Mac in a Windows-driven world.***

Inspired, I started offering free workshops, like my 5 Days to Fall in Love with Your ADHD Brain. That's when it became even clearer to me that teaching ADHD women how their brains work can greatly reduce shame, help overhaul self-image, and change their belief in what they think they're capable of—sometimes in just a matter of days. And this is possible for you, too, even if you've lived with ADHD for years or have already tried multiple sessions of traditional therapy or life coaching.

For all these reasons, I knew that I had to write an ADHD book for women that didn't just disperse the same old or traditional advice, like to keep a to-do list and write everything in your planner, which may or may not work for you. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, medical professionals who don't understand ADHD have chided women who've diagnosed themselves with the condition by using TikTok (a real phenomenon, chronicled by *Good Morning America*, *Time* magazine, and many other eminent media outlets). The reason women have turned to TikTok to get help with ADHD is because we haven't felt heard or seen and we've been undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, or, worse still, told that it's all in our head. Other times, when doctors believe we have ADHD, we're given a prescription or a bunch of literature highlighting how we're disordered or defective when, in reality, our brilliant brains just work differently.

Recently, while reading the latest research on ADHD, as I often do, I stumbled on a large study conducted by scientists at the University of Toronto that found 42 percent of all adults with ADHD are in excellent mental health. Excellent mental health? Nearly half of us? I was floored. Why wasn't everyone talking about this study? I began to wonder what would happen if, instead of pathologizing ADHD, we looked at what these 42 percent of people were doing to live successfully with ADHD and leveraged their strategies for ourselves.

Discovering what your best life can look like with ADHD isn't always a straight path forward, and it may mean upsetting the applecart in places as you step into the brilliance of your extraordinary brain. Those of us with ADHD think differently, and not everyone likes different. I don't have tips on how to fit in because I don't believe we need to fit in. Instead, I believe we should embrace our unique brains so that we can work with our biology, not against it, to be truly successful and happy. This is what I want to teach you, how to work with your exceptional brain so you can do things your own way and live the life you were meant to live.



## ***Those of us with ADHD think differently, and not everyone likes different.***

If you're struggling with your ADHD, one reason may be because you're still "trying harder" to do things society's way. A lot of ADHD women think they're broken because they live outside the status quo, but instead of kicking it to the curb (where it belongs), they end up trying to improve the areas of their brains that society tells us need shoring up. I strongly believe, however, that there are far better ways to spend your time, like embracing what makes you special and living up to your potential. You don't have to fit a square peg into a round hole—in fact, you can go ahead and ask why the damn hole needs filling in the first place.

This book is not packed with incomprehensible, confusing, or pathologizing medical jargon. It's written the way most of us speak: simply and directly, with a sense of humor. You can also start the book wherever you want. Take a look at the table of contents to see what interests you. You have my permission not to finish a chapter if it doesn't resonate with you.

I want this book to feel fun and easy so that you feel good about reading it—and keep reading it. What I want to foster in you with this book is positive emotion—when we feel satisfaction, success, happiness, or joy—because that's exactly what our ADHD brains need to feel inspired to keep going.

One of the most important lessons I can impart to you is, start to get curious about what works for you. Whether you realize it or not, you already have systems and procedures in place that function best with your ADHD brain. Together, we'll get curious about *your* systems and how *you* can leverage and implement them. That's the big secret with ADHD: you are already the expert on you. No one knows what will work best for you other than you. And while many of us may have stopped believing in ourselves years ago after being told we were "too much," I'm here to teach you how to start trusting in yourself again.

I have never met a person with ADHD who wasn't truly brilliant at something. Not one. That includes you, me, and my son, Markus, who has been my greatest teacher. He's now in his junior year at New York University and was recently offered a summer internship at an international bank after beating out 870 applications for one of fifteen

spots—not bad for a kid who was told to lower his ambitions.

Markus taught me that often our creative ADHD brains need more structure, not less. By finding the right environment and surrounding himself with people who believe in him, my son’s sky has become limitless. And so can yours.

Markus didn’t need to have his expectations lowered—he needed them raised. Once he knew how his different brain worked and understood how smart and capable he was, hope took hold.

Hope is the bridge to our success. It fuels our intentions, drives our determination, and gives us the confidence to soar.

Hope is my promise to you.

## Part I

# Understanding You and Your ADHD Brain

# 1

## What ADHD Really Is

Monday morning, 6:30. I head downstairs to the spin bike we keep in the garage. I adjust my bike seat, look down at my wrist, and remember that the watch I use to track my workouts is in the kitchen on its charger. I totter back up the wooden stairs in my bike cleats to the kitchen, where my bossy Shih Tzu, Mo, greets me with a face that says, *I need treats*. “OK, Mo,” I say, reaching into the cannister and handing her a biscuit. She crinkles up her nose. She wants a different kind of treat, the kind I keep in the garage. Not only is she bossy, she’s also demanding.

On my way to the garage, I see flies in the hallway. *Gross*, I think, *who left the door open?* I go back to the kitchen, grab a fly swatter, and begin to swat insects. After getting rid of enough flies, I head back to the garage to get Mo’s biscuits, scooping up an unopened UPS package I see on the floor. Then it’s back to the kitchen, where I slip and almost fall on the hardwood floors (I’m still in the damn bike cleats). I notice the postmark on the package: Even though it was mailed to me weeks ago, I decide now is when it must be opened! I start searching for scissors. Mo has given up on her treats. She’s hovering at the kitchen door, asking me to let her out. I do so, then go back to the package.

While opening the package, I spot the hydrangeas that my mom and dad brought when they came for dinner the night before. If you’re a gardener, you know how fussy hydrangeas can be—I see these ones are already wilting so I drop the scissors and start rummaging around for garden clippers to trim the hydrangea stems when another fly whizzes by. *Where’s that swatter?* I think. I hear my cellphone ding with an email. I hesitate, but it could be important, so I may as well take a look, right?

Several minutes later, I see Mo out of the corner of my eye at the door again, begging to come in. I look up at our big kitchen clock. *How in the hell is it 7:15 a.m.?*

“Oh no, my workout!” I mindlessly grab the half-opened package,