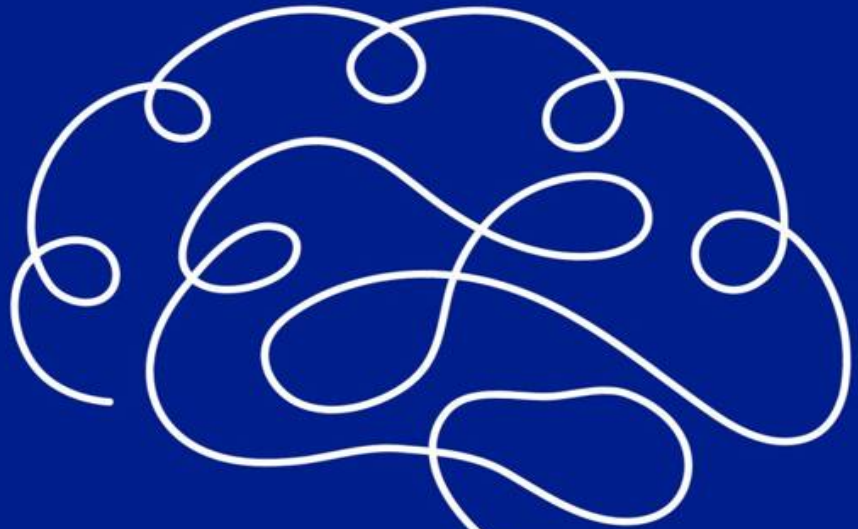


How

to



ADHD

An Insider's Guide
to Working with Your Brain
(Not Against It)

Jessica McCabe

How to ADHD

An Insider's Guide to
Working with Your Brain
(Not Against It)

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This book aims to provide useful information based on the author’s personal experience and research, but it is not intended to replace your doctor’s diagnostic expertise and medical advice. Please consult with your doctor if you believe you have any medical conditions that may require treatment.

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Published in the United States by Rodale Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

RodaleBooks.com | RandomHouseBooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCabe, Jessica, 1982– author.

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023036480>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023036481>

Hardcover ISBN 9780593578940

Ebook ISBN 9780593578957

Book design by Andrea Lau, adapted for ebook

Chapter-opening illustrations by Stephen Foster and Palestrina McCaffrey

Cover design by Irene Ng

Cover art by Ann1911/Shutterstock

ep_prh_6.1_145816692_c0_r0

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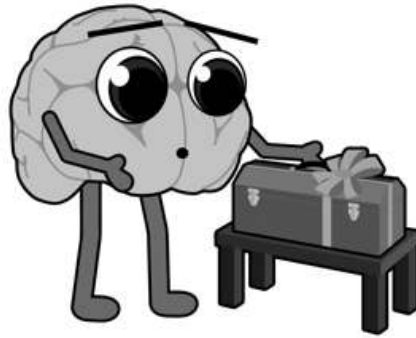
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Introduction



You don't write because you want to say something; you write because you've got something to say.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Hello, Brains!

You found my book! A BOOK! How did that happen? Well, first I had to write one. So why did I, someone with ADHD, do such a long and forever-taking thing? Because I lose and forget things, and what I have learned over the last seven years is too important to do that with. As I'll explain in Chapter 1, my intention in starting the YouTube channel How to ADHD was to put everything I learned about ADHD in one place so that I could actually find it again when I needed it.

Well, it's years later. Over the course of building the channel, I've developed a deep and detailed understanding of the invisible obstacles those with ADHD tend to run into, as well as our options for dealing with them. The (almost) weekly videos in which I've shared what I learned, every step along my journey, have helped me and millions of others learn to work with our brains, not against them.

In fact, my team and I have made so many videos that even I'm a little overwhelmed by the amount of information we've put together!

Sometimes I wish I could just flip to a table of contents, or control-F my channel or my brain.

Until that is possible, I'm putting the most important information I learned—what's been the most helpful for me and for my community—in a book. Something tangible, with a cover and a table of contents and an index. A reference to remind myself of a tool I can use when I'm feeling stuck. And if I accidentally leave it on the bus like half my school notebooks, I can just buy a new one—wherever I am in the world. (Hello, International Brains!!)

Think of this as a user's guide to ADHD full of insights, research, strategies, and validation, one that both explains and accounts for how our brains work.

More importantly, though, I wanted to write a book that would give people the experience they'd have if they saw my TEDx Talk, binge-watched my videos, hung out in the comments section, and went to coffee with me. I wanted to give others, if I could, what I had found on my own journey: a deep understanding of how our brains work, a sense of solidarity, and a toolbox full of strategies tailored to the specific challenges we face in achieving what it is we set out to achieve. I wanted to make our invisible obstacles visible for as many people as possible, so we stop blaming ourselves for tripping over them and understand how to navigate them. And I wanted to do it all in one book.

It was an ambitious project, and I wasn't sure how to make it happen. I was pretty sure it wasn't even possible many, *many* times while creating it. But I used the book I was writing to push me over the finish line—tapping into the tools, reading the ending anecdotes for each chapter when I felt discouraged, and...well, here it is!

What you are holding in your hands right now is the book I needed and didn't have. Maybe it's the book *you* needed and didn't have.

Think of this as a user's guide to ADHD full of insights, research, strategies, and validation, one that both explains and embraces how our brains work. You won't find definitive solutions for managing ADHD, but a menu of tools I've collected from the community, ADHD experts, lived

experience, and research. You'll also find deep dives into why we even need these strategies, so you can choose the ones that fit your unique life and brain. The information and strategies I share in these chapters are meant to empower those with ADHD, enlighten and support the efforts of those who love someone with ADHD, and be helpful and insightful for anyone who is simply human.

How to Book

This book was written by and for ADHD brains. That said, ADHD brains often struggle to read books. We tend to get distracted (or bored), forget what we just read, lose our place, or stare at the same wall of text for five minutes, unable to actually read it.

For this reason, I was determined to write this book in a way that is ADHD-friendly. The pages have a lot of white space, the paragraphs are short, and it even feels good to hold. I included many reading “shortcuts” throughout the book, too: there are pull quotes, bullet points, and bold subheadings that you can scan to catch the main ideas. I worked closely with my (very patient!) editor to make the text as ADHD-friendly as possible for a book this jam-packed with information.

I have included quotes from Brains within the How to ADHD Community. They share their personal experiences, including how they find ways to navigate around obstacles and how they work with their brains, in case you need ideas for how to apply any of these tools. I have also written the chapters so that you can read them sequentially or skip to the ones that interest you without missing important information. (We are interest-based learners, after all!) Almost every chapter is divided into four sections.

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF...

At the beginning of every chapter, I describe my lived experience of the topic of the chapter, which tends to be relatable to those with ADHD. Sometimes I get a little literary in these sections. I may use metaphors,

hyperbole, or jokes to make them more fun to read (and, let's be honest, to write). If you don't enjoy reading this kind of thing—or if you prefer literal language to figurative language and just want to get to the facts—skim (or skip) the chapter introductions.

These sections sometimes deal with emotionally heavy topics, especially the ones that begin the “How to Feel,” “How to Heart,” and “How to People” chapters. It was important to me to be honest about my experiences here, because the struggles we face in these areas can be profoundly painful, but feel free to step away or skip ahead if you need to.

2. WHAT I LEARNED

In this section, I share the information that helped me the most on my own journey, as well as the information that resonated most with my community. If you like the easy-to-understand science communication in my lecture-style videos, this part of the chapter is for you.

I've compiled facts and insights from credible sources, such as peer-reviewed studies, books by ADHD coaches, doctors, and researchers, and conversations with experts in the field. That being said, there is so, so, so much more to know about each of these topics than I could possibly include in a single book, and there is new research being published all the time. If you are extra curious, please consider this information as a jumping-off point for more learning—and check out the research papers cited in the link on [this page](#) if you want to take a deeper dive.

3. THE TOOLBOX

In each toolbox section, you'll find strategies that work *with* your ADHD brain, rather than against it. The strategies I've included are research-backed, commonly recommended by ADHD coaches, and/or ones that have been helpful to my community and me. Each toolbox section has four or five main evidence-based strategies (tools), as well as a few ways each one can be used.

It is important to note that none of these tools are magic wands that will painlessly eliminate the obstacles that those with ADHD face. Everyone has go-to tools that work more often for them and a couple tools they only use occasionally. And we all have days when nothing seems to work. My hope for you is that by the end of this book, you'll have a personal toolbox full of options. This, in my experience, is better than a toolbox with nothing but a sticky note that says "try harder." Even if you never use some of these tools, they're there for you when you need them.

On [this page](#), you can find a shiny new toolbox page –make copies, tear it out, write in the book, whatever you like. On it, you'll find space to list three tools you want to try, how long you'll commit to trying them out (it can take time for some strategies to become comfortable/routine enough to make our lives easier), and for what purpose. It's limited to three tools for a reason. I built up this toolbox over seven years, learning one tool a week. And even then it got overwhelming sometimes. We have brains that want to do all the things, but I suggest adding more tools slowly as you get comfortable with (or decide you hate) the ones you're currently trying.

4. THE ENDING ANECDOTE

After spending months and years studying a particular topic, my perspective on it often changes. The final section in each chapter shares this perspective shift. I include these stories to remind you (and myself) that there is no single way to look at any topic, and that we can always learn something new—not just new information but new ways to view it. It's one of the awesome things about having a brain.

IS BOOK? IS BOOK.

So here it is. *How to ADHD: The Book*.

This whole journey started as a personal project—an attempt to understand how to work with my brain more effectively.

It quickly became a group project. My community jumped in to help me before I even thought to ask. I learned a lot of what I’ve written here from talking with Brains, Hearts, ADHD experts, and researchers.^[*]

Over the years, we’ve shared long, deep discussions about what it means to have ADHD. About how being “normal” isn’t a realistic goal but being functional *is*. About how sometimes, paradoxically, being functional means behaving in *less* (neuro)typical ways, so we can be more mentally healthy, happy, and generous humans for ourselves and for those we love.

I offer all that I’ve learned back to you, the reader. I’m really proud of how this book has turned out. Thank you for making your way to these pages. Allow your brain to explore this book however it wants. This book was written for your brain, and I hope your brain enjoys it. And if you are finding us for the first time here?

Hello, Brain!

Welcome to the community.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

* I call my viewers “Brains” (Hello, Brains!) because it’s their brains that brought them to my channel. Plus, they’re here to learn about their brain. When people find their way to my channel because they love someone with ADHD and want to understand them better, I call those people “Hearts” (Hello, Hearts!) because their hearts are what led them there. (In addition to what you may learn throughout this book, I wrote a whole chapter for Hearts; see [this page](#).)

A Note on Language

What I prioritize when it comes to language is *accessibility*. So many of us have run into issues of access—access to information about how our brains work, access to the supports we need, access to one another, and access even to ourselves and our own voices.

There is language that decreases or denies access, which I do not use or allow in my community: language that attacks, shames, or silences.

There is language that creates access. For example, “disability” gives us access to legal protections and accommodations. “Impairments” explains what we might need and where we might struggle. Research-based terms such as “response inhibition,” “divergent thinking,” and “working memory” give us and our healthcare providers access to information about our deficits and strengths relative to neurotypical brains so we can access treatment tailored to our needs. Colloquial language like “doom spirals” and “brain smoothie” makes discussing our challenges more accessible to those of us who did not go to grad school and helps us build community.

There is language that people use to identify themselves or their loved ones: identity-first language, person-first language, or terms such as “neurodivergent” or “neurotypical.” People hotly debate which type of language is appropriate, and some communities ban the use of one term or another, including in how people refer to themselves. I do not.

While the language we use matters, rigidly enforcing the use of specific language can deny access to those who need it most: those with the least cognitive flexibility or the least ability to remember and get it “right,” or those living in places that have the least understanding of

ADHD. It can alienate or isolate those who are more comfortable using different terminology for themselves or are at a different place in their self-identity and self-acceptance journey. What's more, some people may maliciously wield the "correct" language in a way that actively stigmatizes our community, while others might use the "incorrect" language in an accepting, supportive context.

My policy is to use the language that an individual person prefers: "brain-holder's choice," I call it. Because of this, I also use the language a particular community tends to use when there is a clear preference. In our community, people often use different terms to refer to the same thing. In these cases, I use these different terms interchangeably.

My policy is to use the language that an individual person prefers: "brain-holder's choice," I call it.

Ultimately, my hope is to combat the underlying stigma surrounding ADHD through education and understanding, and normalize the experience of having ADHD enough that the meaning can, eventually, be assumed to be respectful regardless of the particular language used. Just as I can be characterized as a girl with green eyes or a green-eyed girl without anyone, including myself, thinking less of me. I'm hoping my use of language in this book will help advance this goal.

In terms of how I refer to myself, I use person-first *and* identity-first language, depending on context. I also enjoy casual, community-created terms like "neuro-spicy," especially when speaking about my anxiety or trauma. It took some time for me to adjust to some of the words I now use. I shied away from the term "disability" for a long time. Ableism is deeply entrenched in our society, and I internalized a lot of it. But the bigger issue, for me, was that I didn't feel I was "disabled enough" to claim that identity and the protections and accommodations that come with it. It took me a long time to understand that it was my internalized ableism telling me I "should" be able to do without them.

My hope is that using the word "disability" helps me let go of my internalized ableism, and that it helps others accept themselves and access the supports and protections they need. For what it's worth, many things

can be considered a disability, even pregnancy. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), “disability” means you have a “mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities”—which can include focusing, working, or communicating. It was helpful for me to learn and embrace that.

As for the stigma around disabilities and the willingness to speak openly about mine? I had a head start on that one.

Being disabled is an identity I share with my mother. She was born with one leg shorter than the other, and after several unsuccessful surgeries, she moved through this world using a special shoe, crutches, and/or a wheelchair. She was also a talented special education preschool and kindergarten teacher, and the strongest, most capable woman I’ve ever known. I can still hear the baffled tone in her voice when she was told she’d be excluded from something she cared about. “What do you mean I can’t teach in that room because I’m on crutches? Put some carpet down!” (And they did!)

My mother spoke openly about her disability to anyone who was curious. Children would gawk and stare at her at the grocery store. When they asked questions like “What’s wrong with your leg?” their parents would turn red, rush their child away, and begin scolding them.

Language evolves through conversation.

My mom would respond, “No...let them ask!” She’d then patiently explain her scars, show them how to touch them (“See? It’s fine!”^[*]), and help them to understand how her mobility aids worked. She knew that these explanations would normalize her experience for them and help them understand that there are differences in how bodies work. She knew that this exposure combats the stigma that results in biases about people who are “different.” She encouraged every curious person to participate in those conversations, however awkwardly they could.

This was because she knew that while people may always communicate differently, language evolves through conversation.

As a trained speech and language pathologist, my mom’s job was to help students with disabilities learn to communicate, and she encouraged

augmentative and alternative communication systems to meet each student where they were, giving them a path to having their voices heard and their needs met as they learned to speak.

She knew that, contrary to popular opinion and concerns from others, these different ways of communicating would not make it harder for her students to learn how to speak; they would be a path toward it. I volunteered in her classroom every summer starting when I was five, and her classroom rules are ones that guide my own work: We are here to learn. We make space for differences. And we allow all voices a chance to be heard.

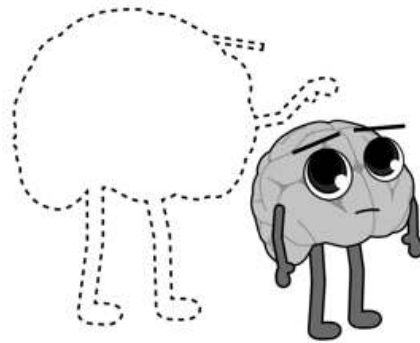
My mother modeled language for her students and let them speak back how they could. This increased their sense of safety and efficacy—which made it easier for them to stay in the conversation and learn how to communicate in more nuanced ways over time. This is what my mom—Mrs. McCabe, or “’abecca” to many of her students—modeled for me, in her classroom and outside of it. In my mom’s memory, it’s what I still do now, in this book and beyond its pages.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

* When you encounter someone with a disability, it’s a good idea to ask about their preferences: If it’s okay to ask questions. If you can touch their service dog or their mobility aids. If there are types of support they’d like you to provide. Everyone has different needs and preferences. It’s important not to assume.

Chapter 1

How to Fail at Everything



Be yourself!...No, not like that!

—SOCIETY

POTENTIAL

My whole life, I felt like I was failing to be the person I was supposed to be.

When I was little, my mom would drop me off at school—my hair braided, jacket clean and warm from tumbling in the dryer, quietly reading a new book. At the end of the day, my dad would pick me up—dirty, disheveled, backpack left unzipped and messy, anxiously shivering because I'd forgotten my jacket.

I went to school looking like the person I was supposed to be. I went home looking like...me.

And I wasn't what anyone expected.

When you are eight, people expect you to be able to dress yourself, keep your shoes tied, and keep your backpack zipped. The basics. When you are thirty, people expect you to show up to work on time, pay your bills, and put gas in your car *before* it runs out.

I've never been great at meeting basic expectations.

I could, however, *exceed* them.

In school, I took standardized tests every year. These tests measured my performance in each subject by grade level. In third grade, my reading comprehension came back “PHS.” I asked my teacher what it meant. She didn't know, so she asked the principal. He told us, “Post high school.” (I really liked to read.)

In high school, I was assigned an essay to write. I do not remember what the topic was, but I decided that—to research it properly—I needed to go to a duck farm, buy some eggs, incubate and hatch those eggs, raise the ducklings, and then teach them to swim in my bathtub. This wasn't for a science fair project, by the way. I did this for *English* class. I'm not sure why I felt I had to go to those lengths, but the day I presented my paper to the class, I was the only student walking around campus with three ducklings in tow.

The teacher gave me the same feedback that I had heard throughout my entire life: “You have *so much potential!*”

In college, I signed up for multiple classes on the music business because I wanted to support my then boyfriend, who was a musician. I had no plans to be a composer, but I took a composition class where I learned how to write music using math. I was pretty good at it, too! The teacher gave me the same feedback that I heard throughout my entire life: “You have *so much potential!*”

EXPECTATIONS

The fact that I could *sometimes* exceed expectations made it even more frustrating for me—and everyone around me—when I failed to meet the basic ones.

Be a Good Daughter

As a daughter, I was supposed to make my parents proud.

But I struggled to meet most of my parents' expectations for me: clean your bedroom, do your homework, and behave at the dinner table. So I tried to earn their respect in other ways.

When I was in middle school, my mom survived a car accident that killed two of her friends. The accident left her with a broken back that never healed completely. With both drivers uninsured and my mom—a special education teacher—suddenly unable to work, our family went from financially comfortable to broke. Mom needed to go back to work sooner than she probably should have.

I started my acting career at fifteen because, as a kid growing up in Los Angeles, I knew it was a path where someone my age could make enough money to support their parents. I didn't want my mom to have to work anymore; it was clear how much pain she was in. I couldn't take away her pain, but I could try to make her life easier.

When my parents struggled with their marriage, I tried playing therapist.

When my little brother experienced significant mental health issues, I tried to mediate between him and my parents. Sometimes, I parented him myself.

After quite a bit of therapy, I now understand that this was not healthy, but I so desperately wanted to be a good daughter and make my disabled mom's life easier that I did whatever I could, especially because I felt like such a "difficult" child.

Pay Attention in Class

As a student, I was supposed to know what was happening in class.

In elementary school, I could get away with staring out the window or getting distracted during tests because I was smart, we stayed in one classroom all day, and there were sticker charts and prizes to motivate me to do my work. By middle school, when I was responsible for motivating myself to do my work, bringing the right books to the right class, and managing assignments on my own, my academic life fell apart.

Around twelve, I was struggling so much that my mom brought me to a doctor, who diagnosed me with attention deficit disorder (ADD).^[*1] I was prescribed daily stimulant medication, and it helped me focus. My GPA went up a whole point without me doing anything else differently. The effort I was already putting in suddenly *worked*. As far as everyone I knew was concerned, my ADD had been successfully treated—and that was supposed to be the end of that.

But medication added new expectations. Now, “Stop messing around, are you ready for school yet?” was followed by, “Did you take your meds?” Now, I figured there was no excuse for me failing to be what everyone wanted me to be: the gifted student who received straight A’s and was a “delight to have in class.”

On top of completing my schoolwork and finding time for extracurriculars, I also needed to remember to schedule my doctor’s appointments every month, go to them, pick up my prescription, refill it within the two-day window, and then take my meds at the right time (after I woke up but not too late if I wanted to go to sleep that night).

And when my meds wore off or I forgot to take them, I struggled even harder than I did before.

Get a College Degree

As a gifted student, I was supposed to graduate college.

Though I had completely missed every deadline to apply for universities, I did very well on my community college entrance exams. My counselor told me she wasn’t worried. I’d be able to transfer to a four-year university, no problem.

Somehow, despite her confidence in me, I missed another expectation: the part of college where you make a plan to complete your course requirements. I wanted to be a journalism major, but instead of writing classes, I took fencing. And those music business classes I mentioned. And ballet. And opera. And Italian, so I could understand what I was singing in opera. One semester, I decided to take statistics, a class I actually needed to graduate. I forgot to register for the course in time,^[*2] but the professor told me to show up for class anyway. Once I completed the course, he

said, he would give me whatever grade I got when I officially registered for the class next semester.

Statistics is *tough*. I went to every lecture, spent two hours a day doing homework, and aced the class. The next semester, however, I forgot to sign up—*again*. I spent the rest of the year looking for bushes to hide behind when I saw this professor on campus. By the time I worked up the courage to admit my mistake a year later, and ask if I could still register for his class and get that A, he told me it had been too long; I'd need to take it again. I was so discouraged, I dropped out shortly after. Statistically speaking, I knew my odds of graduating anytime soon were not great.

Be Successful

I couldn't reach my potential as a student, so I tried to reach it in my career.

After dropping out of college, I decided to give acting another shot. My theater teacher had previously introduced me to his acting manager, who also believed in me.

I pursued acting the same way I pursued everything—with total enthusiasm! Unless I got distracted...or had to do something boring like memorize lines, listen while someone else spoke, or hold relatively still, which turns out to be 90 percent of being a professional actor.

I had a handful of early successes, but as time went by, there were fewer and fewer opportunities. (Heads-up: you'll find a frank discussion of disordered eating. Feel free to skip ahead to the next page.)

My manager and agent had ideas to boost my career: "Lose ten pounds, and we can get you a pilot!" I'd try a new diet or a different workout, but I could never sustain my efforts long enough for them to matter. I'd get discouraged and give up, or run out of money from paying for personal trainers I couldn't afford or purchasing dehydrators and other equipment so I could follow the latest diet. I'm not sure if I would have qualified for an eating disorder, but I definitely ended up with disordered eating (see "Let's Talk about Eating Issues," [this page](#)).

I carried my shame and frustration with me into the audition room. I hadn't lost ten pounds. I saw other girls walk in, competing for the same