

These 2022 graduates had untreated ADHD during the pandemic. And it nearly upended their academic careers.

Up until their third semester of college, Chima Ikoro had always been a model student. But in the summer of 2020, their school threatened to take their scholarship away.

Columbia College Chicago told them they did not meet the GPA requirement of 3.0 or higher to receive a scholarship for the fall. Ikoro had maintained a 3.7 the first year, but when classes went online in spring 2020, they started failing all their classes. And they didn't know why.

“I thought it was only because I was unable to function well in online classes, because I was depressed, or because I was living by myself. But that wasn't the case. Because then when we went back to partially in person, I was kind of struggling,” they said.

In the fall of 2021, they would hear the answer from their friend. “Chima, you have ADHD.”

When colleges switched to online learning during the coronavirus lockdown, many faculty members, administrators, and students faced setbacks like Zoom fatigue and higher than normal levels of stress. But it was especially difficult for some 2022 graduates with untreated attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, who depended on in-person routines and motivations to complete their work — and most of their tasks.

Lauren Spiezia, a 2022 graduate from Syracuse University, found herself procrastinating significantly more during online learning because she didn't have in-person cues to hold her accountable for starting assignments.

"I definitely think that some of my individual assignment grades did suffer especially because a lot of the time, I would save my big projects to the night before," she said. Her ADHD symptoms were more noticeable during online learning, which motivated her to receive a test in March 2021.

Clinical psychologist Lesley Cook said that people with ADHD have a harder time adjusting to Zoom classes because they need a learning environment with active engagement. Active learning involves many shifts in movement like writing and talking and increases stimulus value, which makes it easier to attend classes and boosts feelings of being rewarded.

"Online learning often presents much more of a passive learning environment, which means that folks that were doing really well in an in-person environment may suddenly experience a drop in attention and drop in grades," she said.

Ikoro's inability to do the work from their apartment caused them to fail and retake classes, delaying their graduation by two years.

They would spend lectures getting distracted by the background of the professor's screen or doing chores in their apartment with the camera off because they couldn't sit still.

“When I'm at home, there are a million things that I could be doing,” they said. “And so, then I'm like, ‘Well, let me just wash the dishes. Well, let me just walk my dog, when we just fold this laundry.’” If classes were asynchronous, they would forget to do the work.

Ahmed Hassanin, who is receiving his master's degree from Memorial University of Newfoundland this year, finished his thesis four months late. Without the routine of study groups or class schedules, he would become hyper-fixated on his thesis for long periods of time, resulting in burnout, long breaks and lack of sleep. He completed 90% of his thesis after he started receiving medication in October 2021.

“If I had the knowledge I had now and access to medication now, at the start of 2021, I think I would have been able to finish my thesis way out on time,” he said.

Rhyse Tamez, who graduated from California Baptist University in 2022, said that their anxiety and depression symptoms also worsened during 2020 due to their academic shortcomings from untreated ADHD.

“My identity has always been a student. And I've always been good at it. I work very very hard to reach my goals, especially my academic ones,” they said. “To have that kind of taken out from underneath my feet that way, I felt like I lost myself,” they said.

Students with learning disabilities experienced not only greater challenges in adapting to online instruction during the early phases of the pandemic, but also experienced greater rates of major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and basic needs insecurity (food/housing insecurity), according to a [study](#) conducted by The Student Experience in the Research University Consortium.

Catherine Bray, an ADHD coach based in Toronto, Canada, said adults with undiagnosed ADHD tend to experience higher rates of depression and blame themselves for their inability to reach their potential.

“It's very hard to know that you're smart enough to follow your dream, to be a doctor, to be a lawyer, to be an engineer, to be whatever you want to be. But just are struggling to focus and create your own structure. It's really hard to know that you're capable of it. But they can't do it right now. And it makes people feel broken,” she said.

When Ikoro got into their friend's car after receiving their ADHD diagnosis, they felt relieved. They weren't broken. They weren't less than everyone else. They finally had an explanation.

“There's a reason why I have to work harder than everybody else. It's not because I'm dumb or inadequate or like, not passionate about like the work that I do,” they said.

Ikoro described their first-time taking medication beginning of spring 2022 as “the best day of their life.” While they get distracted, they are able to get large amounts of work done and their grades improved.

Ikoro does feel cheated by the limitations of the pandemic. They could’ve been a better student if they had been diagnosed before the pandemic. They could’ve graduated on time. But sitting at commencement in May 2022, at that moment, they felt like they were sitting exactly where they needed to be.

“I feel bold. I feel like if I could get through that, I would like to accomplish anything,” they said. “Doing online school during a pandemic was, I could say, one of the hardest things I’ve ever been through like this past couple years. I made it out the other side and I’m very proud of myself.”