

## **Remote learning, TikTok revealed unidentified ADHD for college students during the pandemic**

Morgan Harron opened her laptop. She clicked the Microsoft Word icon at the bottom of the screen and opened a blank document. The cursor blinked, waiting.

Then, she burst into tears.

It was the spring semester of her junior year, almost a year since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Harron was starting a research paper the night before it was due. Throughout the semester, she'd mentally rehearse the steps ahead of her: review lectures, research, outline. But she couldn't get her body to do it.

"It was just like I was at the bottom of a really big wall, and there was no way for me to climb to the top of the wall," Harron, a recent UNC-Chapel Hill graduate, said. "It was I think the first time that I was like, 'OK, I'm not just procrastinating, this is something more than that.'"

One year, several social media videos and a formal diagnosis later, Harron found her answer: she had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

ADHD is a developmental condition defined by impaired self regulation and disrupted executive functions, like working memory, prioritization and impulse control. [ADHD can present itself](#) not only through recognizable symptoms like hyperactivity and fidgeting, but also in struggles with task initiation, time management and forgetfulness.

"It can pretty much boil down to, how efficiently do you do what you set out to do?" said Russell Ramsay, co-founder and co-director of the University of Pennsylvania's Adult ADHD Treatment and Research Program.

For students like Harron, remote learning exacerbated everyday struggles, ones that they might've previously chalked up as "quirks." But with COVID-19, those struggles became so debilitating that for the first time, they sought help, receiving a diagnosis that changed the way they operate in college and beyond.

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Katelyn Heuer, a junior at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, thrived in school when she could talk through her assignments with her professors. Those short, in-person conversations had been her key to turning the text on a syllabus into a mental language she could understand. Remote learning took that away.

"I can't start this because I feel like I don't have all the information," is how she felt towards schoolwork then. Staying up all night to finish assignments became part of the norm.

“Why am I not like everybody else?” she’d ask herself.

Her parents told her to stop worrying and try harder. “It’s all in your head,” they’d say.

“I always felt like I’m trying so hard, I’m exhausted,” she said. “But no one recognized my level of trying as their level of trying.”

Erin Suh often FaceTimed friends to study during remote learning, hardly talking at all. She told her friends that she could only get work done with another person, but she didn’t know why.

“I guess that’s one quirk of mine,” she thought.

Then, on the social media app TikTok, Suh began seeing posts with snappy hooks like “Signs you may have ADHD.” The [hashtag “ADHD”](#) now has more than 11.5 billion cumulative views across the app.

She came across a video discussing the strategy of mirroring, which relies on the presence of another person to complete tasks. Someone had *finally* put her need into words.

“I was like, ‘I have never seen anyone talk about this before,’” Suh said. “‘Maybe I have ADHD.’”

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COVID-19 shook up the “scaffolding of our day-to-day lives,” Ramsay said. After Harron lost her routines of going to the gym, studying in the library and eating meals with friends, she felt like she went from treading water to sinking.

ADHD involves “consistent inconsistency” in brain function, Ramsay said, and for people like Harron, COVID-19 eliminated the coping mechanisms that had masked it.

Other factors that have increased the amount of ADHD diagnoses being sought out include improved psychoeducation, increased access to care through telehealth and heightened awareness of symptoms due to social media, Ramsay said.

Sheila Henson is an ADHD coach and educator who shares tips for living with ADHD on [her TikTok account](#), with more than 150,000 followers.

Despite [concerns about the dangers of self-diagnosis](#), Henson sees her role on the app as validating people’s struggles and connecting people, such as [college students](#), with information they may not otherwise have access to.

“If you’re struggling, you deserve support — that’s it,” Henson said. “And I think a lot of people are looking for the diagnosis, the label, just to validate that their problems are real.”

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In October, Harron went through the formal testing process. When it confirmed that she had ADHD, she first felt relief.

“It felt like an answer for so many things I had been struggling with for a really long time, but didn’t realize,” she said.

Now, Harron keeps a dry erase board in her room so she can jot down any thought before it flits away. She writes down the steps of her morning routine the night before and sets reminders in her phone to check in on friends regularly.

“In almost every single area of my life, I feel like I’ve changed things,” Harron said.

Suh often wonders how much easier her college experience could have been if she was diagnosed sooner.

“If I had worked just as hard as I had all those years, and I had a diagnosis and I had been on medication —how much more accomplished could I have been?” she said.

Heuer said her diagnosis felt like unlocking a “magic rule book,” filled with information on how her brain works, just by now knowing what to type in the Google search bar. She also feels like she can advocate for what she needs to be productive in society.

For the first time in her college career, this semester, Heuer didn’t pull a single all-nighter.

And now, Heuer’s personal motto for why she is pursuing a degree in education is simple, she said: “Help my future students discover their potential earlier than I did.”