

Robin Zheng: Performance anxiety, academia & the pressure to...

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SPEAKERS

Katy Weber, Robin Zheng



Robin Zheng 00:00


And so for me, it was sort of a very scary thing I actually didn't didn't tell them for a very long time that I was having this sort of problem to deal with. And then when I told them that I might have to do something else, they were like, Oh, that's good. And they were like, You will be so good at so many things and, and you know, you would be less stressful being a professor, so stressful. So like, they saw how difficult it was for me and had been for a number of years. And, you know, they didn't care that much if I was a professor or not, they wanted me to flourish.





Katy Weber 00:39


Hello, and welcome to the women and ADHD podcast. I'm your host, Katy Weber. I was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 45. And it completely turned my world upside down. I've been looking back at so much of my life, school, jobs, my relationships, all of it with this new lens, and it has been nothing short of overwhelming. I quickly discovered I was not the only woman to have this experience. And now I interview other women who liked me discovered in adulthood they have ADHD and are finally feeling like they understand who they are and how to best lean into their strengths, both professionally and personally. I'd like to share with you this review from a listener named Amanda are on the Apple podcast platform in Canada. It's entitled validation with a capital V. I've been listening to your podcasts for a month or so and have been catching up on your episodes. I was waiting for my upcoming assessment. A couple of days before that appointment, your interview with Casey Davis was released. I cannot overstate how much this episode validated so much of my experience and helped me feel ready for my assessment. Unsurprisingly, my assessment came back as ADHD without any doubt. And since that appointment, I've listened to that same episode a few times. It's helped me process. Thank you both for being so open. Looking forward to continuing to learn from Katie and her guests. Thank you for that lovely feedback. Amanda, I am so glad you were able to receive the diagnosis and that this podcast could hopefully make that whole experience a little bit easier. And yes, the Casey Davis interview is an incredible one. It's episode 82. So if you haven't already listened to it, add it to your to do list for sure it is great. And speaking of


episodes you do not want to miss here we are at episode 108 in which I interview Robin Chung. Dr. Zhang is an academic philosopher. She's originally from the US but spent several years working in Singapore and currently lives in Scotland, working as a lecturer in political philosophy at the University of Glasgow. Her research and her teaching focus on moral, social and political philosophy. With special emphasis on issues of gender, race and class. It was only very recently that Dr. Zhang's therapist suggested that she might have ADHD and she's still in the midst of the long and drawn out process of getting a formal diagnosis through the National Health Service. Nevertheless, simply learning the truth about ADHD has already led to major improvements in her mental health. We talk all about her experiences with anxiety and depression. in an academic setting. She notes that she was particularly motivated to share her experiences on this podcast because she has come to realize that ADHD manifests in a diverse multitude of ways. And each new personal story makes it possible for another person to feel that self recognition and potentially start living a more flourishing life. Doctors young and I also talk about mental health stigma, especially in the Chinese American community, as well as some of the barriers to understanding ADHD and neurodiversity within Chinese culture. Please note that there is a trigger warning on this episode because we do talk about suicide and suicidal ideation. So if that is a difficult topic for you, then you may want to set this one out. Okay, here is my wonderful conversation with Robin Sharma. Hi, Robin. I am really, really looking forward to this interview. Thank you for sitting down with me. Me

 Robin Zheng 04:07
too. Yeah, definitely looking forward to it.

 Katy Weber 04:10
So you're currently in Glasgow, but you're obviously you're from the US?

 Robin Zheng 04:15
Yes, exactly. So I'm, I'm from the US Chinese American. My parents are first generation immigrants, second generation, which means I was born in the US, but I went to the UK for one year briefly before I went to Singapore for five years. And now I'm here in Glasgow.

 Katy Weber 04:33
Wow. Okay. And your lecturer in political philosophy? Definitely. Yes. That was my major back in undergrad a million years ago.

 Robin Zheng 04:43
So your podcast is so good. Do we join philosophy? You know, so?

 Katy Weber 04:49



Katy Weber 04:49

Right. Yeah, I know. For me, it all makes perfect sense. When you look back and you sort of think of all the things that kind of make you who you are today. I'm like, Yeah, well, obviously that makes sense. Okay, so now you you when you had in previous correspondence, you had talked about the fact that your therapist brought this up. Yeah. Was this an American therapist? Or was this a British therapist? Or, you know, they were the first person who suggested that this might be ADHD.



Robin Zheng 05:13

Yeah, so they are American. And they suggested it after working with me for quite some time. I've been working with them ever since the summer of 2020, which is easy to remember, because that was pandemic year, it was a few years, a few months into the pandemic. We're now a few years into the pandemic. And so we've been working together for a long time, and had been working on on again, you know, these sorts of other diagnoses, anxiety, depression, and there were a lot of things that happened in that time. But also, it just seemed like the treatment wasn't working the way that we wanted. And so my therapist brought this up. And interestingly, they brought it up because they also have ADHD, and had come to learn about it recently. And they were they were great about it. Like they sort of checked in with me, like, Was it okay, that they disclosed that to me, and so on? But yeah, so they brought it up to me. And I was completely taken aback. I didn't identify with it at all I said, and even after I read quite a bit of soy, they said, you know, just read around and see if so there was like, in all my reading from just Googling, there was like one thing that kind of spoke to me something about sort of being overwhelmed. And actually, it was listening to your podcast, which they also recommended. That started to get me to see that wow, actually, a lot of this is making sense. And then I did some further reading. And then it's sort of like, all the pieces were falling into place. And so I haven't been diagnosed, but I'm trying to get a diagnosis. How I do have the classic ADHD like, Do I really have it? I mean, I don't have the diagnosis. But I'm pretty sure I do given a number of things that fit.



Katy Weber 07:03

Well, and whenever I get asked is a is a formal diagnosis necessary? My answer is always like, no, but yes, but no, but yes, because I feel like the journey and the identity starts well, before you get the official diagnosis, right, which is like relating deeply to elements of the literature or, you know, conversations and or memes or whatever it is, but like really kind of feeling like, Oh, my goodness, this hits on a level that that I wasn't expected, you know, like, there's just this visceral reaction to this idea of that this could be ADHD, that I think pretty much speaks for itself. And yet also at the same time, like, without a formal diagnosis, you do always sort of stay in that limbo of is this something else? am I fooling myself? am I fooling doctors, you know, I feel like the imposter syndrome doesn't necessarily go away, even after a formal diagnosis, right? Because then it's like, Well, did I fool everybody?



Robin Zheng 08:03

Yeah, so I mean, for me, the thing that has helped me is I've said, okay, these things are not binary, right, there's got to be some sort of spectrum of disorder versus normality. And, and that's very context specific to because from what I've read, if you're in an environment that

supports you very well, and you might not have a disorder in the sense that you do very well in that environment. But if you move to a different environment, then you could start experiencing these problems, right. So the thing that has helped me is to think, Okay, well, even if I don't have it enough to have some kind of official diagnosis, I'm close enough to it, that the sorts of strategies and tips that people with ADHD are using can help me. And so that's been something to sort of, like think about as I am in the process of this, which is kind of difficult, because I'm American, I have health care, health insurance from my partner, who gets it from his union actually, has, has fought to give them very good health care benefits. But I'm in the UK. And so it's sort of gonna be a long process in the UK, I have been told, you know, got my letter, and the wait time to get a diagnosis is 50 plus weeks, so it's just not going to happen soon, the prioritized children, which makes a lot of sense, and this is the NHS, the National Health Service. And so it's going to be a sort of journey before I can actually get some kind of diagnosis. And so for me, that's been helpful to remind myself like look, even if I don't have it, I have something very close to it. So I can already start benefiting from it from knowing about it. And then if I do have the diagnosis, the main thing for me was that it will allow me to try out medication as just another tool in the toolbox, which you know, I don't know if it'll work or not, but you know, it is at the point where we want to explore all these all these options.



Katy Weber 09:57

Yeah, that's the other reason I think, you know, When, when it comes to getting the formal diagnosis, I forgot about the whole medication part. Because I don't take it. I mean, that's the other thing is that I tried it, I tried two different types of stimulants and ended up not using it. So it's a kind of sometimes I forget what an important part of that modality is, when he listened to my very early podcasts, I've always asking people about medication, because I was like, still trying it. And at this point, I feel like I've just sort of given up, I'll go back to I don't know, I might try it again sometime.



Robin Zheng 10:29

And that's one thing with ADHD too, is that because it's this problem with your executive functioning, the actual way it manifests is so different from person to person, because from what I understand, the sort of best explanation that I read was, this metaphor of the executive functioning is like your operating system. And, you know, reading, writing and communicating all these other things, these kind of like modules in your brain, if you were, if you will, they're they're kind of like programs. And so like, you could be really good at reading. And you could be really good at writing, if that's like the only program you have open. But you know, you slow down, if you've got a lot of programs open. And like in general, if your OS is having the problem, then you're just not going to function that well, right. And that's the thing with different people with ADHD, like they can do really well, and lots of other ways. And so it really helps, I think, to listen to these different stories and these different experiences, because the way someone manifests might not be similar to yours, given the sort of very nature of ADHD itself. So that's one reason I wanted to do this.



Katy Weber 11:38

Yeah. And I think also it helps to when you say, like, see all the different stories and feel like you. you know. that's another one where sometimes I'll post something on Instaaram about.

you know, being really particular about what spoon I use? And, you know, and then I'll always inevitably I'll get the response, like, I don't care what spoon I use, does this mean, I don't have ADHD. And I think it is so important to see how varied this spectrum is, and that it is a spectrum. And you know, a lot of the time, even just how the language around how we talk about neurodiversity and neuro divergence is still, I think developing right? I think we're kind of it's constantly, from what I'm understanding from the experts I talked to, it's like, there's really a lot everybody, everybody is kind of making this up as they go along. So now you said you related to the idea of overwhelm, but like, what are some of the other things that really felt like, helped you connect the dots? Yeah, so

R

Robin Zheng 12:38

um, I hope you don't mind me plugging another podcast, but I'm the two at ease and a coffee.



Katy Weber 12:45

Yes, no, you could absolutely plug that podcast, I love them.

R

Robin Zheng 12:49

Yeah, so the first few episodes, they give these and they're quite short, right, which is good. If you have HD, they have this sort of like primer on just like some some basics about it. And so it was kind of hearing that all in one place, the way that they explained it and their particular journeys. That was the the kind of story that maps the most on to my story, because I've never had trouble in school. And so, you know, for my dad, he took them a while he was like, but you never had trouble in school, but you were good at everything. And what's interesting is like, when I think back to that, I'm like, You know what, I was good at everything. If you look at my standardized test scores, because we had to do those, you know, in elementary school and so on. I had high scores, and it is true, I had high scores and everything except oral comprehension. And you know, that little thing has stuck with me all these years. And it totally makes sense now. Because if they're like reading some story at you, and you're not interested and zoned out, then you can't answer questions about it correctly. And so I wasn't good at everything. And that is already like when when clue I think to to the



Katy Weber 13:55

ADHD. And I think that's a conversation we have a lot because I feel like the overwhelming majority of the women I interview did really well in school, right? And so we sort of have that stereotype of like, Wow, I can't possibly there's no evidence of it in your childhood, because you did so well. And now here we are in adulthood, talking about depression and anxiety, and realizing like, at what cost was all of that perfectionism and drive in childhood, and how could things have been different and all of that just really quickly

R

Robin Zheng 14:25

on the childhood thing I have, you know, gone back and thought about it. And my family has always called me the absent minded professor ever since I was a kid way before I got into academia. And it's because I would walk into a room and just forget what I was doing and then have to walk back to the room I came from to remember and then go back into this room and and so yeah, it takes a lot of extra work. And so that was one of these things that my my therapy kind of my therapist clued me into was that even though people have complimented me on being organized and so I I sort of take up or get put into these roles where I'm kind of like managing things. She pointed out that the amount of work it takes for me to be organized is enormous. And it's true, I have like 10 million apps, like if you if you want to talk about like my system, I've got this up for this, and this up for that, and this up. So it's kind of like all different variations on to do lists and reminders, but I keep them in like 25 different places. And as my therapist says, like, look at the amount of effort it takes you to be organized. That's, I think, something that I've heard from from other people as well. And it also makes it hard to figure out if it's being masked and if you've got these these coping strategies, and then yeah, the that's when the the anxiety and depression can come in. And I think the anxiety for me, I realized, it's very likely that the anxiety itself was a coping strategy, because if I forget things all the time, and I did ever since I was a kid, I did you know, lose library books, I lost, you know, my jacket in school, I, I forgot a violin on the airplane once when I was a kid, and those things are, those things are valuable. So if you tend to forget a lot of things, the anxiety can help you because you're constantly like, what have I forgotten? Do I have everything and you do this, like every second of the day, it does help you catch things that you've forgotten, but then over time, it's not good to be anxious, and you start to really undermine your, your own mental health with that. So that's, that's another hypothesis that I have coming coming out of all of this.



Katy Weber 16:37

Right, yeah. And I think that the metaphor of the Swan, madly paddling under the surface is so meaningful to so many of us, I think, too, right, which is like, we're working so hard to maintain this sense of normalcy, we don't even have time to stop and think about the degree to which we are working to maintain this amount, right. And so when somebody stops, like a therapist, and my my doctor said the same thing during my diagnosis appointment, where she was like, you work really hard to remember things. And I, you know, was so emotional at that comments, because it was an acknowledgment of the fact that I had been working hard. So but at the same time, I was like, my narrative was how lazy and disorganized I was, right. And so it was going against this sense of self that I had, but she was like, it sounds to me, like you actually work really hard. And I was like, nobody's ever said that the only thing that people have ever said to me was work harder.



Robin Zheng 17:34

That's one of the things that resonated, was hearing from somebody else, this exact situation of seeing my peers spend a lot of time doing, like proper work. Whereas I would spend a lot of time procrastinating, you know, out of anxiety and dread, and then do stuff really quick. I mean, graduate school, academia is hard enough, you always feel like you should be working, because there's just like, literally, there's no end to the reading list. Now, because nobody gives you a reading list, you come up with your own reading list. And there's so many stuff, so many things that you could read, you just you feel like you should always be working just as a matter of fact, of being in the academy, you know, being a graduate student. And then on top of that, I

could see that other people were spending a lot of time on it, and I wasn't, and it was like, why, why can't I just like, work as hard as they do. It's taken, you know, this whole ADHD journey to realize that that's maybe part of one of the benefits is like the stuff that I really need to get done, I could do it quickly. And then the rest of the time, if I have extra time, maybe I don't have to spend it feeling terrible about about myself and doing things that I consider to be wasteful. Maybe I could spend it doing things that I actually enjoy, and which usually feed into my work anyway, because I'm a philosopher. So pretty much everything I do, I can reflect on and it all gives me stuff to to enrich my sort of my theories and so on.



Katy Weber 18:59

I want to talk about women in academia or ADHD in academia. One of the questions that comes up so much for me in the in this whole journey is is this ADHD? Or is this something else right, which is like, especially I feels like so many women are getting diagnosed nowadays. But that could just be confirmation of you know, what I'm surrounding myself with. I also, you know, at the same time, I also realized that the statistics are, it's 5% of the population, and I feel like how is that possible? I feel like there's so many of us. But anyway, like, I'm constantly questioning, you know, is this is this ADHD or are these sort of symptoms that have arisen from childhood trauma or you know, being a woman in a feminine being a feminist in this society that we live in right now or you know, having kids or perimenopause like I feel like I'm constantly questioning what this is, but I also feel like that seems to be a common experience with ADHD too, right? That that curiosity and that insatiable desire to figure this out. And I feel like the more I research ADHD, the less I understand it and what we're even talking about a lot of the time. So I'm just curious, have you? Are you facing those questions? Are you? Are you finding peace around it? Or are you still sort of feeling like, who knows what we're, what this is?



Robin Zheng 20:20

Yeah, I mean, I don't know about that piece. Because you know, I don't have a diagnosis, and there's so there's still stuff to come. But what I can say is that I have felt very, very empowered by learning about ADHD. And, you know, despite the initial kind of like, I don't really recognize this stuff. Like, at this point, I've gone into it deep enough that it does seem to work as an explanation for everything. One thing I was thinking about when when you started asking this was that it might not be an accident that you feel like lots of people around you have it, because there's probably something about certain types of careers or even social circles or whatever, that that draws people together. Right. And so this is something that I've, I've certainly noticed around me, I've been kind of like unofficially diagnosing a bunch of people. I mean, with more or less, I think, like, likely accuracy. So, you know, I've had, I have a very good friend, who's also in academia, whom I saw recently, and they told me, you know, at the end of it, they were like, this might actually be a transformative conversation, because again, for them, it rang true, so much. So they're like, extremely, extremely accomplished, like, have gotten to international world level elite of their, their thing. In fact, they have like, already gotten a job, which is really difficult to do when, when you're in graduate school. And so despite all of this, the one factor of like, not having just like turned in that one PhD, is the thing that they, as they describe it to me, like, they always add it as like a caveat, like when people praise their achievements at the end, they're like, Yeah, but I haven't, like submitted my PhD, even though, that doesn't at all undermine all these other achievements, right? Or I'm thinking about another friend and family friend who's extremely talented, like in this one dimension is a self

taught artist and has just like these incredible works of art, but has very clearly a kind of rejection sensitivity, dysphoria, or rejection sensitive dysphoria, because their mom was telling me that they can't even sort of like, get ready to say something, because this friend of mine will say, No, no, no, like, before you before even finding out whether it's a positive or a negative thing. And then it's just so sunny. These are just a couple of examples. But it is actually the case that around me, there are lots of people who are manifesting these kind of signs that to me seem like oh, that very much sounds like it could be ADHD. And in particular, it could be ADHD, that's explaining the underlying sort of difficulty, because in both these cases that I've mentioned, anyway, the person has gone through other kinds of, you know, I don't have their diagnosis, but they seem to go through low periods where they have a lot of trouble managing their eating or things like that. And all of these things, when I hear that, combined with the fact that you know, they're very high achieving their women just reveal that, then, you know, it just again, makes me feel like, well, maybe this is, this is a good explanation for you, too. So it's interesting for me to hear that for you, the explanation has gotten sort of like less satisfying. I don't know if I'm just such a newbie to this, like this literally happened within the past few months, because I only moved to Glasgow in December. And so it's been less than a year. And the this whole Getting Started has just been a few months, but I was just so excited that I already wrote to you and said I want to talk to you. Maybe it's just like the newness of it, but it feels good for me for my case.



Katy Weber 24:08

Yeah. Well, no, that is a good reminder to for me to like come back to the origins of Lego saying like that whole body reaction that you have to ADHD, right, which is like, wow, this says so much. This explains so much. Yeah, that in itself really speaks volumes in terms of how important a diagnosis can be in in adulthood to write and how life changing it can feel. And yeah, maybe I just take that for granted now that I basically just live and breathe at HD. I'd like to take a moment to thank better help for sponsoring this podcast. If you're a regular listener of this podcast, you know, I am a big proponent of therapy therapy provides me the best opportunity for verbal processing something that is so important for my kind of brain and my sense of So, what I love about BetterHelp is that it's not a crisis line. It's not self help. It is professional therapy that's done securely online from the comfort of your home. They assess your needs and match you with your own licensed professional therapist, and it's available for clients worldwide. So you get access to a broad range of expertise that might not be available to you locally. It also tends to be more affordable than traditional offline therapy and financial aid is available. If you visit their website and read their testimonials. There are actually quite a few reviews that specifically reference help with ADHD as a special offer for listeners of the women and ADHD podcast, you'll get 10% off your first month, simply sign up at [betterhelp.com/women ADHD](https://betterhelp.com/women-ADHD), that's BetterHelp [h e l p . c o m / w o m e n . A D H D](https://betterhelp.com/women-ADHD). And there's a link in the show notes. This podcast is sponsored by BetterHelp. So you had mentioned a few things from your childhood. But what are some other, you know, elements that you look back and think, gosh, the signs were there all along? And how have you taught you it sounds like you've talked about it with your parents. So what was that conversation like?



Robin Zheng 26:04

Oh, that was really interesting. So I, I talked about it first with a very close family friend, because they they happen to be here. And so I was going through all of this at the time when and so my parents are still in the US and I just haven't had a I didn't get the chance to talk to

them as soon. And so one thing that's really, really interesting is that I immediately felt like my mom has it. Because my mom is so multitalented. So she does ceramics. She's like done, she's she makes these beautiful pots and plates. And like everything. She's done that for a long time. She's a wonderful gardener, she just like she can grow these like massive vegetables. She's a really good cook, like she's known in all her circles for being a really good cook. She's also taken up sculpture like actually like carving stuff out of stone, she makes jewelry. I mean, she just loves like, all of these things. And as my family friend was sort of telling us, she's always just been like, really quick, quick, quick, quick. And so I immediately recognized that my mum had it. And then I sort of thought, well, maybe this family friend, she's actually more of a family friend of my parents. So you know, we're friends on these two different at these two different generational levels, I sort of thought, probably this family friend has it too, and her daughter probably has it. And so one interesting thing about that, that made me reflect upon sort of childhood. And the context we grew up in is that insofar as like the second generation has had more mental health problems than then the former generation. I mean, maybe there is something about just like environmental context and the kind of childhood that you grew up in. And so it could be that two people of different generations could both have it, and yet it could manifest differently, or not manifest as a problem at all. Because this family friend had a really hard time imagining my mom having it in part because she she didn't seem to have signs of like the depression and anxiety that I have. And so yeah, there's just like different different things that could be going into that, I think,



Katy Weber 28:13

yeah, that's a great point. It was, and I think that's something I think about too, as a feminist, right, which is like the, the different roles that women have had from generation to generation and, and our expectations, and I, you know, often will talk about like individualism, right? And in our culture, and that does and how, as women asking for help is, is something that not we have to do now. Whereas we wouldn't have had to do that, you know, generationally, we often were much closer to with our parents, geographically, we had a lot of help. And so a lot of the times that we sort of struggle most in our life is having to admit that we can't do this alone, and how that feels like failure for a lot of us. And I feel like those are those issues that seem like very specific to women. But yeah, even generationally, right, like, I think we've been sold this bill of goods that we can have it all quote unquote, and do and be in the workplace and also be partners and wives and mothers and, and do it all. And yet, we're also like, chronically burnt out and overwhelmed as a result, surprised sobriety, surprise,



Robin Zheng 29:14

there's just like that many more ways we can fail, right? And feel that about, like, one thing that, um, clicked into place a little bit more recently, is thinking about anxiety and the different types. So I had been reading about how ADHD can be a sort of underlying disorder that then leads to, for instance, social anxiety. I mean, there's many other things that it can you know, even like OCD and things like that, like people hypothesize that there might be some kind of link here. But with social anxiety that this sort of story goes like, well, if you're ADHD and you have sort of like lowered inhibitions, then let's say you're a kid and you just like say, whatever you're thinking, and because you're ADHD, you like think stuff which is like, you know, all over the place, then And people might label you as being weird. And then you're like, oh, you know, I shouldn't do that. And then you start to develop this kind of like social anxiety, right? So I didn't

have that at all. But what my therapist helped me understand is that I definitely have performance anxiety, in that, if I don't feel I performed well, whether it's something professional, so it could be teaching a class or giving a talk. Or it could be something not professional, but just like social, like, you know, going to a party, and I don't feel like I told good jokes, or that was, you know, fun to talk to, like, I mean, I can think of moments when I was in a, you know, in a low period, and I would go to lunch or whatever. And I would sit there feeling like, I couldn't think of anything, like fun or interesting to say, and then afterwards, just feeling so terrible about it. Like, even though, you know, my friends and colleagues that I was with, I don't think they would have like, judged me or anything, but, but the fact that I didn't perform in that situation, that is the thing that I have a lot of anxiety about, or that can can, like, bring me into a depression.



Katy Weber 31:08

Right? Yeah. I think that's a question I have a lot about my own dual diagnosis of depression and anxiety to which is like, I was obviously depressed for many, many years. I mean, it's not that it wasn't depression, or, and I still have periods of absolute overwhelming sadness. So I'm like, it feels like that is still depression. But at the same time, when I hear medical professionals say things, like, let's deal with the depression first, before I diagnose you with ADHD, I hear that for a lot of women where I'm like, but it just seems like it really is the underlying issue for so much of this, like you said, like the, you know, the expectations of ourselves or being rejected by you know, so many of us are, like, rejected by either teachers or peers, or there's a sense of too much newness or, or even just, you know, one of the things I think about a lot, sorry, sold and wrote about in women and attention deficit disorder, which she wrote originally back in 1995. But she was talking about the how, how we can't trust how we are going to be from one moment to the next, right, because of so we relying so much. So like you said, in social situations, like I have no idea if I'm going to walk into a room and be the life of the party, or if I'm going to want to immediately go home, you know, and so that sense of like disconnect that we have from our own behavior in certain situations. And that really hit home for me, right, in terms of how that leads to a lot of that anxiety that you said that performance anxiety, or even just like, you know, the anxiety of like, Oh, God, I don't, I don't know who I'm going to be right now. It's almost like you've got this, this child inside of you that you're just like, am I going to embarrass myself? Am I going to say something weird? Am I gonna be totally inappropriate? Am I not gonna like is read the social cues, you know, all of that stuff that's just constantly leading to the same sense of like, gotta work hard. Gotta work hard. Gotta work hard.



Robin Zheng 33:01

I even felt that way, like leading up to this podcast, because I saw on my calendar, like I had like lots and I was like, this is I need to like rescue myself, because I don't know how I'm going to be on the podcast, because I've done a podcast before where I was in a low period. But I forced myself to do it. Because, you know, we had had the scheduling things. We were playing tag for months. And I was like, I just got to do it. And then I felt so terrible about it afterwards that I asked to redo it. By the time that we were redoing it, I had like, gone back and listened to the original. And I was like, it's not that bad, actually. And so I had gone to all this trouble. And you know, the interviewers as well. We had, like, done it a second time, because I had been unsure. And so it's exactly that feeling of not knowing how you're going to be that I think, yeah, I hadn't, I hadn't realized that. But I think that is part of the anxiety too. And I think the sort of

relationships between depression and anxiety and ADHD are definitely complex. And probably they differ from person to person, because I'm thinking of another friend. And they, they actually also thought that ADHD is a possible diagnosis. And for them, they felt that it was sort of an underlying depression that would trigger anxiety in the way that you're describing. But for me, I have thought and in sort of conversation with my therapists and psychiatrists, I've sort of thought that for me, it's often the other way around. So I'm very, very anxious about something, which I'm interesting. So going back to something you said about, like, trying to be a feminist and so on. Interestingly, one thing that I started to notice at my previous institution is that it was particularly moments when I had to deal with issues of diversity and inclusion. So I had a role where, you know, it made sense for me to do this role because I care about it a lot. I know a lot about it, you know, relatively at least because I study these kinds of issues. And I would have just like massive anxiety like leading up to these events and then if it went well or not, that would determine whether I would like plunge into a depression or not. So it seems like in my case, it was more anxiety that could then sort of the buildup of anxiety could trigger a depression. And so I think these relationships are just complex, right? It could go one way or the other. And maybe it could even differ depending on what we're talking about. So it's gonna be hard to figure out like, is there a real underlying one thing or the other? Right?



Katy Weber 35:27

Yeah, right. Yeah. Yeah. Now, I want to backtrack a little bit, because we had asked, I want to get back to the conversation you had with your parents and what their reaction was, in terms of, you know, your you said, your father was like, Well, you did so well. Because I think, you know, sometimes parents are like, this is fascinating. This explains so much. But I think also, just as often parents will be like, I don't know what you're talking, like, they'll think that it's somehow an attack on on their parenting, and, or that they did something wrong, right? Because I think that parents can sometimes have just as much grief around Oh, you know, we didn't see this I or we didn't know.



Robin Zheng 36:07

Yeah, it's I mean, I think this intergenerational pieces is huge, because I mean, we know that there's a strong genetic component, right. And so, you know, thinking from the parent side, if you have ADHD, then you're raising, you know, your children in a way that's sort of like consistent with that. And then neither of you has a sense of what is like normal or not normal, right. And so so it could very well be that they missed things that other people might have picked up on, or, I mean, that that's all very much possible and even probable, given what we know about ADHD. Right. So. So I was fortunate in that, and I think I'm like, very, very fortunate in that this is this is helped me throughout my entire mental health journey, that I have parents who have been very open and and very, pretty unconditionally supportive, I would say, so I'm thinking about a moment when so one of the most difficult moments of Lage when I thought that I might have to just like, switch careers or sort of be forced out of a career anyway, I thought that I might not be able to continue in my professional role. And I knew it was something that mattered to like my dad, because he told me, you know, that he had tried to get an academic job, and he hadn't been able to. And so for me, it was sort of a very scary thing I actually didn't didn't tell them for a very long time, that I was having this sort of problem to deal with. And then when I told them, that I might have to do something else, they were like, Oh, that's good. And they were like, you would be so good at so many things. And, and, you

know, you would be less stressful being a professor, so stressful. So like, they saw how difficult it was for me, and had been for a number of years. And, you know, they didn't care that much, if I was a professor or not, they wanted me to flourish. And I think that, you know, for all parents, even the ones who might respond kind of badly, as you mentioned, like, it's, it's probably they're feeling it so deeply, because, you know, they really do want their children to flourish. So, I do think that understanding ADHD and understanding trauma and like many of these other mental health issues is really, really key to the parent child relationship, and kind of making it possible to heal some of those rifts, or at least to make make the other side more understandable.



Katy Weber 38:40

Yeah, that's great. So were they was your mother? She liked this makes a lot of sense.



Robin Zheng 38:47

Yes, you identified with it. She was like, Yeah, that's me. I mean, because because there there are a lot of these positive aspects to ADHD too. So you know, I tried to give as comprehensive a picture as I could given my, you know, non expertise. And so so so yeah, I think they were they were really okay with it. And, yeah, they might even be a little bit unusual. In that respect. One thing that I had wanted to talk about is something that came up in two hours in a coffee as well, which is coming from a Chinese American background and the Chinese community. And so one of the most poignant things and one of the episodes that they talk about is the the mental health that they received from a physician in China, which was just really clearly like, not based on on the sort of most recent understanding of how to deal with these issues, and how horrible that was at the age of nine to have gone through that. And I can really, really relate because there really is additional difficulty I think that surrounds mental health issues where you come from a Chinese or maybe more generally, Asian, Asian American background, you know, I wouldn't want to speak for other ethnicities that I don't have experience with. But I just think back to high school when, you know, not just one, but a number of my very close friends were struggling with quite serious mental health disorders, and there wasn't really like anywhere to turn to, I think, and so for me, I was one of the sources of support, you know, and, and I remember, like, very clearly going away to this, like, summer camp sort of thing that, that my state used to do. So just like a six week thing, and not being there, for my friend, or sort of feeling that I wasn't there, and being really, you know, down about that, and actually, one of the teachers in this, you know, summer camp sort of thing, like, I remember this, so clearly, like, sat down on the floor next to me, and said, if you're not the problem, you can't be the solution. And that was so sort of game changing for me, because it was like, Yeah, I can't fix this problem. I'm not a mental health, you know, professional. And, and I just, that's not something that I can do. And when I went to school, and one of the first classes I took as an undergraduate was actually a psychology class. And, and I wrote a paper about levels of suicide in Asian American communities, because they are elevated. And, you know, there's, there's a number of different things that go into that. And I definitely am still not an expert on any of this. But what I can report from my own experience is that there's just really, really high bars, I think, to dealing with some of these issues. And it depends a lot on, you know, what your parents are like, and what your closest circles are like, but also just the wider culture too. So, um, when I was in Singapore, I remember a friend telling me that they would not go to see a therapist, because they didn't want it to, in any way become attached to their professional role,

because of the worry that that might, you know, cast out on their on their competence. It could be stigma, I mean, I think stigma is part of it, I haven't experienced that so much. But for me, it's been more just like, like lack of understanding and lack of knowledge, there's a real gap, and sort of the technical technical term would be sort of these hermeneutical resources. So like, what the community has at their fingertips is sort of concepts and theories that they have to work with, within the sort of Chinese American and also in Singapore, there's a, you know, it's a majority Chinese country, there, there is something there in that I think there's a lack of resources to understand this kind of thing. So, in particular, I'm thinking about the the high rates of suicide amongst young people in Asian countries. And so actually, you know, this is not just Singapore, it's it happens in China and Korea and other countries to where it can happen. And very young people who have so much going for them, they can be, you know, very talented. And I'm thinking of a case that affected me very much, where it came as a total surprise that this person committed suicide, because they were so high achieving, and all of their friends and everyone who knew them thought that they were doing well, because again, on the outside, they seem to do so well. Anyway, the reason I'm going into all of this is that, that sort of experience, and the reflections that came with it, you know, year after year, in a different way over time, learning about ADHD is one piece that has helped me understand how that could even be possible. Because when when I first heard of, you know, that case, in particular, but there's there's been other cases, and I've heard of other cases before, it was so unintelligible to me, until I got to the point where I had some suicidal ideation. Like it was passive, which means that even though I thought about it, I was not about to make any plans to carry it out. And I very quickly, like, took that off the table. I mean, at the time, I was like, Darn, now, I can't even do this, because, you know, I promised my partner that I would never unilaterally like abandoned him and so, so I'm able to sort of make light of it now, but like, that's how bad it got. The again, the sort of ADHD piece of it has helped me understand how I could have had depression that was so severe, because otherwise it's, it's it is very hard to explain. Of course, there are many other things things that go into depression, it could be genetic and all of that. But for me, I think that the understanding of ADHD has helped me come to understand how that kind of thing becomes possible. And it's terrible, it still breaks my heart to think about it, because there are resources, you know, not not just for ADHD, but for depression, if that's all it is, that's not all it was, if that's what it was, or, you know, whatever it is, there are resources. There are people who have studied this, and they have expertise. And yes, our collective expertise is still quite limited. So you know, you're, you're one of these experts, and you're like, there's so many things I don't understand. So, yeah, collectively, our expertise is limited. But we have enough that we could save a lot of lives already, if this knowledge was, was more widely available. So again, that's one reason I really wanted to do this.



Katy Weber 45:54

When I think about the advocacy piece around mental health, and especially neuro divergence and mental health, I feel like sharing our stories is so fundamental to that healing, and that validation. And I think also, like your said, to what you were saying, like just developing that language around What is even happening here, or What is even happening to us, because I think we are, if it's the chronic overwhelm, or we're not even stopping to think about struggle, or if it's really just about the stakes that are involved in admitting to myself that I even need help. I mean, the resources can be out there, but it's still I still have to be able to, like, identify as somebody who needs that help. And I think that alone is such a huge step for so many of us, especially when you're high achieving, or especially if you're in certain fields, right? Or, you know, like, I think it's even more difficult when you also see all of this sort of evidence

throughout your life that you're like, No, I, I'm not that person. Right. And it's like, yeah, you can be all of these things, and still be a phenomenal human being, is, I think, can be really difficult to to embrace.

R

Robin Zheng 47:01

Yeah, and not even because you feel like you don't, you know, want to be that person, because there's some sort of stigma around, but you're like, I'm not that person. Because I'm so lucky. Like, I have so many things going for me and like I've done so well. So why you know what, and I totally hear what you're saying about getting started on that path. Because I didn't go to a therapist until I was in graduate school, and actually, a fellow graduate student, in an advice session about going on the job market said, Here's my piece of advice, go see a therapist, because it's going to be soul crushing, because you know, academia has been so transformed. Now the, you know, it used to be 70%, permanent jobs, 30%, contingent or precarious. And now it's like the other way around, like very few people, relative to the number of people who want it actually get these jobs. And so yeah, it's a soul crushing process to apply for jobs to submit publications and get them rejected constantly. And so that was the first time I'd ever even considered therapy. And I went in for my consultation, and they just sort of asked, like, you know, why are you here, and I just cried for like, the 30 Minute, like, the whole 30 minutes. And I was shocked when that happened. So then I kept doing it. And I've been in therapy of various sorts. And because I've moved around, I've also had different practitioners who have used different. They come from different traditions. So not just cognitive behavioral therapy, but also psycho dynamics. And I've gone through trauma of EMDR stuff and couples therapy. I mean, there's just like, I've gone through, like, a lot of it. And it's been so helpful. But yeah, I think about how easily I could have not gone and not started on this journey, and where I would have been and how many people may still be in that sort of situation. So that that first step of getting yourself. So this is interesting, because again, for me, asking for help, has not been so difficult for me. And that might have been sort of like a saving grace. In fact, I remember sort of my therapists and I had an academic coach as well. So I was getting like, you know, many, many forms of support at the same time, saying that, well, it's good that you recognize this and you were able to ask for help. It's interesting, because again, I think childhood and background and stuff come into that. So I had extremely supportive parents. And so I don't think I would be afraid to ask for help on that front. And I'm also an Asian woman and part of the way that I moved through the world. And sometimes it can be in a sort of tactical way I've discussed this with other Asian women is that we're already socialized into and also perceived as being sort of smaller and you No more childlike and stuff that asking for help comes pretty easily for me. I'm not saying that's a good thing to be thought of that way. I mean, it's terrible. And there's so many people for whom that's like, the bane of their life is to be perceived as an Asian woman that way, but for me, it just has it, it has had this kind of unexpected benefit. I think that that part wasn't the hard part. The hard part was just the hard parts, you know, not being able to get out of bed for like, weeks at a time or, you know, not like having to depend on my partner to like, feed me. And, you know, get all my meals on the table and stuff.



Katy Weber 50:38

Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah, I think and I feel like Nelly and Juno talk about that too, and to outies that, that kind of dichotomy.

R

Robin Zheng 50:48

I couldn't remember their names, and I felt so bad. And then I was



Katy Weber 50:52

oh, are you kidding? I was I was obsessed. When I first discovered them. I was obsessed with their podcast. I was like, please be all bye. Bye, guys.

R

Robin Zheng 50:59

Could I have forgotten that anyway?



Katy Weber 51:02

Oh, are you kidding? It happens all the time. When I was diagnosed with ADHD, it completely turned my world upside down. I looked back at so much of my life, my grades in school, my multiple careers and hobbies, my friendships, my marriage, motherhood, my relationship with food and my body, like all of this with a new lens. And it was overwhelming to say the least, if you've been diagnosed with ADHD, and you're feeling blown away by this new insight into your brain and how it operates, I totally understand I can help you begin to sort through this chaos, explore who you are and how your brain operates. So you can finally start to lean into your strengths and begin to use them to your advantage moving forward. Together, we can work to identify what obstacles you've been facing, and create strategies to help you start living a more fulfilling, gratifying life, head over to women in adhd.com/coaching, to book a 30 minute initial consult with me. So we can figure out if my brand of one on one coaching is right for you. Again, that's women and adhd.com/coaching. And you can find that link in the episode show notes. So I'm curious, what have you thought about or how your ADHD has kind of benefited you in academia in academia? Because I'm sure there are many, many people with ADHD in your field.

R

Robin Zheng 52:22

I see them everywhere now. Yeah, I have. And it definitely has helped me, I think, because I mean, to put it one way, lots and lots of breakthroughs and theories and kind of insights come about from recognizing how things are similar and how things are different. Right. So even you and me, we're having this conversation. And there's points where we're very, very similar. And there's other points where we differ and like each one of those helps us understand a little bit more about ADHD, right? for academic purposes, I think my ADHD is part of what makes me so curious about so many things. I read many, many things outside of philosophy, sometimes more, I'm doing more reading, outside philosophy than I am of just philosophy papers. And I go to talks in lots of different disciplines, because they genuinely interest me. And I talked to lots of colleagues about their work, and I tried to see their work, because that genuinely interests me, what's critical to being able to recognize similarities and differences is to have like a wide pool of things to compare, right? So I think that the fact that ADHD makes me so curious, and

makes me go and you know, gather up experiences and facts and theories from all these different places, that makes it easy for me to spot patterns, like, oh, there's a similar underlying thing across these things or differences to say no, that, you know, but I heard this other thing and this other field, and, and so that has helped me more than once in the work that I do.



Katy Weber 53:55

That's cool. Yeah. Oh, yeah, I see that. I think that's probably one of the reasons why I love journalism so much, are writing articles. I think about that, too. Like, I loved having to just suddenly be like, Okay, I'm going to go interview a state senator about this upcoming bill, I have to like research and know what I'm talking about, so that I even know what to ask. So I would just get into this, like obsessive research where I'm like, I need a lot of background, I need a lot of background. And then I had turned around and very under a strict deadline, I had to write about something with a sense of expertise, enough that I could then explain it to somebody who might not know anything about it, and I loved and then you would just like immediately, it would leave my brain and I would move on to the next the next article. And I'm like, oh, yeah, I could see that. Why that was so stimulating now. And I love how these conversations meander so much and I think it's probably why you know, the listeners to this podcast are always like along for the ride, right? Because it really there's so much of that like, going from from one point to another and seeing these connections even throughout conversation and just be like, yeah, that reminds me of something that's on the surface seems told We're unrelated but you know, we both through this conversation are like, oh, yeah, these are all completely inter intermingled.



Robin Zheng 55:07

And it makes it fun for me to listen to these podcasts because, you know, it will jump around. And with every jump, if there was something that I zoned out on, the next jump will bring me back in because I'll be interested again. And so in a way, it's like, for me, it's easier to listen to than certain other things where as you know, I have bad oral comprehend ozone out.



Katy Weber 55:28

Well, even when you said that, to ADDYs is a short podcast, because they're usually 30 minutes. My immediate reaction was like, Oh, my podcasts are too long. Nobody likes that. Well, I love it. No, I feel like it's working.



Robin Zheng 55:42

It's good that it's short for other people to learn about ADHD, I think because then they're only committing to the short, but I love these podcasts. I am I have actually listened to them all day, for a few months now.



Katy Weber 55:56

Yeah, I know, it's so funny how you could hear one thing, and then like, hear all the other things

mean, I know, it's so funny now you could hear one thing, and then like, hear all the other things around that when you're listening? Right. So okay, so I love to ask the question. If you could name ADHD, something else that's less confounding? Would you? Would you have a name that you would call it?

R

Robin Zheng 56:14

I'm so prepared for this question. I have four different answers. So the sort of theme is that, um, I keep thinking about how it's sort of like, like a kid brain, because it is a developmental disorder, right. So like, for some people, it's literally that they're developing slower. And so if they just wait a few years, then actually they're, they're fine. And they're functioning well, again, but then, you know, for the rest of us, it's like being a child where you get easily distracted by things you might not be able to control, you know, inhibit things the way you should, and you have a lot of energy. Sometimes, the thing about children that this has really helped me understand is how they can be like, so exhausted, and yet, so hyped up, that they can't go to sleep. Now, I understand why I have this kind of insomnia as well, right. So it's kind of like a kid brain. And I like that because kid could refer to a human child, but it could also refer to like a baby goat. Because I think there's similarities with the animal brain as well. I mean, I think about my cat and how I'm trying to train my cat and how, like, there's similarities to how I have to treat myself or others have to treat me so.



Katy Weber 57:24

Conditioning. Right? Totally. Exactly.

R

Robin Zheng 57:27

So they're all kind of variants on this, because I was thinking of the Little Prince, and you could name it after the author, because it's such a beloved, you know, like, it'd be like San Dixie for release syndrome. But then I was like, that's way too hard to say. So then I was like, maybe it could be like Peter Pan syndrome. Because again, it's like the, you know, the kid that never grows up. But then I think my favorite is something having to do with marshmallows, like the marshmallow syndrome or something? Because,



Katy Weber 57:56

like the marshmallow experiment. Yeah,

R

Robin Zheng 57:58

exactly. Yeah. And those are all ideas that I've had, you know, with varying degrees of seriousness, but I think there's a lot of different ways you could go with it. But I feel like that developmental piece is something that's nice to highlight, because it helps other people understand really quickly. So when I've told, you know, my partner, to just like, like, imagine

I'm a child, and like, you have to do the things that and he was like getting parenting tips from his mom, and from my friends, and but like, that's kind of what is necessary sometimes to deal with some facets of the disorder. So I feel like having that, that piece in there.



Katy Weber 58:39

No, it's so true. And, you know, I feel like there is that sort of kid brain and the adult brain and I talk about that a lot too, with with coaching with, with my clients about the the child voice and the adult voice and how, you know, the child in me doesn't want to do it, it doesn't, I don't want to do it. It's boring. It's annoying, you know, I, it's, I don't have the motivation to do this thing, because I don't feel a connection to it. And so the kid in me is like, I don't want to do it. And then the adult has to come in the room and be like, Okay, well, do you have to do it? Is this something that needs to get done? When does it need to get done? And you know, the, so I always feel like there is this push and pull? Or can you get somebody else to do it? Yeah. Right. And so I often think of myself in that way of those sort of two voices of like, okay, you know, I acknowledge that the child voice is there that that voice is in me with that I'm like, I acknowledge I'm like, Yeah, of course you don't want to do it. Who wants to do that? That's crazy. Why would you want to do that? But it needs to get done. And who's going to do it and you know, all of that. So yeah, I love that. And plus, with goat, you've got the greatest of all time and acronym, right? So right in terms of reframing,



Robin Zheng 59:43

maybe that's where I'll just call it my my kid brain from now on.



Katy Weber 59:49

I love it. Well, this was wonderful. Thank you so much, Robin for reaching out and being open to talking about this and whatever ADHD is and how it manifests. And I just really appreciated your perspective. So thank you.



Robin Zheng 1:00:06

I appreciate everything that you've done. And I mean, in, you know, the little feedback that you share from people who talk about how much it's transformed things. I mean, that is so true for me, as you know, and it's such such important work. And it really has been transformative for me. And the reason I wanted to do this was was completely because I hoped that I might contribute to that little project and in a way that might be transformative for other people, too.



Katy Weber 1:00:34

I'm sure it will be I'm sure it will. It's all Thank you. And there you have it. Thank you for listening. And I really hope you enjoyed this episode of the women and ADHD podcast. Also, you know, we ADHD ears crave feedback, and I would really appreciate hearing from you the listener, if you're a fan of the podcast, please take a moment to leave me a review on Apple

podcasts or audible. And if that feels like too much, and I get it, then just take a few seconds right now to give me a five star rating, or share this episode on your own social media to help reach more women who maybe have yet to discover and lean into this gift of neuro divergence assay, and they may still be struggling and don't even know why. And if you'd like to find out more about me and my one on one coaching for women with ADHD, head over to [women and adhd.com/coaching](https://www.adhd.com/coaching) and you can always find that link in the show notes. I'll see you next week when I interview another amazing woman who discovered that she is not lazy or crazy or broken. But she has ADHD and she is now on the path to understanding her neurodiversity and finally using this gift to her advantage. Take care till then