

# Sharon McCarthy: Decoding a dual diagnosis of ADHD & autism

📅 Thu, 6/30 8:31AM ⌚ 1:05:39

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

adhd, suppose, autism, autistic, absolutely, identified, people, diagnosed, diagnosis, question, individuals, feel, person, podcast, kiddos, talking, reality, journey, important, speak

## SPEAKERS

Katy Weber, Sharon McCarthy

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Sharon McCarthy 00:00

I think the reality is, is that as neurodivergent individuals, we have all experienced the entire of our lives, living on the periphery almost of societal norm. We have all experienced different situations where we haven't done the expected thing. We haven't spoken in the expected way we haven't behaved in the way that other children or adults or whomever might behave.



Katy Weber 00:34

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. Okay, we're gonna waste no time and get right into Episode 92, in which I introduce Sharon McCarthy. Sharon is the founding director of autism journeys, a training and consultancy service based in Cork, Ireland, where she supports autistic children and young people and their families from both an advocacy and educational standpoint. Sharon is also the host of autism journeys, the fabulous radio show and podcast centered on sharing the stories and perspective of members of the worldwide autism community. Sharon has worked in the autism field in a number of capacities over the last 20 years. She lectures in University College Dublin coordinates and delivers autism centric courses in her local community college and delivers autism specific training workshops to different disability and training services across Ireland. We talked about her incredible journey as a mother to multiply identified neurodivergent children, which led her to become a fierce advocate for kids. And more recently, this journey has led her to being identified as both autistic and as having ADHD. And she's now finally empowered to be her authentic neurodivergent self. We also talked about the dual diagnosis and the overlap of traits, how autism presents in girls and women and how the definition and understanding of autism

has changed over the years, as well as when it might be time to seek an autism diagnosis either for your child or yourself. This was a fantastic conversation and interview you're gonna love it. Enjoy. Alright, so Sharon, I usually start out my my first question is almost always kind of what was going on in your life for you to start connecting the dots when it came to ADHD. But I want to start differently with you because you have such an interesting, unique background in terms of this journey of neuro divergence. See, so you started, let me get this all straight. You started the autism journeys radio show and podcast five years ago, or six years ago, five years, five years ago, as a parent who had children who were diagnosed with autism and other additional needs, that was I was gonna say you use a beautiful phrase. So you kind of started this as a parent who was looking to get more information and to help her children. And over the course of this time, you've really kind of learned a lot about yourself. So I will stop talking and ask you, how did this journey start for you with the radio show? Why did you What made you want to start it and then I think, you know, we can get into your own diagnoses for yourself. Perfect.

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Sharon McCarthy 03:43

As you rightly said, I'm a mom to mostly identified autistic kiddos who have other co occurring conditions including ADHD, I suppose ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, sensory processing disorder, learning difficulties and so on. And I suppose when I initially when I was first played with it identified as an autism parents specifically, there was very, very few supports available in our catchment area here in Southern Ireland. And I suppose I felt that in order to best meet my children's needs, I needed to help upskill and educate myself and figure things out and best position myself to support them in whatever way they needed, it needed to be supported. I suppose. I went back to college as a person in my early to mid 30s and spent a number of years studying autism and so on and so forth. And I suppose during that time, I found myself meeting more and more parents of children neurodivergent kiddos, who were not receiving any support either Am I suppose I just felt that I had some level of knowledge and some level of, of where to begin, I suppose in information that might need to be shared. And so I decided that you know, if I if like, Wouldn't it be wonderful to maybe have support other families and other parents and so on. So supporting their little people as well. So I suppose that's where it was born from? Quite literally, no, I was, I will credit a friend of mine, who was a wonderful drama teacher she was she lived in the States for quite a number years and so on. And she persuaded me initially, to kind of step into it because I was very apprehensive that I might not be the best person and I don't have a great radio voice. And I don't do this, and I don't do you know, that kind of negative kind of conversation that goes on. But actually, it's probably one of the best things I've done. And it's definitely one of the things that I'm most proud of,



Katy Weber 05:34

Isn't it incredible to sort of I've, I've loved thinking about how I learned best is through this medium right of asking questions, and having these conversations and it's really helped me helped shape kind of my relationship with learning, because I always sort of thought I wasn't much of a student, I, you know, wasn't very smart. And, and so I feel like, you know, this whole journey for me of having these interviews and reaching out to people and learning through lived experiences has been really eye opening, and just kind of the different ways in which we educate ourselves and help ourselves and then, as you said, in turn, help our children and help our family and having a podcast where I interviewed women who were diagnosed in adulthood,

you know, beat so many women who came through their own diagnosis with their children. But I feel like yours wasn't quite as simple because I honestly my question is, like, what was going on behind the scenes over the course of these years talking about autism, and as a parent, where its users started to shift your spotlight, I guess, so to speak on yourself and think like, I am also what autism looks like, because we have this idea of what autism looks like. And I feel like the conversation has shifted so much over the past few years in terms of like, what does autism look like in children? What does it look like in girls? What does it look like an adult women, so what was going on for you behind the scenes?

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Sharon McCarthy 06:59

So I suppose for me, I know when I first started studying, as I say, there was that talk around autism and those kinds of core areas of identification that are kind of included in that in that diagnostic process. And for me, I found that I was kind of looking and I say, Maybe I am maybe I'm not. And I can remember a lecture specifically sent to me, in the same way that a medical student will immediately feel like, Absolutely, they've got every medical condition that we're looking at that that kind of dissipation that is settled and that everybody most most likely is feeling like this, but that things will settle within the first couple of months or whatever. And that was back in jeepers was that 2010 2011 tone. And I was kind of going okay, so I was waiting for this to dampen down these feelings to dampen down and they didn't. And I suppose the more I started with it, the more I kind of started analyzing different areas and different conduit convert stations that I've had, and different kinds of interactions that I've had, and so on. And I suppose I was looking and I suppose I suppose to outline for me, my two of like, five, six kiddos, um, I only have one daughter. So five, like five of my children are little boys. And I suppose I was looking at myself through the lens of what my understanding from a little male perspective might be. And I was gone. I don't know, I don't know, should I or shouldn't I, and so on, should I find out about this, and it was kind of bubbling up and going back down, and so on. Um, I suppose back in maybe about 2016. I sat with it for a little while. And I was kind of thinking, actually, I think this makes a huge amount of sense for me. But it still took me another while to even consider going about an autism diagnosis. During that time, my daughter was identified as well, and so on. So there was all this kind of, I suppose I was trying to model for my kiddos, how to be your authentic self. But I wasn't living that truth, if that makes sense. Believe it or not, it took me four more years to quote, motion autism diagnosis. And just at the beginning of the pandemic, back in 2020, I decided that I had, I had had enough of being unkind to myself giving out to myself all the time telling myself that I wasn't good enough for that I was always making mistakes, or do you know those kinds of real self deprecating kinds of comments. And so I went about an autism assessment. And at that time, the clinician did tell me that yes, I do believe that you meet the criteria for autism. However, I don't know do you need the piece of paper because the reality is as if it was for me, I'd hate anybody to know that I was autistic. And I remember feeling or sleep model of God, this is just awful. This is had the complete opposite effect, if that makes sense. It didn't allow for me to become kinder to myself and I found myself and not getting ashamed, but very, very slow to share my autism diagnosis with anybody at all so much so that there was maybe three or four people Who, in my very close circle knew that I was autistic, so much so that I actually decided back in just in January of this year, and to go about another assessment. And at that time, I met with a gorgeous woman called Barb cook. She's one of the authors of stetron women walk into beauty of your autism. And she, she's, no, she's the opposite side of the word. She's in New Zealand. And she, we'd like I had a bit of a chat with her. And she immediately said to me, she said, Sharon, I think that you, you remind me so much of myself, and not only do you remind me of myself, in the context of autism, you are still reminds me of myself in the context of ADHD, I am an ADHD or

as that, am I my chippers. Okay, and I suppose that's where, I suppose a with regards to the autism piece. I think that, that that conversation I had with Barb in January, where she confirmed for me my neuro divergent identity, but I confirmed it in a very kind way that it was then that I absolutely stepped into who I am. And it definitely had the wonderful effect of empowering me to become kinder to myself, I'm less critical of myself, and I definitely feel more empowered to be my authentic self.



Katy Weber 11:20

Mm hmm. Yeah, you know, I feel like an a diagnosis. Regardless of whether it's ADHD or or autism, I think any sort of confirmation of narrative urgency provides you with a language it provides you with the validation, to then start to assert yourself to ask for what you need to understand why you are doing what you're doing to have that kind of conversation with yourself. Right. I talked about this a lot on the on the podcast about how you know, the diagnosis is such a revelation to us in terms of our in our narrative in terms of our self talk in terms of just how we look at ourselves. And yet it can be so disheartening, when we talk about it with other people who really don't understand what the diagnosis means. And they start thinking, Oh, I'm sorry, you I'm sorry about your disorder, you know, and all of these ways in which it can be really difficult to talk about with outside of your inner circle, and how sometimes my advice is just not to talk. And I don't know if that's the best advice, honestly, because I feel like, you know, there's those of us who are living out loud and have, you know, doing as much awareness raising as possible for changing that changing the view around neuro divergence, but at the same time, like when it comes to yourself and your own life, like, sometimes the diagnosis is enough for you and your journey, and it gives you the validation, but you don't necessarily have to always be talking about it. But then I'm like, Well, are we doing? Are we doing a disservice to neurodivergent? See, by not talking openly about it always, even in those uncomfortable moments, because, you know, then we're just perpetuating stereotypes. And we're perpetuating the stigma. And I never know, but I'm always it's so it is really difficult when you come up on people, like you said, with your initial diagnosis, which was like, Oh, I wouldn't I wouldn't talk I'd like, do you really want this? Is this really something you want to talk about? Or need or be open about?



Sharon McCarthy 13:15

Yeah, I kind of think that with regards to that, with regards to whether or not somebody is loud and proud or whether or not somebody is very quietly confident, it absolutely should be and has to be centered on the individual's choice, there should be no pressure for anybody to take out themselves or to be outed. And equally, there should be no no pressure on anybody to have to stay quiet if they if they choose not to. For me, my young lady was identified as an ADHD or just a Christmas. So just before I was identified Am I suppose my oldest son at the moment is going about an ADHD assessment and so on as well. And then he is a he's identified as autistic and dyspraxic, and all kinds of everything, and if that makes sense, but nonetheless, I suppose I think about her, I think about her specifically. And I kind of think that you know what, it's so important that she is empowered with the mileage and with the confidence to know that if I choose to share this, that it is absolutely great that I do, and that I shouldn't be met with judgment that I shouldn't be matched with unkindness that I should be met with an absolute acceptance of who I am from my authentic self. And I suppose that's why for me specifically, I

kind of, I feel it important that I do start to become loud and proud in relation to my unvarying divergence of leaves, but equally, I come from a space of absolute respect for the individuals who are very quietly confident and choose not to share that.



Katy Weber 14:49

I agree and I feel like it's my impulsive ADHD side that leads me to open my mouth before I think and so in some ways, I feel like it's it's a benefit because Hi, I Live loud and proud in a way that I feel like can be helpful. But I also feel like I'm not necessarily at the wheel with that there's intention behind that. Right? I have so many questions about like, how do you even know what is ADHD? And what is the autism? Because that's a question I have all the time. And often I get like, even on this podcast I get so like, confused, where I'm like, What are we even talking about here? Because there's so much overlap. And I often like I have these videos on on Instagram of these, like quirks that I always thought were, you know, just quirks of mine that I realized now have have to do with ADHD and oftentimes, I will get the response which, you know, especially if I'm talking about sensory issues, lighting, sound particularity around like what mug I use, and, you know, or, or things like any social or interpersonal issues. If I talk about those, the response, I will often get us that's an autistic trait that's not ADHD. And I'm like, How do you even know, there's so much overlap. And a part of me doesn't want to get into that narrative of like, well, maybe I do have autism like part of me feels like that's really kind of casual. And in some ways disrespectful. I haven't had an autism diagnosis, I have had an ADHD diagnosis. So I feel comfortable talking about the ADHD part. But there's always these areas where I feel like we're there's so much overlap, and then am I being am i doing a disservice to the autism community, you know, is it ablest of me to talk about these traits only in the context of ADHD and not in a larger framework of autism and neuro divergence, which is, and that's, that's when I get to that point where I'm like, What are we wait, what are we even talking about? Because I sort of feel like, I'm more comfortable talking about neuro divergence, and the fact that we all kind of fall in this camp. And maybe some of us have been diagnosed with ADHD, maybe some of us have been diagnosed with autism. But I could be totally wrong. Like, do you feel like there's a clear delineation, and having been diagnosed simultaneously with both where you can really say, this is the autism This is the ADHD?



Sharon McCarthy 17:05

I like for me, I suppose, in my personal experience, I think that kind of anxiety around having to engage from a social perspective, I would absolutely attribute that to autism. I kind of think that, that kind of it that the minute that there is any social pressure, social expectation placed upon me, that that is absolutely like that is absolutely autism, in my opinion. And I suppose in my experience, rather, and but I'm mindful that at the same time that like, I think current stats are between 72 and 74% of autistic people are identified with a co occurring ADHD diagnosis. So it's very, very hard to unpick and pull one or another. I suppose, like, when I think about stimming, for example, I stim as an autistic person, but I also see him as needy. Ah, dear. And I suppose that fits beautifully into both categories. So I suppose it's not possible to decide whether or not one is more more ADHD, like, are more autism. Like, if that makes sense? I kind of think that it speaks to our experiences and and that we can only speak to our own true experience that it like, isn't it much, I suppose, isn't it much more beneficial, that these conversations are happening, and that sometimes that the lines are a little bit blurred, because then it allows for people to figure out where, where each of their traits, or each of their kind of

presentation pieces sit for them. If it's very clearly put in a box, then it's going to make it more difficult to identify adults who might be late diagnosed ADHD, if it's very clearly put into an ADHD bus. And it might be much less likely that a person might be identified as an autistic person as a much older person. There's that balance piece, definitely, I suppose the other thing that I'm thinking about with regards to autism specifically for me, for me, whilst I'm very proficient at speaking about autism, and I suppose I'd be quite proficient at speaking about ADHD as well, for me, it's not possible for me to split and split myself down the middle. The reality is that all of my experience to date have been shaped by being an autistic person and being an ADHD ear. Do you know?



Katy Weber 19:24

Yeah, I do, but you haven't cleared everything up for me. I know, I know. It's i and that's the other thing is sort of like, I feel like obsessive about getting to the root of what we're even talking about, sometimes into a point where I just feel like I'm frustrating myself for no reason, you know, because oftentimes, the answer will be like, Well, does it really matter at the end of the day, and I'm like, I don't know why, but it does.



Sharon McCarthy 19:46

Doesn't that speak to that absolute wonderful ability to be able to hyper focus and pull down that kind of mono tropic road and be able to just focus to that level dictate to that level of intensity? And I suppose even in that, even in that, unfortunately, in itself can be both artistic and ADHD I was hyper focus can be, but doesn't it speak to the absolute wonder of an origin of urgent mind at the same time whether or not they're categorized as autistic already to HD?



Katy Weber 20:17

Right? I know exactly what I'm like if there's ever evidence enough that you're in the right place having the right conversation. It's an obsessive drive for the answer. But you know, when you were talking about stimming, and kind of how stemming can be, you know, how you sort of deeply relate to it from an artistic point of view. But also from an ADHD point of view, I also think about the term masking, right, because that's another one, that masking was really a term that was used primarily in the autism community. And as and there has been some, some controversy about whether it's been co opted by ADHD ears as a, you know, in an ableist way. But I think, you know, it's sort of like you were saying, masking is one of those things where we really, so many of us relate to it so deeply, because it comes back to that idea of not living as your authentic self, and having to kind of fit yourself and feeling like a square peg in a round hole. And all of those ways in which we are kind of looking over our life through this new lens, realizing the degree to which we had to work to fit in the degree to which we had to work to keep it together. And like, I feel like masking is one of those terms that so many of us relate so deeply to, and is that CO opting or is it just a deeper level of understanding in terms of how this conversation around neuro divergence is evolving?



Sharon McCarthy 21:38

I think the reality is is that as neurodivergent individuals we have all experienced the entire of

I think the reality is, is that as neurodivergent individuals, we have all experienced the entire of our lives, living on the periphery, almost of societal norm, we've all experienced different situations where we haven't done the expected thing. We haven't spoken in the expected way we haven't behaved in the way that other children or adults or whomever might behave. The reality is, is that when you are a person who experiences the world slightly differently to the majority of people in the world, it doesn't matter where you where you're positioned. On the globe, the reality is, is that when you experience things differently, like this masking is one of the most frequently utilized ways and means with which to protect ourselves from additional judgment and additional onsolve kind of common sense is did like a negative negative comments and kind of that that real kind of negative experience. And now I suppose I don't absolutely as well, you know, I wouldn't ever advocate the people who should have to mask. But I suppose I'm mindful that in my experience, again, that I have absolutely masked, and masks to the high heavens, as we say here hearing card, because of knowing that I didn't quite fit the norm in inverted commas. But that knowing that I also didn't want to be the victim of that awful judgment. And that also critique that I have experienced tasteful.



Katy Weber 23:18

Yeah, I'm sort of going through this with my daughter right now who's in high school. And when I first started out on this journey, and was first diagnosed with ADHD, I looked at my son who's in fifth grade, and I thought, yes, textbook, absolutely, he has it as well, I didn't come to my diagnosis through my children, as most adult women do. So I've been like looking at them, and seeing so many neurodivergent traits, and both of them but also learning on my own and trying to, you know, figure out what is the right path, and they both do very well in school, it is really important for them to do well. They're very competitive with themselves, they have very high expectations of themselves. And so they don't kind of present in a very typical ADHD way, which is why I have always been really reluctant to just go through their school district or or you know, you know, just go to the pediatrician because I'm, I feel very protective of these, this diagnosis journey for them, right, I don't want to fuck it up. It's basically my anxiety around it. And so with my daughter, but I see her now in high school really struggling with a lot of executive function issues, but at the same time still holding it together still doing very well at school. And a lot of it is internalized a lot of it is at home and that only she is experienced, you know that only I am seeing and her father is seeing so we're going through this diagnosis process right now and they want to reach out to her teachers and I panicked because I realized her teachers are not going to see any of the signs they're gonna have no idea why we're doing this. They're just like they're going to be totally in the dark. And it really kind of hit home how, how hard my children are working to present As, as the certain type of of do good, you know, perfect Gold Star Child, and seeing how that's the anxiety and how negatively that's affecting their mental health as a result, and so, to me, that's a clear sign of narrative urgency, but I'm also realizing that like to the teachers, they're gonna be like, I don't know what you're talking about, everything's great. Everything's fine and and how that narrative is so prevalent with children, right, that idea that like, I don't know, they're doing fine. I don't see what the issue is that there's, you know, that there's a sense that like, asking for help, or asking for accommodations is not allowed, unless you are really, really struggling or really incapable of conforming, or all of those things that get children with the sort of stereotypical traits diagnosed, but this large swath of kids who are who are being overlooked?



Sharon McCarthy 25:55

I suppose doesn't it sneak to the level of lack of education there is amongst the are within the

I suppose, doesn't it speak to the level of lack of education there is amongst the are within the education system that our children have to navigate everyday? Doesn't it absolutely speak to the fact that so many educators, so many teachers be their primary or secondary school, it doesn't matter, doesn't speak to how much they've got to learn. My experience would have been similar here insofar as I've got young people who, absolutely they go into school every day, I have been the person or the parent who was questioned, why why did you go about a diagnosis for your child she like? I mean, why would you label him as autistic, that code isn't autistic. And we looking saying, Excuse me, excuse me, it just, I suppose it beggars belief that these people are involved in any diagnostic process that we undertake for our children, when they don't hold the level of education that they need to take ensure that these kiddos who are masking and who are flying under the radar actually have their needs met. And I suppose the reality is that there needs to be that absolute shift from only looking after and meeting the needs of a kiddo who is hugely struggling, from an outward Perspective Perspective, to actually ensuring that there's that kind of equitable accommodation for our kids who internalize everything as well, because every child deserves every opportunity to become their best selves, and to realize their potential. And educators need to get off their asses and actually start upskilling and educating themselves so that they're meeting the needs of these kids. And I see that as an adult education. So I suppose I get it, if that makes sense from an education standpoint, as well, but they have to, they have to, because otherwise, I mean, the mental health crisis isn't coming from nowhere. The mental health experiences of our children aren't happening for no reason. In order to support our kiddos to be mentally well, adults who aren't going to experience different suicidality is and really negative. And I suppose institutionalization and hospitalizations, and so on, they really have to start getting in there now, and meeting their needs, so that these kids don't fall off a cliff so that they don't hit 18 and fall off the cliff because they don't know where to go what to do next. Oh, man,



Katy Weber 28:21

it's so heavy. Because it's true. Like,



Sharon McCarthy 28:25

my apologies, I suppose. I'm sorry. But I suppose it's so important. It is so important. It's so frustrating. It's just, it makes me so crass to think. I mean, I see these adults, I see women being identified, being diagnosed with depression and bipolar and all of these kinds of things all of the time. And when in fact, they're either undiagnosed autistic women, or undiagnosed ADHD errs, I mean, get off your axis and started out so that these women aren't reaching that point of crisis, let's make sure that our kids are positioned properly now. So that we're not dealing with a both a teen and an adult epidemic of mental health crises.



Katy Weber 29:07

Yeah, that's a question I bring up a lot on the on the podcast, too, which is, does it feel like we are going through a mental health revolution right now, either as a result of the you know, I think it was kick started by the pandemic, certainly, it was kicked started by lockdown and, and the changes and so many of our structures and, and also just sort of this increased awareness that's happening on social media and people being able to communicate and share their stories, you know, but I'm always questioning like, Is this is this proliferation of diagnoses, the



result of this new awareness and the shifting conversation around what to look for and what what even is considered neurodiverse agency and or are we misreading it and it's totally something else, like a collective communal trauma that we're all going through, but it's temporary, because you know, But I mean, like, and then again, I get back to that idea where I'm like, Well, I think this obsessive questioning over what it is and what it isn't, you know, is the neuro divergent experience. Is it harmful to expand the idea of what ADHD and autism is to a point where people are kind of being light hearted about it be like, oh, yeah, you know, because we talk about that a lot with this idea that like, oh, everybody's a little ADHD, everybody has that a little, and is that that feels like, you know, a disservice, it feels really belittling to people who have really been struggling. I guess my question is really about the expansion of what is autistic, right. So I feel like we had a very frank stereotype of kind of what an autistic child looked like how they acted. They were you know, who was easy to kind of spot and now it feels like we're expanding this definition, we're expanding the idea of what autism looks like in children and in adults? And is there any part of you that feels like this could be dangerous, but almost like we can start blurring the lines, so to speak? Or is it really at the end of the day is it really just about learning how to advocate and learning how to, you know, not try to always just fit and conform?

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### Sharon McCarthy 31:19

I suppose when you think about it, when you think about, we'd say autism, for example, and the fact that it's centered around social communication and social interaction, and those kinds of official terms, restricted interests, and new questions, patterns of behavior, and so on, when you think about it like that, the reality is, is that individuals are going to struggle, whether they have the label or not, individuals who have difficulty with social communication and social interaction, are going to struggle regardless. And for now, unfortunately, because there's not that shift. That's so full of shift and societal awareness, I suppose absolute acceptance of individuals, for just to their because that isn't happening, it is absolutely necessary as of yet to label individuals. And I suppose for me, I always kind of think about label being having a label of being empowering, because it allows for us to have a greater level of understanding and awareness and knowledge around ourselves. If that makes sense. I suppose separately, though, when I think about autism from from a diagnostic standpoint, in, we'd say, when I was little person, the DSM, so the Diagnostic Statistical Manual was in it was in its third edition at that time. And for me to be identified as autistic, as a little person two or three, it would have been necessary for me to be completely non speaking. And to have, like, had a full regression, in speech and swampy completely non speaking, and to be unable to engage with those around me, so to speak. In 94, they introduced the DSM four, which was the Aspergers was brought in, and so on, and so forth. And then in 2013, it was shifted, again, the DSM five, and it became just autism levels, one, two, and three, the reality is, is that whether or not we've got the labels, these individuals are going to have difficulty in those moments. But also, I suppose the reality is that by expanding it, you are creating opportunity for more people to actually recognize who they are, and to gain that level of knowledge and understanding of themselves. And by gaining that level of knowledge and understanding, we are positioning individuals then to be set up for success, and to realize their potential and to become their best selves and so on. So I suppose why stay I get the question around, that kind of blurring the lines and so on. The reality is, is that I've had some really good friends who without doubt I would look at and I would say definitely not autistic. absolutely nowhere, the artistic. And do you know what I mean? So there's that real, strong group of non autistic individuals, it's really important that individuals who are autistic are equipped with that information, and so that they are set up for success as well. And I don't think that there's a problem with blurring the lines. The reality is, is

that I think the current global statistic is about 1.5% of the global population are being identified as autistic. It's important that those individuals have that information about themselves.



Katy Weber 34:17

Yeah, that's a good reminder too, because I think sometimes I forget, I surrounded myself with women with ADHD all day long. And so I sometimes I forget that it is such a small percentage still in this world. Because I you know, I sort of feel like I look around and I'm like, is anyone not neurodivergent around me?



Sharon McCarthy 34:38

Yeah, we have a saying in our house and it's same it's like it's gum Ah, so go ma as the Irish is very good. It that's the Irish for very good, but oftentimes what I'll say is they're like we say tick box, like so we're going to tick box. And in school, if you get something right. As a young person, the teacher will say come up, we'll write down we can load the red text And we'll say coma. So the joke in our house is always Now gamma, gamma as we see these neurodivergent individuals and so on. It's always that kind of gamma i phone conversations with the gamma. Yes, absolutely. So I get it. I do like I absolutely get it, I think, doesn't it speak to the level of community actually doesn't speak to the level of community when you say that you have so many people around you who are females, identified with ADHD doesn't it speaks to speak to that absolute wonderful connection piece, and the opportunity to have that wonderful, holistic and positive community around you?



Katy Weber 35:40

Oh, my goodness, yes. And how important it is to find out, you know, how we do find each other, and how important it is for us to have that community. And I often will say, like, I think finding your people is part of the treatment plan. Because we speak it's like we speak a different language. And I say I say, you know, I feel like I'm at home in a way that I really I forget, I don't feel like with many, many people. And you know, I say like talking to other women with ADHD is like I'm buttoning a two type pair of jeans, because it really is just sort of like you, we just cut right to the chase. And you just you get right in there. And we have these healing connections that are Yeah, or I think is so important to us as because so much of this adult diagnosis is shifting that narrative and thinking and changing our point of view of ourselves and who we are in this world. So yeah, absolutely. It's been it's so much of my own healing and treatment, it has been just conversation and meeting other women like you. I'd like to take a moment to think 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 self. 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 [help.com/women. ADHD](https://www.betterhelp.com/women-ADHD), and there's a link in the show notes. This podcast is sponsored by BetterHelp. Okay, so I'm curious. Because you, you know, obviously you did not have these glaring presentations when you were a child, what are some of the things looking back now over the course of you know, looking back at your life where you were you said the signs were there all along, like as a, as a parent of a daughter, like, what should somebody be looking for?

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Sharon McCarthy 38:13

So, I suppose she's so different to me, first of all, she is this real witty, really funny, really great, servatius character, this gorgeous and really gorgeous, gentle kind energy. But I know that she's very quick. She's very quick, in any kind of response, that kind of really, really kind of witchy kind of response, I wouldn't be very quick off the mark. That's the first thing to say. So I suppose a like both of us would be so different. But yes, we kind of we absolutely. gel so well. And I think that if you've got to lift the person who is an orange divergent individual, oftentimes, we'd say my relationship with my neurosurgeon or like with my daughter, particularly, is so much stronger, I think, because we are so similar in some ways, then at the same time, that there is that connection piece that there is that communication without judgment, and there is that kind of attuning to each other without judgment and kind of just getting what we mean. That's my brain love going off in a million different directions, my apologies. But I suppose that's an important point to make, I suppose is that sometimes we identify ourselves and our kiddos that like that, that's absolutely the piece I suppose for me when she was identified back in December, the clinician at the time, so I'm not sure about a stateside but here individuals are identified through either multidisciplinary teams so psychology and, and OT and so on, or individuals can be identified by psychiatrist and it was a psychiatrist who identified my young lady, and at that time, my understanding on a very serious note before that was that may have that little boy that kind of sis male presentation where kiddos are bouncing off the walls and they're jumping around the place and they're the folks who are running out into the middle of the road. Budget and all that kind of a crap. The reality is is my daughter and ever presented like that never, never never presented like that. And it was only when she was asked the right questions by her psychiatrist that it came to light that her brain never stops, never stops, her brain goes and goes and goes and goes and goes. And I remember sitting there in the meeting going, her brain never stops. And that's not normal. That's not normal. Do you know kind of press because I have definitely without doubt I am the person who will start talking and will lose my train, like will lose will almost like stop in mid sentence sometimes, because my brain has gone off in a completely different tangent. I am the person who will awake in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. And as my eyes open, my mind starts going, there is no way I'm kind of okay, actually, where am I there's not even that. There's not that kind of transition from one point to the next. If that makes, it's just going all of the time. And this was always the way and as a little person that I was depressed, I was the kid who always talked at length, always, always always, like, teachers at parent teacher meetings, he used to say to my mother, can you just tell her to stop talking, please, she has to stop talking. She has to give other people the opportunity to, to answer questions and so on. And I can remember being a pain in their arcs with the teacher, Teacher Teacher trying to answer questions and so on. And I suppose in relation to that you mentioned while ago, that you tend to say things like without thinking, I am the impulsive thinker. I am absolutely the impulsive thinker and the impulsive talker, where I say things like, Oh, God, why did I say that? Why did I say that? Sugar, reverse reverse. And then I try and repair what I've

said midway through a conversation, and it's just, it can become a disaster, an absolute disaster. That has always been my savior. I've always been my experience. Absolutely. And I suppose to come back to your camera your question earlier on? That's definitely for me, because it wasn't centered on those kinds of real areas of interest. That to me is definitely ADHD and not autism. Absolutely, definitely. For me, ADHD and autism, I suppose. The other thing that I'm taking, like I like I can remember being the person who oftentimes would try and figure out okay, so like, we'd say, when I'm engaging with somebody having to process what's going on, or what's being said, or whatever the case may be, before they finish what they were saying, I've had my next step planned out, and I was kind of coming at them immediately if that makes sense. When I was little I stemmed hugely. And unfortunately, stemming like in our house, I encourage kiddos to stim all of the time. But unfortunately, many moons ago stemming was even less acknowledged as as functional, wasn't acknowledged at all, let's be honest, but I stemmed and stemmed and stemmed all of the time I was like, I used to rock and I used to do all kinds of everything you see my hands are moving on screen, non stop. And I suppose this is a processing piece, this is how I kind of focus my thoughts almost this is something that I have always, always, always even from the littlest stage, I have always done this, am I suppose I can remember to with regards to school and studying and so on. Like I did find like in Ireland here, we do an exam called the leaving certificate. So it's that kind of exam that you might do at about 18 years of age. And I remember it like to have to study and prep for an exam, I found it absolutely impossible, not being able to focus not being able to take information and trying to figure out as you mentioned a while ago with regards to that kind of organizing our thoughts organizing what we need to do next and so on. That can be so sort of like that, for me was so so difficult. And I remember figuring out the kind of learner that I was, am I look I'm definitely not a learner who can sit and just look at something and take note I am okay. Like I'm definitely a kinesthetic learner. I'm definitely an auditory and individual. I like that kind of multimodal learners when I'm going to put it. But the reality is, is that because I didn't have that information about myself when I was littler, I wasn't able to study I wasn't able to prep, I wasn't able to kind of take large pieces of information and focus on what I needed to focus on. I suppose when I think about hyper focus, I definitely definitely definitely was the person when I was little, who became very, very focused on a particular topic and had to figure everything out about it had to couldn't give up if I was talking about something couldn't give up about what I was talking about, until I had said everything I needed to say about it. And I know that that can be sometimes attributes with autism, but for me it was both because there was that kind of real No, retrospectively, I suppose I know that there was that real intense Greenpeace involved in that as well that really kind of intense cognitive Turn around that as well, I suppose the other thing that I'm absolutely mindful of is that kind of inertia that I would also experienced, where I would find it difficult to organize focus, to engage with the task at hand. So depending upon whether I was interested in that's for some tasks, I could, I could still be there, and it still wouldn't be completed. So I suppose it's that kind of, we'd say that that kind of combined type, ADHD combined type, it's that real intense focus. And then at the same time, that real difficulty with planning out different stages or planning out how to complete a task or whatever, I was always the person who I got one instruction, and I'd fly with one instruction. And I was gone as people were sounding the second or the third and stopped instruction at me so much so that I'd have to come back and I couldn't retain it all at once. In general, so many different things, I suppose so many, so many different things. But there's one thing that comes to mind as a young adult, and I know that it was my wife was pregnant with my second son, and my gynecologist, my OB GYN at that time, said to me, you're going to have to slow down. And I remember saying to my sister in law, very indignantly, they want me to slow down and try and grind them so slow now, which is, I couldn't really be at a standstill, and she looked the barriers at zero. And I remember her saying do not recognize that you're slowing down is actually my normal. I can't like she thought she's not identified as a neurodivergent. Individual. So there was absolutely that kind

of, I just kind of going, alright, okay. And COVID consciousness shifted. That's because she doesn't have the same energy as me. But no, retrospectively, actually, that's one of the key things that has come back, come back to me again, and again and again, as a person who was more recently identified as an ADHD ear.



Katy Weber 46:52

Yeah. Interesting. Those moments where you're like, wait a minute, not everybody is like this. Okay. All right. Good information to know. Yeah, absolutely. So I'm curious. You know, I'd love to ask if you could rename ADHD to something a little less confusing in terms of its acronym? Would you call it something else?



Sharon McCarthy 47:16

Absolutely. First of all, remove the floaty word disorder, and remove the bloody word deficit in the name of God Almighty, just remove it. That's it, just take it, just get rid of it. Stop pathologizing and medicalizing this condition is my genuine genuine opinion, I kind of think that if we were to focus on individual strengths, and utilize areas of strength to support any challenge that they might have, I kind of think that we'd be on a much better footing, I think that it needs to be shifted to be moved from that kind of real medicalized, pathologized idea, to one of unique, individual perspective. And I was just kind of playing with this. And I'm not like, I'd like to think that I'm creative. And I can be very creative insofar as they can get, get things done very, very quickly. And I can kind of once I start a logical pattern, and a kind of a larger type pattern, I can become very creative with my thinking, creativity from a, let's think about this out of my imagination piece. Because I'm autistic as well, that can be a bit a bit challenging is the way I'm going to put it. But I've been thinking about this, and I was thinking that actually, something like the triple E might work better. And a say the triple A standing for alternative augmented attention. So that kind of a profile piece, I suppose alternative, because it's alternative to the 98 point, whatever percent of the population who aren't, who don't have that wonderful, unique perspective. And then augmented, I suppose, as it allows, I suppose it enables and it allows for a person or a learner, I suppose to creatively think and learn and to bring their unique perspective to the table. So I kind of think a AAA, I think that might that might work.



Katy Weber 49:04

I love it. It would be confusing in the US because we have the American Automobile Association. And so, but it's funny because I always talk about how I often wish I had a AAA card for my diagnosis because I spend so much time doubting, you know, did I get this wrong? Did I trick my doctor, you know, all of those ways in which I am always questioning the diagnosis itself that I often wish I had like a wallet size card that reminds me that yes, I have been diagnosed officially and all of that. So but I do I do agree in terms of you know how its labeled by its deficits. Its labeled according to the sort of, you know, negative and needing to manage traits, which is so frustrating because I think so much of it is really about finding the environment that is and the environment and the strategies and the schedules that work for you and your brain and living your best life as a result.

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Sharon McCarthy 49:59

There's two points, I suppose. One is that we speak about the mental health of young people we've mentioned about it, and we've spoken about it already. The reality is, is that when you tell a child that they are disordered in any way, you're going to compound the mental health piece for that young person. So I suppose if not, if for no other reason, that's a good enough reason to get flipped. Just remove it and figure it like, rephrase that, you know,



Katy Weber 50:24

yeah. Because I had this conversation very early on with my husband, when I was first diagnosed, which he was very worried, you know, because I was like, okay, if I'm diagnosed, look at our kids. And so we started looking at them, and he was very nervous about the label of ADHD and that diagnosis, and I would, you know, was explaining like, well, they're gonna get labeled either way. So either they're gonna get labeled as being, you know, depressed or lazy, or all the things I was labeled with this kind of label can be more freeing it can it can really open a window into kind of how to advocate for themselves. But at the same time, you're right, like, there is something really terrifying about labeling your child with a disorder. When really like when you the more you understand, the more it's not it, the disorder is only in relation to the inability to conform in a certain environment that is asking too much of you, like school classrooms and all of these ridiculous environments that we're putting kids into where they're unable to conform. I guess, I was trying to think of a different word, but that's the best word.

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Sharon McCarthy 51:25

Absolutely. The other thing I would say is that in relation to that environmental piece, there's a great guy here in the UK, his name is Dr. Luke Pearson. He's one of the senior autism professors or lecturers while they're in Sheffield, Hallam University. And he speaks very clearly, like his golden equation self professed, as he always says is autism plus environment equals outcome. And the reality is, is that anything plus environment equals outcome. So a positively situated environment will always, always always equal a positive outcome for a child. And in the same way that a negative environment will always end with a negative environment will always, always always result in a negative outcome for a child. So I suppose, let's swap the autism with ADHD, ADHD plus environment equals outcome, I kind of think that it's a really good, a good way of explaining how important it is that these environments are structured and created to best suit the needs of our kids. And there's another guy as well, who is Dr. Demian Melton he works in I think he's in Kent University. And he speaks about the job of empathy problem. And again, I think in the same way that it applies to autism, because he speaks about it in the context of autism, it can be applied to ADHD, and I suppose essentially, his speaks to communication difficulties arising when autistic individuals are expected to engage with with non autistic individuals because there's that difference in neuro type. And the reality is, is that when we think about autistic individuals and other autistic individuals, communicating and interacting with each other, there's not that same level of difficulty. The same again, can be said for ADHD is because the reality is that when you see and meet and you mentioned it earlier on around that kind of finding your tribe and surrounding yourself with like minded people, and so on, it sticks to that kind of neuro type and seem you're engaging so wonderfully together and creating these wonderful positive experiences.



Katy Weber 53:27

Oh, yeah, yeah. 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](https://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](https://adhd.com/coaching). And you can find that link in the episode show notes. And so I get asked, is it important for me to get diagnosed as an adult? I've made it this far. Do I really need a diagnosis? And I'm always sort of my my answer is always yes and no. Because on the one hand, I think a self diagnosis and the ability to research and learn more about yourself is the most important part. I think we are in a situation right now where a formal diagnosis of ADHD can take years in some countries and then even if you do get seen you have no guarantee that you're going to see a medical professional who knows anything about what you are relating to and the questions you were having. And the the fear of being minimized and rejected is so great that I feel like you shouldn't wait for a formal diagnosis before you really start to begin to understand yourself and begin the treatment plan. And so much of that treatment plan is internal, right, you know, for somebody who has either been diagnosed with ADHD already, or is still just kind of early on in the journey of exploring her nerd of urgency relating to ADHD traits, also relating to autism traits, do you feel like it's important to seek out the autism diagnosis? I guess, for a woman for an adult woman who's questioning I'm asking for a friend, how does she do next? Does that importance of a diagnosis extend beyond just having one diagnosis of either autism or ADHD? You know, how important do you feel like it is to really kind of understand everything that's at play here.

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Sharon McCarthy 56:02

I claim to think that first of all, from a self diagnosis standpoint, that it's absolutely essential that people who identify as autistic or ADHD errs or whomever any, any individual neurodivergent individual who is self identifying isn't doing so because they're seeking out a label that doesn't make sense to them, that first thing I'm going to say. So I think it's really important that anybody who identifies themselves, is their identification is equally valid to that kind of professional diagnosis. So I kind of think, but for me, for me, specifically, I felt that it was necessary to call about a professional diagnosis, because I know you've mentioned that we can kind of research and find things out and so on and so forth. But I have no doubt because of oftentimes those kind of obsessive kind of thought patterns and so on that I'd have, I would have no doubt that I would continue to say, Well, yeah, maybe I do. Maybe I don't maybe I will make did I, as you said while ago, today, kind of trick my clinician, did I still have those kinds of thoughts as well, if that makes sense? So, so the reality is, is that if I didn't go about your professional diagnosis, I would not sit? It would, it would not settle completely. For me, I needed personally the validation of a professional to let me know that I wasn't going mad, and that this was absolutely my experience. And I suppose if my advice would always be for anybody who has that kind of a process where it's kind of up and down and up and down. But

they know that they're always going to be the person who's going up and down, and that it's not potentially not not ever going to sit one way or the other. That then I do think that it is worth looking to a professional to validate what is going on. What I do think is essential to that, though, is sourcing a clinician or a professional, who actually has a background in neurodivergent conditions, who actually has a genuine understanding of neurodiversity neurodivergent conditions in all of their glory, not just in those very stereotypical presentations, but also in those kinds of more nuanced presentations, I think, wherever possible. And for me, at least, I suppose because of my experience, I think that it's that it's worth saying that if you had the opportunity to access an assessment, with neuro divergence, clinician or professional, all the better, because there's just that additional layer of empathy, understanding and kindness that you're going to be met with.



Katy Weber 58:33

Yeah, I thought that was really moving. When I was listening to your interview that you did with your son, on your own podcast, as you're sort of coming out interview, when you were diagnosed, I loved what you said about, you know, your advice to clinicians, which is when somebody is seeking a diagnosis, they're not coming to this casually, they have, they are relating deeply, they are seeing patterns throughout their whole life, you know, nobody just sort of thinks they want to fake it. And so to have that, to have that empathy and to have that the kid gloves, when dealing with anybody who is coming to you and just how damaging it is. To understand how damaging it can be for somebody seeking a diagnosis to be told by clinician Oh, you're fine. You know, don't worry about it. I don't see anything wrong with you. Or you know, what's the point you're, you've gotten this far. That's another one I hear all the time, which just drives me crazy. You know, somebody's being told by their doctor, like, what's the point? You're already you're already you're managing fine. You've made it this far. What would a diagnosis How would a diagnosis help you?



Sharon McCarthy 59:34

It's bonkers. It's bonkers. Because when you think about it, many of us, many of us have experienced so many different levels of trauma, right throughout the entire of our lives, right throughout trauma, not not giant, some people unfortunately, yes, but it doesn't have to be giant trauma, trauma from a kind of a rejection standpoint, trauma because of not feeling like you mattered and that you are good enough and so on. and that kind of continuous negative internal conversation going on as a result? And the reality is, is that for somebody then to say, look, you're after getting this far, they not only disregard your question around yourself, but they're also disregarding and dismissing all of all of what it takes for you to continue to be able to navigate the world every day without this information. Do you know so I suppose my advice to anybody who's met with somebody like that, is you know, what? Swap doctors find somebody who is absolutely going to listen.



Katy Weber 1:00:35

Yeah. And yeah, and then don't stop. Trust yourself. Trust your experience. Absolutely. Which is difficult, obviously, for us. But I think at the end of the day, I think really listened to that voice, however tiny, it is deep within you that use like you said, it's not going to go away. It's just



going to nickel and it's going to stay there. And it's there for a reason. Oh, my God, I'm so glad you reached out to be shared. I, I'm so glad I discovered your incredible podcast, autism journeys. Is it still a radio show? Or is it a podcasts or it's both

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Sharon McCarthy 1:01:08

podcasts since the pandemic now it's moved on to, to just podcast for now. But it will fingers crossed, move back into the realm of radio again, please God sharply. And I suppose, you know, there's loads of information. And I suppose just to preface that as well with within my position, so I'd be always would say, looking to the strength of individuals. But what I will say is that, when the podcast first started, when the show first started, I interviewed different individuals, and so on. I know that some people get a little across, but I actually choose to leave. So some of the earlier podcasts up there, because when I first started, there was more palette pathologized language used, it was autism spectrum disorder, and so on. And I suppose as I started figuring things out, obviously, there was that transition. But initially, at least there was that kind of there was the more pathologize language. And I suppose one of the reasons that I leave all of this on our podcasts up there, regardless, it's because it shows up nothing as the journey that we have taken in the last five years. And where we were five years ago to where we are now is hugely different. It is so so important to recognize that journey, and to recognize that if we want to support people in as they navigate their autism journey, that it's important that they're aware of where we were so that we don't go back there and so that we continue to move forward.



Katy Weber 1:02:35

Oh, I know, right? Yeah. Oh, absolutely. I'm thinking of the first episodes that I published with this book. I was in such a different place. When people asked me, Where should I start with a podcast. And I always say, you know, if you're just getting diagnosed, start at the beginning, because that's where I was, I was at the beginning of my diagnosis journey, too. So I was asking probably a lot of the same questions you're asking now. And it's such a wealth of information. There's so the conversations and the interviews are top notch. They're fantastic. And I really applaud you and the work that you are doing and this incredible journey you've been on. But in addition to the radio show, you also do public speaking and what how can people find you? What's your website? And can they work with

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Sharon McCarthy 1:03:14

you? So my website is [autismjourneys.ie](http://autismjourneys.ie). So whatever the WWW dot autism journeys dot A, I'm on Facebook autism journeys radio show on podcasts, and I'm on Instagram as well, or I think it's autism, dark journeys on Instagram. I am on Twitter, but I'm very inactive on Twitter. I find it difficult to watch too many balls in the air. But I suppose, I think you know, is news and I think we definitely I've met a like minded and kindred spirit today. Definitely without doubt. If people want to contact me they can. I know on the website, specifically, there's email, there's phone numbers, there's, there's social media, there's everything. LinkedIn, everything is on the websites. That's probably the easiest place to touch base, if anybody wants to find out more our athletes, if somebody wants to even find out more about the podcasts and so on. All of that information is there.



Katy Weber 1:04:08

Yeah. Oh, so wonderful. Well, thank you again, Sharon. It's been a real pleasure getting to talk to you and pick your brain and hear more about your story. So thank you so much. Thank you



Sharon McCarthy 1:04:19

so much for the opportunity to say I've absolutely loved having a cast with you today.



Katy Weber 1:04:29

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 decide cover and lean into this gift of neuro divergence see, 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.womenandadhd.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