

# UNDERSTANDING ADULT ADHD

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**MIDLANDS ARTS CENTRE (MAC), BIRMINGHAM**

**DOORS OPEN 18:30 TALK STARTS 19:00**



**WHY ME?**

# Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

# SLIDES AVAILABLE HERE



# UNDERSTANDING ADULT ADHD BY MYTH-BUSTING

1. 'Adult ADHD isn't real'.
2. 'Adult ADHD is a trendy new thing'.
3. 'It's easy to get a diagnosis of ADHD'.

## BREAK

4. 'ADHD was invented by Big Pharma'.
5. 'ADHD is a disorder of schoolboys... who grow out of it'.
6. 'ADHD IS...'

**MYTH 1: 'ADULT ADHD  
ISN'T REAL'.**

## WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?

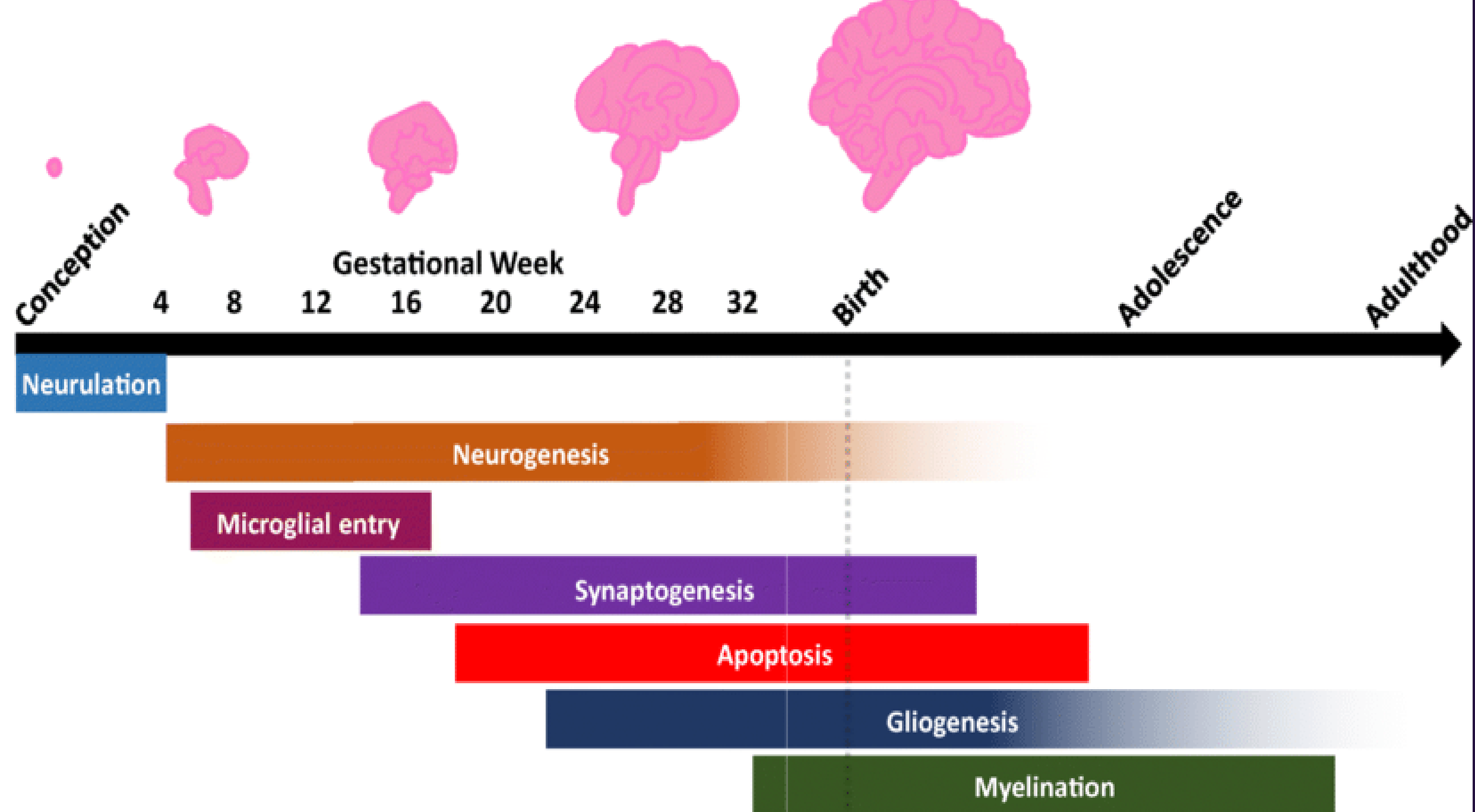
- Ask them...
- No 'objective test'
- All people have some traits and may think "But I don't need help"

**EVERYONE IS NEURODIVERSE...**

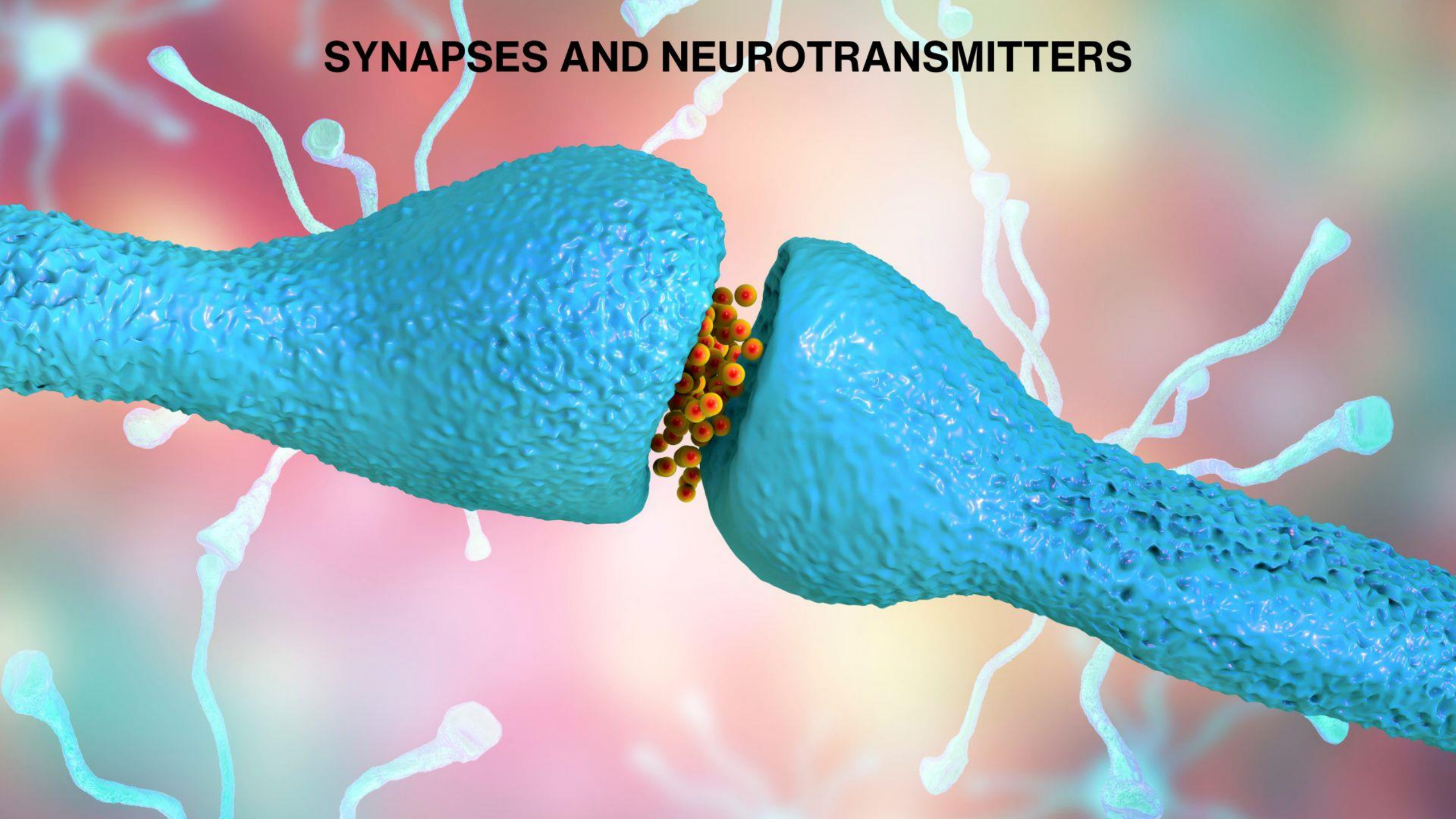




**Human Brain Development**



# SYNAPSES AND NEUROTRANSMITTERS



# ADHD AS A NEURODIVERGENCE

- **3 % of ALL adults (range 2-5%).**
- **Small changes in how the brain develops lead to large differences in behaviour.**
- **ADHD is more likely to have accompanying NDs (ASD/Dyslexia etc.).**

## SO, IS ADHD REAL?

- **1000's of studies over decades.**
  - **Epidemiological studies.**
  - **Genetic and epigenetic research.**
  - **Neuroimaging studies.**
  - **Clinical trials & treatment studies.**
  - **Longitudinal studies.**
  - **Psychosocial and educational research.**

# HOW THE 'ADHD BRAIN' DIFFERS



**STRUCTURE**  
(LARGELY CONNECTIVITY)

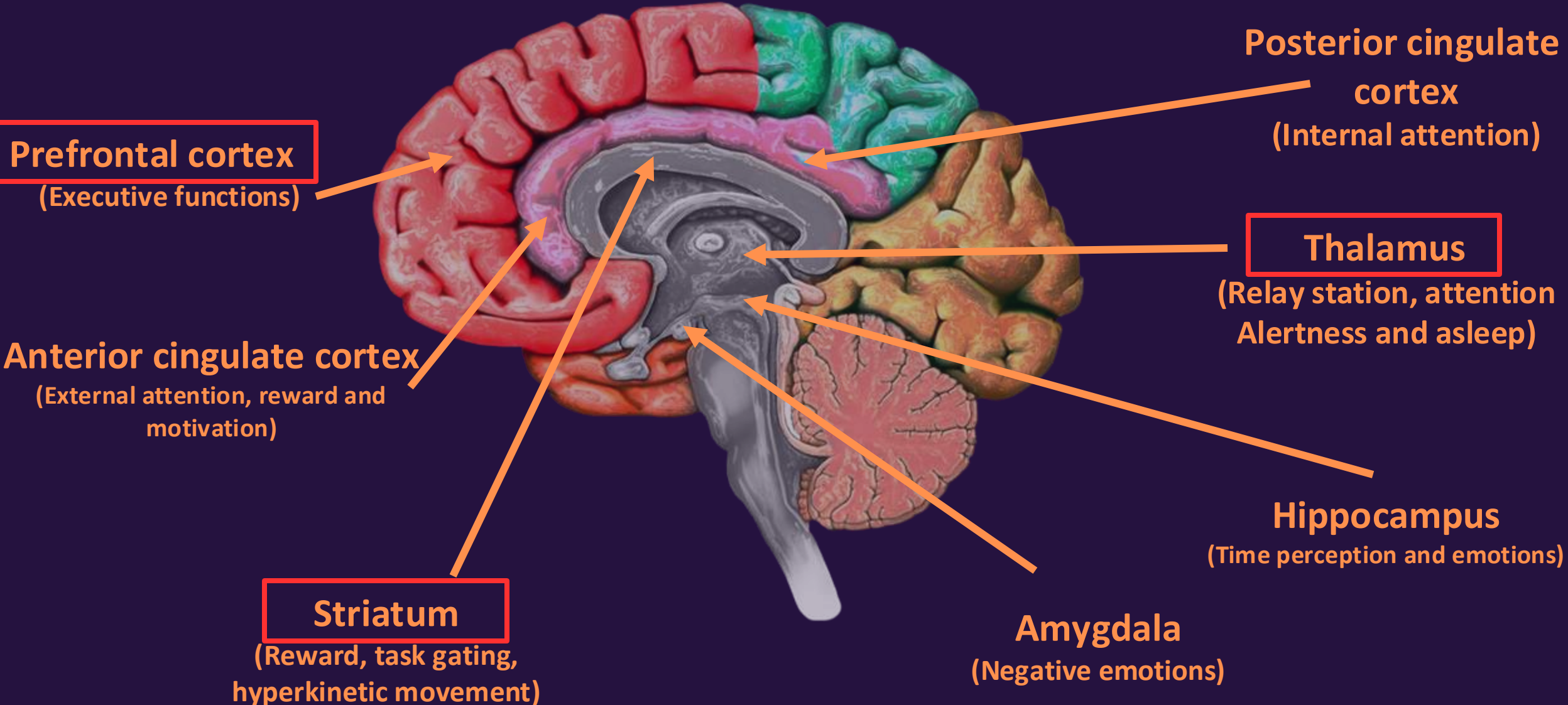


**FUNCTION**  
(LARGELY NEUROTRANSMITTERS)

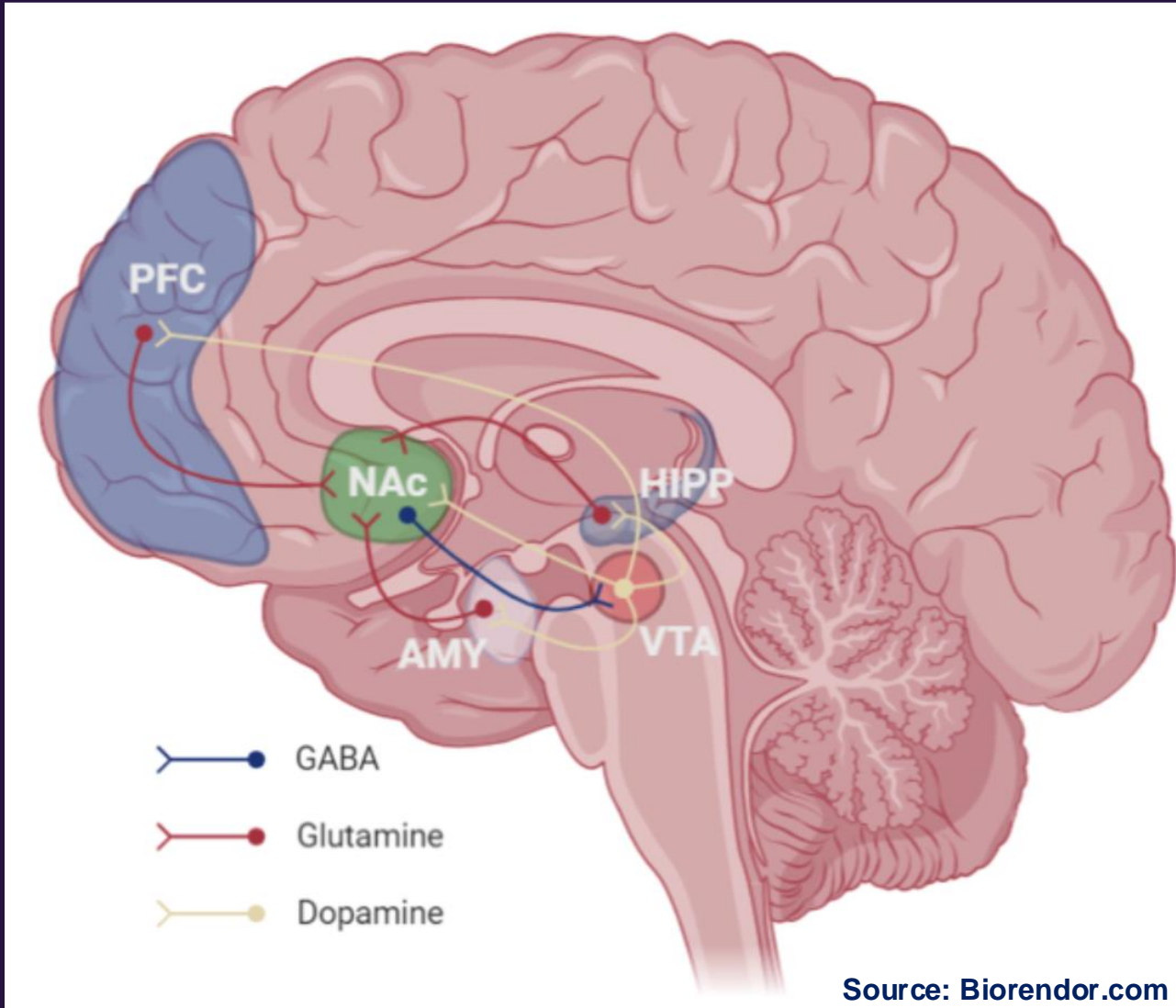
**BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY = CLINICAL DIVERSITY.**



# BRAIN AREAS IN ADHD



# REWARD AND ADHD



Our brains will direct us towards small, immediate rewards as opposed to much larger, delayed rewards...

**“JUST ONE MORE”**

PFC – Prefrontal cortex.  
NAc – Nucleus accumbens.  
AMY – Amygdala.  
VTA – Ventral tegmental area.  
HIPP – Hippocampus.

# SO, WHAT CAUSES ADHD?



**GENETICS**

**(CAUSAL)**



**ENVIRONMENT**

**(CORRELATIVE)**



**SOCIAL**

**(NOT INVOLVED)**



# CAUSES OF ADHD

## GENETICS

Hereditary mutations (80 %)

New Mutations

## ENVIRONMENT

Almost always peri-natal:

Premature birth.

Low birth weight.

Exposure to infections.

Maternal

Malnutrition/alcohol.

Toxins such as mercury and lead.

Maternal medical disorders like diabetes.

## OTHER

Early life adverse events:

Trauma (biological or psychological).

Tumours.

Strokes.

Lead poisoning during the first few years of life.

Possible that low levels of nutrients (like iron).

**MYTH 2: 'ADHD IS A  
TRENDY NEW THING'.**

## WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?

- **Pre-2019: No one knew it existed.**
- **TikTok/News/‘Celebrities’**

# ADHD ISN'T NEW: THE HISTORY OF ADHD

YEAR	AUTHOR	NAME
• 1775	- Melchior Adam Weikard	- “Attention Deficit” (“Mangel der Aufmerksamkeit”).
• 1798	- Alexander Crichton	- “Disease of attention”.
• 1812	- Benjamin Rush	- “A syndrome involving inability to focus attention”.
• 1848	- Charles West	- “The nervous child”.
• 1859	- Heinrich Neumann	- “Hypermetamorphosis”.
• 1885	- Désiré-Magloire Bourneville	- “Mental instability”.
• 1892	- Thomas Clifford Albutt	- “Unstable nervous system”.
• 1899	- Thomas Smith Clouston	- “Simple hyperexcitability”.
• 1902	- George F Still	- “Abnormal defect of moral control”.

# WIEKARD'S BOOK: "ATTENTION DEFICIT"

- Describes adults and children with an attention deficit as:
  - Easily distracted by everything (even your own imagination).
  - Persevering symptoms.
  - Overactive and impulsive.
  - Generally careless, flighty and bacchanalian.
  - Superficial everywhere.
  - Mostly reckless.
  - Highly unstable in design.
  - Inattention is more common in younger people than in older people, and women are more inattentive than men.

# THE (ANCIENT) HISTORY OF ADHD

- **460 to 375 BC – Hippocrates** - made at least one reference to patients who could not focus on any one thing for long and had exceptionally quick reactions to things around them.
- **300 BC - Theophrastus of Eresos** - In his book “Characters”, he described character traits that are very similar to the modern description of ADHD.
- **131 - 201 AD – Galen** - Galen described different personality types that are vaguely related to today’s definition of ADHD.
- **17<sup>th</sup> century – John Locke** - published the earliest modern essay on child education and described a perplexed group of young students who, “try as hard as they could, would not keep their minds from straying”.

**MYTH 3: 'IT'S EASY TO GET  
A DIAGNOSIS OF ADHD'.**

# WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?

- **BBC Panorama.**



# Eight-year ADHD backlog at NHS clinics revealed



**Catherine Burns and Vicki Loader** **Rob England**

Health correspondent and health producer

Data journalist, BBC Verify

# THE FIVE CRITERIA FOR ADULT ADHD DIAGNOSIS

1. A persistent pattern of 'Inattention' and/or 'Hyperactivity-Impulsivity'.
2. Symptoms present before age twelve.
3. Symptoms present for at least six months as an adult.
4. Symptoms causing 'significant impairment' in two or more settings.
5. Symptoms are not better explained by another mental disorder.

# SYMPTOMS OF ADHD (INATTENTION)

1. Making careless mistakes/lacking attention to detail.
2. Difficulty sustaining attention.
3. Inability sometimes to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Failure to follow through on tasks and instructions.
5. Exhibiting poor organisation.
6. Avoiding/disliking tasks requiring sustained mental effort.
7. Losing things necessary for tasks/activities.
8. Being easily distracted (including unrelated thoughts).
9. Being forgetful in daily activities.

# EVERYDAY INNATENTIVENESS

[Home](#) > [Biogerontology](#) > [Article](#)

## The interconnectedness of ageing: does the **convoy principal** apply?

Editorial | Published: 04 February 2015

Volume 16, pages 131–132, (2015) [Cite this article](#)

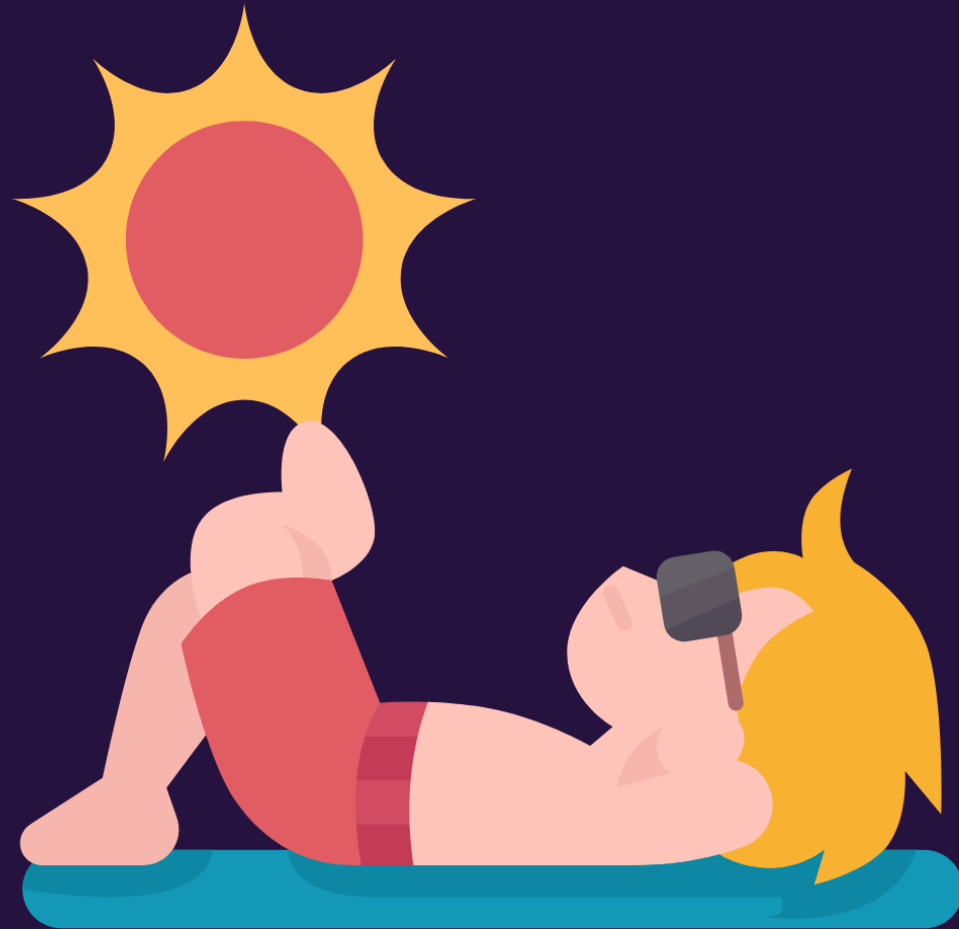
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[Jill Saffrey & James E. Brown](#) ✉

# **SYMPTOMS OF ADHD (HYPERACTIVITY/IMPULSIVITY)**

- 1. Fidgeting with or tapping hands or feet, squirming in seat.**
- 2. Leaving seat in situations when remaining seated is expected.**
- 3. Experiencing feelings of restlessness.**
- 4. Having difficulty engaging in quiet, leisurely activities.**
- 5. Being “on-the-go” or acting as if “driven by a motor”.**
- 6. Talking excessively.**
- 7. Blurting out answers.**
- 8. Having difficulty waiting for your turn.**
- 9. Interrupting or intruding on others.**

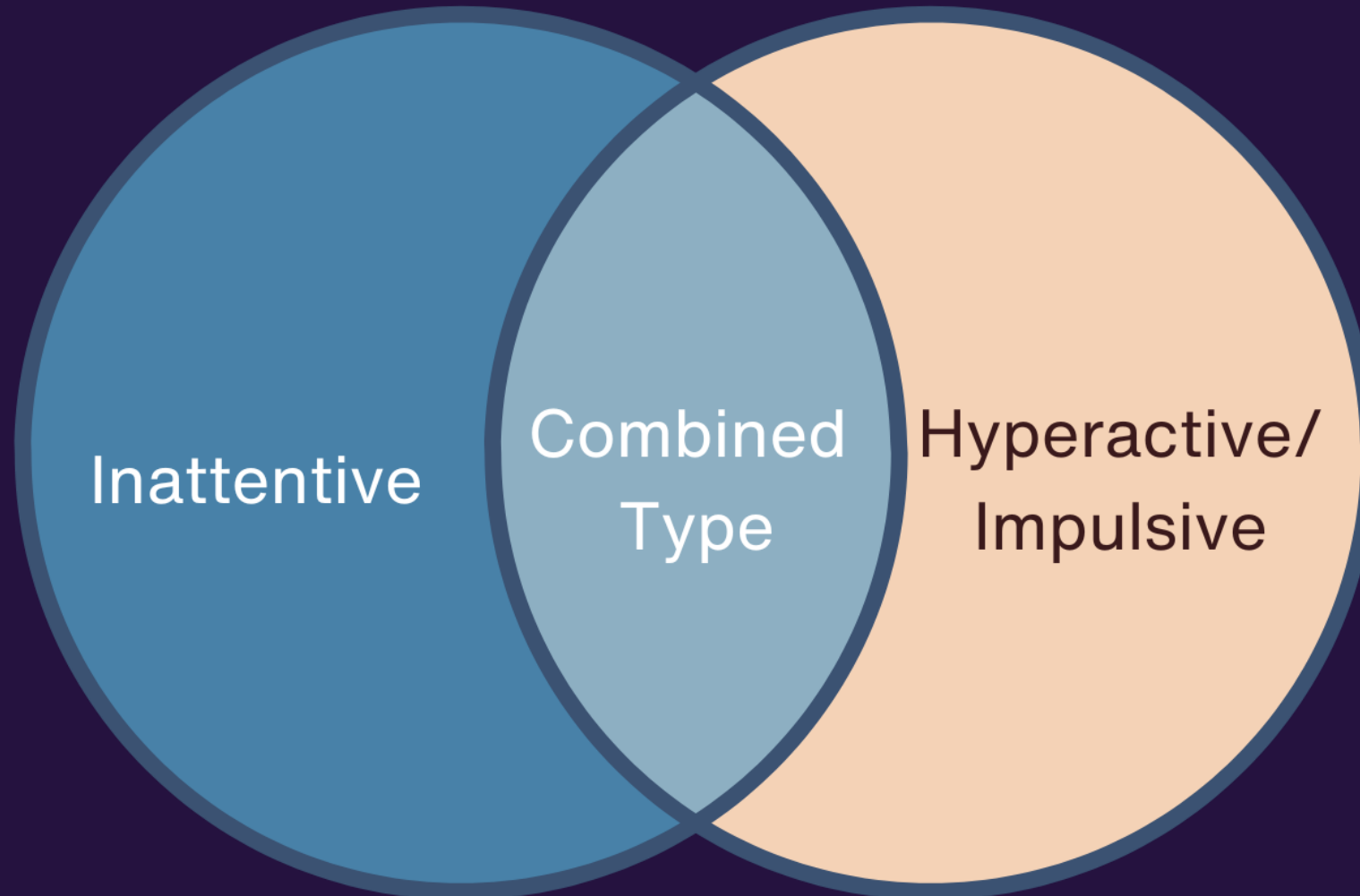
# EVERYDAY HYPERACTIVITY



# EVERYDAY IMPULSIVITY



# ADHD PRESENTATIONS



but...



# NON-DIAGNOSTIC SYMPTOMS OF ADHD

- Emotional issues.
  - Emotional dysregulation
  - Rejection-sensitive dysphoria (RSD).
- Neurological Deficits
  - Time Blindness.
- Sensory Issues.
  - Sensory Processing Disorders

**TIME FOR A BREAK**



**MYTH 4: 'ADHD WAS  
CREATED BY BIG PHARMA'**

# WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?



LACK OF TRUST IN PHARMA



MEDICATION IS MAIN TREATMENT

# TREATMENT OF ADHD (CURRENT)



80%



20%

# 'BIG PHARMA'

- **The first pharmaceutical company (Merck) founded 'small-scale pharmacies in 1668.**
- **The Industrial Revolution brought us Pfizer (1849), Burroughs Wellcome (now GSK, 1880), and Bayer (1863).**
- **Mass production of medications from 1940 onwards.**

# WHAT ELSE HELPS?

1. **Exercise – releases dopamine.**
2. **Education – helps emotional acceptance.**
3. **Improve sleep routine – reduces stress and improves function.**
4. **Mindfulness – reduces inattention and hyperactivity.**
5. **Caffeine – increases dopamine.**
6. **Assisted Relaxation (e.g. Moonbird) – can improve symptoms.**

**MYTH 5: 'ADHD IS A  
DISORDER OF  
SCHOOLBOYS... WHO  
GROW OUT OF IT'.**



## WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?

- **Lack of awareness.**

# SYMPTOMS IN MALES V FEMALES

## MALES

- Often presents with noticeable hyperactivity and externalising behaviours.
- Boys are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviours such as running, shouting, and physical impulsivity.

## FEMALES

- Often manifests with inattentiveness and internalising behaviours, more subtle and less disruptive.
- Girls with ADHD are more likely to be quietly inattentive, daydreaming, or struggling with organisation and follow-through without causing classroom disruptions.

# THE WHOLE SYSTEM WAS SET UP TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST ADULTS/WOMEN

- Design bias in diagnostic tests.
- Commonly used tools are often biased towards identifying hyperactive and impulsive behaviours.
- Interviews may not always probe deeply into the internal experiences of individuals.

# Diagnosis in children and adults

CHILDREN

5 %

ADULTS

3 %

## THREE DATES

- 1775 – First scientific report
- 2008 – NHS approves adult diagnosis
- 2013 – BMJ survey: most psychiatrists disagree that adult ADHD is real.

MYTH 6: 'ADHD IS...'

## WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THIS?

- Lived experience ≠ everyone's experience.
- The plural of the anecdote ≠ is not evidence.

# SIMPLE ANSWERS TO COMPLEX QUESTIONS ARE RARELY CORRECT...

ADHD is a strength

ADHD is a superpower

ADHD is a burden

ADHD is a disability



# ADHD IS A BURDEN

- On average, but not all...
  - Increased risk of substance use issues, gambling and debt.
  - Increased unemployment or underemployment.
  - Less likely to access or stay in higher education.
  - Increased risk of criminality (25-33% of male prisoners have ADHD symptoms).
  - Increased accidental injuries.
  - Increased suicide risk.
  - Economic burden of £18k/year (average, untreated).
  - 7 x ROI on treatment.

# ADHD IS A STRENGTH/SUPERPOWER (1)

- Many 'strengths' are spoken of.
- If you look at the evidence:

Increased entrepreneurship.

- Those with impulsive traits, later in life.

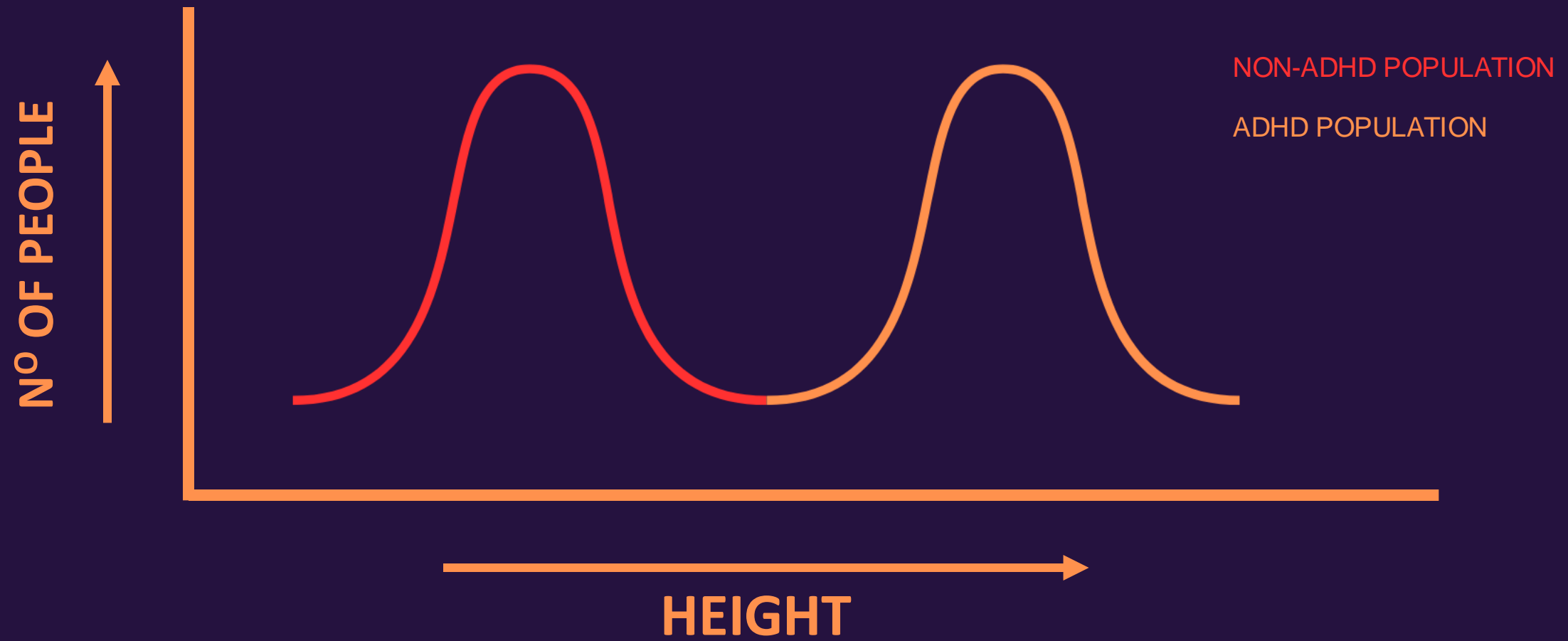
Increased 'creativity'.

- People with symptoms but not the disorder.

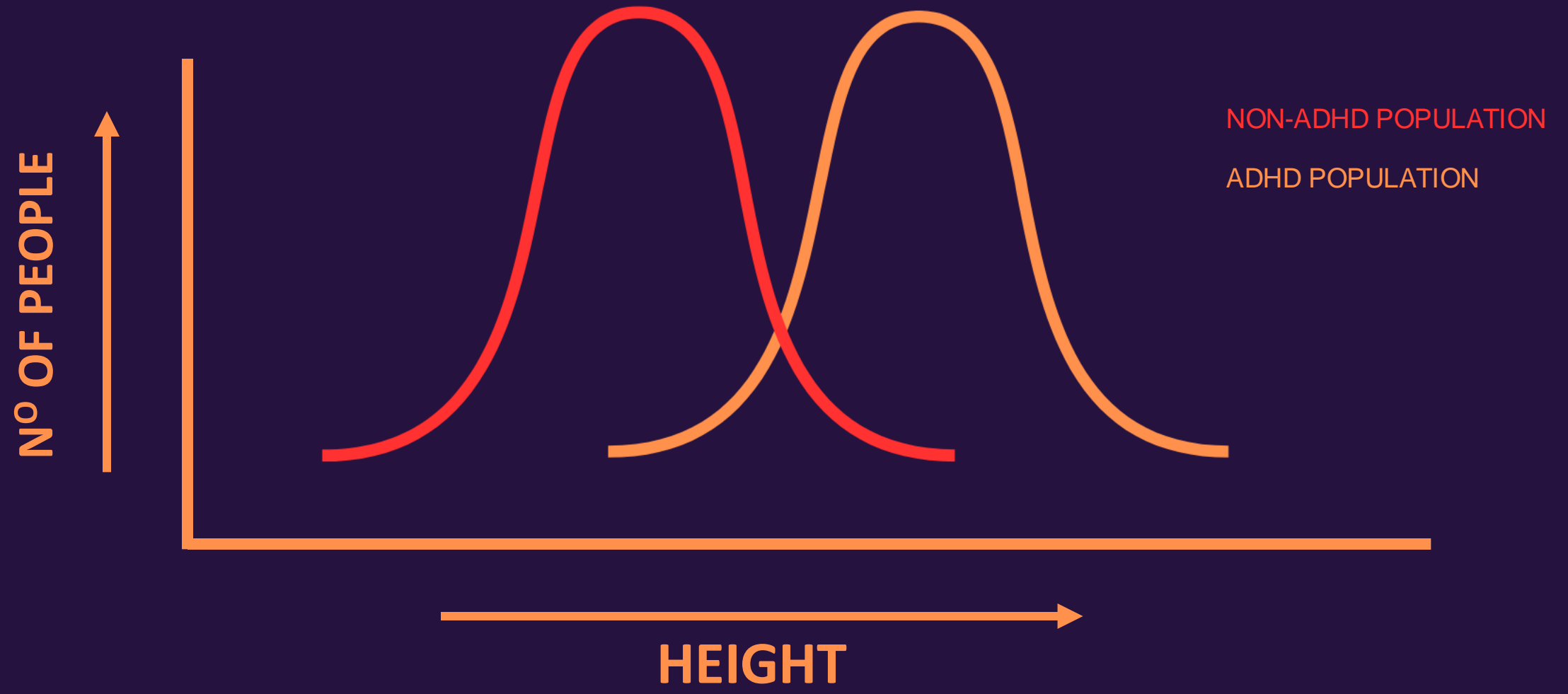
# ADHD IS A STRENGTH/SUPERPOWER (2)

- Two realistic possibilities.
  1. “Everyone with ADHD is better at XXX than everyone without ADHD”.
  2. “On average, people with ADHD are better at XXX”.
- Let’s use height to explain the flaw... e.g., “Males are taller than females”.

“Everyone with ADHD is better at XXX than everyone without ADHD”



“On average, people with ADHD are better at XXX”.



# ADHD 'STRENGTHS' CAN AND DO EXIST THOUGH

- We are not 'born with' them.
- We learn them.
- They often require the right environment.

# LEAVE IT TO BOWIE TO EXPLAIN IT BETTER THAN ME, AND 50 YEARS BEFORE...



*“I'm not a prophet or a  
stone-age man,  
Just a mortal with the potential  
of a superman.”*

**In the right environment,  
with the right support,  
adults with ADHD can  
flourish**



# RESOURCES

## Charity



Website: [ADHDadult.uk](https://ADHDadult.uk)

Social media: [@adhdadultuk](https://twitter.com/adhdadultuk)

Online magazine: [Focusmag.uk](https://Focusmag.uk)

Discord: [theadhdadults](https://theadhdadults)

## Podcast and Patreon



Website: [TheADHDAdults.uk](https://TheADHDAdults.uk)

Social media: [@theadhdadults](https://twitter.com/theadhdadults)

Patreon: [Patreon.com/TheADHDAdults](https://Patreon.com/TheADHDAdults)

## Personal



Website: [JBHD.uk](https://JBHD.uk)

Social media: [@adhdadult\\_james](https://twitter.com/adhdadult_james)

# RESOURCES

