

Finding Your Voice

What is silencing?

The process that discourages girls with ADHD, from freely expressing their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Initially imposed by societal norms and expectations, this insidious form of social control causes adhd girls to suppress their authentic selves and internalize their unique perspectives.

Over time, girls with ADHD may internalize this imposed silence, making it a self-regulating mechanism. Our Flourish model calls this one of the old coping skills.

As a girl, you may have learned to censor yourself instinctively, keeping your thoughts and feelings to yourself in order to avoid the discomfort and rejection that might come with **self-expression**.

Unfortunately, although you were likely rewarded for it, this reinforced and internalized silence can lead to problems for you. In this group module, we will explore how to get back your voice.



Finding Your Voice

Silencing Yourself, Unlearning the Silence

Why do Adhd girls silence themselves?

1. Experiences of Being Misunderstood

If you've had experiences as a young girl of feeling misunderstood when you tried to communicate, it may have caused you to fear sharing your thoughts and ideas.

Executive functioning differences may have made processing during communication exchanges hard. Or, you may have had periods of excessive enthusiasm or specialized interests that you wanted to share that led others to treat you as if your communication style was weird or different.



Finding Your Voice

These interactions might have left you feeling alone and isolated as a child, so you might have just concluded that silence was the best choice.

2. Internalized Beliefs about Your Self-Worth

You might have learned as a girl that your thoughts and ideas were less valuable or less valid than others, leading you to hold back even when you had something important to say.

Society often implies that girls' voices, especially neurodivergent ones, are less important than boys.

3. The Burden of Emotional Labor

As a girl, you were likely expected to manage emotions, including providing emotional support, listening to others, and handling conflict, a task referred to as emotional labor.

This burden can make it hard for females to prioritize their own needs and desires because all of their (already compromised) executive functioning is used up on everyone else.

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4. Lack of Representation

A lack of representation of neurodivergent girls in leadership roles or specific fields can make you feel your voice won't be heard or valued.

5. Punishment for Different Thoughts or Emotions

Girls are often socially conditioned to be agreeable, nurturing, non-confrontational, quiet, focused, and patient.

Those who defy these norms can face punishment and shame in school from peers, and at home, leading many ADHD girls to feel like they must silence their voices, feelings, and thoughts to fit in or avoid conflict.

6. Feeling Different, the Pressure to Conform and to Mask

Looking around and feeling different or out of place can lead you to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself. This is a common experience for neurodivergent girls.

7. Internalized Stigma

Many women with ADHD do not realize the value of their thoughts, the validity of their emotions, and the need for their voices. This comes from internalizing messages that label them in girlhood as weird, as stupid, or lazy.



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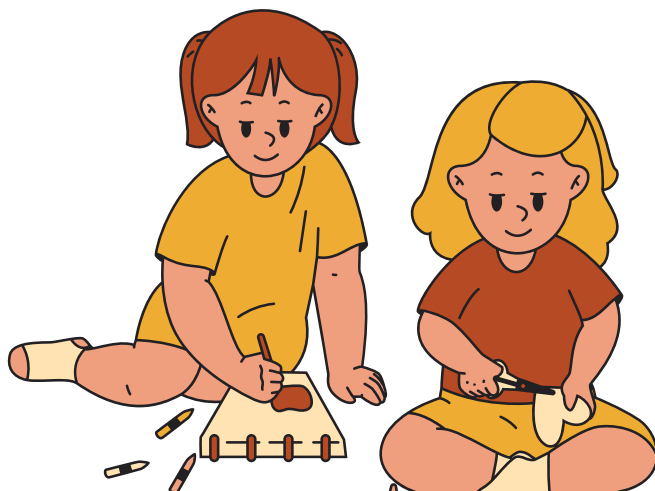
8. Invalidation of Emotional Experiences

You may have felt like your emotions were dismissed as overly dramatic or sensitive, causing self-doubt and suppression. Difficulty with social cues and norms can lead to isolation and feeling like your struggles aren't real. In environments that didn't cater to your unique needs as a girl with ADHD, you may have felt like your experiences and challenges weren't acknowledged or understood.

9. The Gold Standard Girl

As a girl and young woman, you may have felt pressure to conform to societal expectations of being a "good girl." This often involves being polite, accommodating, and nurturing, even if it means neglecting your own needs and desires. Additionally, the fear of being labeled as "difficult" or "bossy" may have caused you to ignore your own needs and desires.

Unfortunately, society discourages all females, especially those who are neurodivergent, from listening to their bodies and advocating for themselves. This pressure can make speaking up and asserting yourself difficult, especially in male-dominated or neurotypical environments, when you have ideas or needs. This fear could stem from past experiences, observation of others, or **explicit warnings of potential consequences from adults and peers in your life.**



The Impact of Silencing on Girls with ADHD

Silence perpetuated and encouraged by society compounds the existing challenges faced by girls with ADHD, severely hampering their development and functionality. It's vital to understand the breadth and depth of this societal harm.

Research has shown that when children are encouraged to suppress their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, it can adversely affect their emotional development, self-esteem, mental health, communication skills, and cognitive development.

Yet this is what we encourage adhd girls to do!

The Detrimental Effects

Encouraging children to suppress their voice, thoughts, and feelings (masking) has far-reaching effects. **For girls with ADHD, the adverse impacts of such silencing are particularly detrimental:**

- Research shows that children who are discouraged from expressing themselves **may have more difficulty identifying, understanding, and managing emotions**, exacerbating the emotional regulation challenges often associated with ADHD.
- Research shows that encouraging children to be quiet **impacts their self-esteem and confidence, impacting their belief in their abilities and potential.**



The Impact of Silencing on Girls with ADHD

- **Mental health disorders are closely linked to repression in children.** Girls with ADHD, who are already at a higher risk of experiencing co-occurring mental health disorders, face an even greater risk when they are taught to suppress their thoughts and feelings.
- Effective communication is essential for successful personal and professional relationships. **Silencing children can hinder the development of these crucial skills.**
- **Suppressing children's thoughts and ideas can limit cognitive development and problem-solving skills.** This is particularly harmful for girls with ADHD, who may already experience challenges in these areas.



Why is it so scary for me to start using my voice?

Why is it so scary to use my voice and speak my truth?

This is a big question, and it has a complex answer. There are three main components.

First, silencing can be a tool deliberately used to keep groups marginalized and oppressed, and speaking out can and may be unsafe when that's you.

Historically, women and various marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, have been systematically silenced. For marginalized groups, speaking out can result in social penalties. The concept of intersectionality highlights the compounded discrimination faced by individuals belonging to multiple marginalized categories. As a woman with adhd, you belong to (at least) marginalized groups. Acknowledging these systemic issues is crucial before suggesting solutions to self-silencing.



Why is it so scary for me to start using my voice?

Second, ADHD women and girls are silenced overtly and subtly, and it's baked into our culture. Girls are socialized from an early age to be polite, not to make a fuss, to not stand out - in essence, not to take up space. This can result in something called self-silencing, where you silence yourself without even realizing it. It's a coping skill you learned, and the part of you that protects you by doing so feels unsafe changing.

Third, there's a double standard when it comes to being vocal. When women are vocal and assertive, they're often viewed as aggressive or bossy, whereas men are viewed as confident and assertive. This is even more pronounced for women with ADHD, who are often already struggling with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Essentially, you are afraid because it may be dangerous.



Why is it so scary for me to start using my voice?

You're not alone if you struggle with self-silencing. It's not your fault that you struggle with this. The issue is systemic and deeply rooted in how society views and treats women, particularly those with ADHD.

Yes, it can feel scary to use your voice, especially when you're not used to it, and especially when you're used to being silenced. But it's also okay to push back against the fear. It's okay to claim your space. It's okay to assert your needs. It's okay to be you WHEN YOU FEEL SAFE TO.

You don't have to find your voice overnight. It's okay to take small steps and do this as it feels right for you.

You bring equal value to all relationships, your voice isn't less just because you are a woman, or because you have adhd.



Silence Breaking Tips

Consider these strategies to find your voice even when facing adversity:

1. Cultivate Self-Awareness: Begin by understanding your values, needs, and rights. This is an essential first step. Reflect on the situations where you feel silenced and the reasons behind these feelings. **Recognize that you have the right to bring equal value and not be criticized for your unique brain-based differences.**

Reflection question: What situations tend to silence you and why?

2. Practice Self-Advocacy: Learn and use assertive communication techniques that involve expressing your thoughts, feelings, and needs openly, honestly, and respectfully, while also considering the rights of others.

Reflection question: How comfortable are you with assertive communication?

3. Build Self-Confidence: Develop your self-confidence through various strategies like understanding your strengths, practicing self-compassion, and engaging in activities you are good at or passionate about.

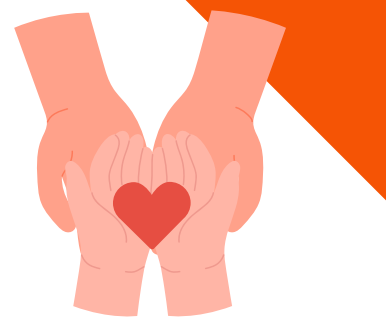
Reflection question: What are your strengths and passions?

4. Find Support: Look for supportive people or groups who understand your situation and can provide advice, encouragement, and solidarity.

Reflection question: Who are the supportive figures in your life, and how can they help you find your voice?



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Silence Breaking

5. Educate and Advocate: Empower yourself with knowledge about your rights and strategies for advocating for yourself. If you're part of a marginalized group, Understanding your group's history and triumphs can be especially empowering.

Reflection question: How well do you understand your rights and the history of your group?

6. Seek Safe Spaces: Try to find or create safe spaces where you can freely express yourself. These could be physical locations or online communities where individuals respect and support each other.

Reflection question: Where are your safe spaces for expressing yourself?

7. Draw Inspiration: Look to women who resisted silencing, such as Malala Yousafzai, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Greta Thunberg, Emma Gonzalez, and Tarana Burke. Despite challenges, they persisted and brought about significant societal and political changes.

Reflection question: Which inspirational figures resonate with you, and why?



Silence Breaking Reconnecting with Yourself and Finding your Voice

Sometimes, especially if you are a late-diagnosed adhd woman, it's hard to know your thoughts and feelings. This may be because you have been masking them for so long that they are deep down and hard to find. Don't worry they are still there!

Below are some specific activities you can do that will help you reconnect with your voice if you are having trouble finding it.

1. Surround Yourself with Safe People: Find a quiet and comfortable space. Invite a trusted friend or family member to have a 10-minute conversation about a topic that interests you.
2. Form Opinions from Articles: Choose a short article from a newspaper or online source. Spend 5 minutes reading it, then spend another 5 minutes writing down your thoughts and feelings about it.
3. Daily Writing or Voice Recording: Find a quiet space. For 5 minutes, write in a journal or speak into a voice recording app about your thoughts and feelings for the day.

Silence Breaking

Reconnecting with Yourself and Finding your Voice

4. Identify Your Feelings: Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Scan your body from head to toe, noting any physical sensations. Then, try to connect those sensations with emotions and write them down. You can revisit our emotions section in the workbook and course, where the feelings wheel and faces can help you with this exercise.

5. Begin a Breathing Practice: Find a calm place. Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Take a slow, deep breath in for a count of 4, hold it for a count of 4, and exhale for a count of 4. Repeat this cycle for 5 minutes. You can imagine the waves moving in and out.



Silence Breaking

Reconnecting with Yourself and Finding your Voice

6. Self-Reflection Time: Find a quiet space. Ask yourself these questions: What do I think? What do I feel? What do I need? Spend 5 minutes writing down your responses. These check-ins help build self-compassion and awareness of your needs, feelings, and body.

7. Embrace Contrary Thoughts or Feelings: Reflect on a recent event where your initial thought or feeling differed from the expected or conventional one. Write it down, then spend a few minutes exploring why you might have felt this way.

8. Freeform Drawing: Grab a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Spend 10 minutes drawing anything that comes to your mind, and let your hand move freely. Creative exercises help you connect to your authentic self.



Silence Breaking

Reconnecting with Yourself and Finding your Voice

9. Daily Dance Practice: Pick a song you like, stand up, and allow your body to move freely to the music for the duration of the song. Any similar exercise where you can freely connect to your body is beneficial.

10. Mindful Eating Exercise: Choose a small snack. Eat it slowly, taking note of its taste, texture, and how it makes you feel. Write down your observations.

11. Capture Your Perspective Through Photography: Take a walk with your phone or camera. Spend 10 minutes taking photos of things that catch your eye. Reflect on why you chose these subjects.

12. Build a Vision Board: Gather some magazines, scissors, and a piece of paper. Spend 10 minutes cutting out images that resonate with you. Glue them onto your paper to create a collage that represents your aspirations and beliefs.

13. Hum or Sing to Your Favorite Songs: Choose a song you love. Spend 5-10 minutes humming or singing along. Notice how the melody and lyrics resonate with your current feelings.

15. Create a Mind Map of Your Thoughts: Grab a pen and paper. Write a word or idea in the center of the paper. Spend 5-10 minutes writing-related ideas around it, drawing lines to connect them.

More Help for Reclaiming your Voice



Dr. Harriet Lerner is a prominent feminist therapist who has extensively worked in the field of emotional healing. Her approach emphasizes the importance of reclaiming emotions, connecting with inner experiences, and understanding personal needs. According to her, it's essential to permit ourselves to have feelings, thoughts, and needs, honor those emotions, and create space for ourselves to think and reflect.

Dr. Lerner stresses the importance of emotional understanding and expression in fostering healthy relationships and effective communication.

Sari Solden has also made remarkable contributions to the study of how silencing affects women with ADHD. Her key messages are precious and worth considering. However, proceeding cautiously and evaluating whether these ideas align with your sense of safety and comfort when communicating is vital.

Start with environments and relationships where you feel safe. Don't push yourself too hard if you feel overwhelmed or uneasy. But remember, It is expected to experience some resistance when expressing your thoughts and opinions. Pay attention to your feelings and trust them.

More Help for Reclaiming your Voice: Tips From Sari Solden

1. **Don't give up:** It's important to not give up on being heard during conversations. Healthy communication involves not allowing yourself to be silenced. If you have an important thought, idea, or feeling that you want to communicate, aim to persist in the conversation instead of giving up or shutting down. Keep working at getting your message across. This may require taking a break but coming back to it later when you have the courage, energy, or executive functioning to pursue it.

2. **Keep Practicing:** Communication is a skill; like all skills, it improves with practice. You might not always be understood right away, but don't let that deter you. The more you practice expressing yourself clearly and assertively, the better you'll get at making your voice heard.

3. **Hold onto Your Truth:** Each person has their own unique experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and these form the basis of your individual "truth." Your experiences and understanding of yourself are valid and deserve to be acknowledged.

4. **Refuse Character Attacks:** It's unfortunately common for people with different brain wiring to be put down or criticized because of it. While it's okay for others to be confused or hurt by your behavior, it's not acceptable for them to attack you as a person.

5. **Equal Value:** You bring unique and valuable contributions to every relationship you're part of. While these contributions may not be the same as what others bring, they're equally important. Don't forget this!

More Help for Reclaiming your Voice

7. Notice and Adjust: If you find that you're being misunderstood or disrespected , pay attention to your reactions . This self-awareness allows you to adjust your communication strategies and try new ways of expressing yourself that might be more effective.

8. Establish Self-Worth: Remind yourself before difficult conversations you are valuable . A significant aspect of successful communication is developing a strong sense of your own worth and power . When you truly believe in your own value, you're less likely to allow others to undermine you or your self- esteem.

9. Baby Steps: Effective communication requires long-term effort . Even if you encounter challenges, it's crucial to keep working towards improvement. Keep in mind that perfecting your skills takes time and dedication.



Taking Action for Adhd Girls

Help for your daughter with Adhd

Do you want to take action against the harmful effects of ADHD on girls and create a more supportive environment for them? Here are some steps that can be taken:

Promote Open Expression and Authenticity:

- Encourage your daughter with ADHD to express her thoughts, feelings, and experiences freely. This helps enhance emotional intelligence, boost self-esteem, and foster better communication skills.
- Validate her emotions and offer empathy, fostering an environment of open communication.
- Teach her that her **voice matters** and **she should not silence herself** even when facing resistance or misunderstanding. Success comes from **speaking her truth, understanding her unique brain wiring, and refusing to let others define her by her ADHD.**

Acknowledge Value and Differences:

Teach your daughter that she brings equal value into any relationship. Remind her that equality does not mean contributing the same things in the same ways but acknowledging and embracing differences. She, like everyone else, has her own challenges and strengths. Reinforce that having ADHD does not diminish her worth or potential.



Taking Action for Adhd Girls

Help for your daughter with Adhd

Educate and Inform:

Raise awareness among families, schools, and peers about girls' unique struggles and experiences with ADHD. This can help reduce societal pressures, stigma, and the expectation for girls to conform or mask their symptoms.

Affirm Neurodiversity:

Adopt a neurodiversity-affirming model at home and advocate for the same at your child's school. This perspective recognizes ADHD not as a flaw to be corrected but as a different way of experiencing the world. This perspective can shape positive self-perception and enhance cognitive development.

Rethink Social Skills Curriculum:

Advocate for a curriculum of empathy and understanding for all children; rather than training girls with ADHD to hide their unique experiences and conform to societal norms, teach others to accept and understand differences.



Silence Breaking Group Exercise

- Can you remember times as a girl when you felt your voice didn't matter or that you were discouraged directly or indirectly from using your voice to express yourself? What does it feel like in your body to think about being unable to freely share your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs?
- How do you envision your life and relationships being transformed by finding and using your voice? What does it feel like in your body to think about using your voice to share your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs freely and safely?
- What does it feel like in your body to believe that you bring equal value and that no one has the right to criticize you for your brain-based differences? What would your life be like if you adopted this belief and acted from it?
- Share your reflections and insights with the group, discussing your experiences with self-silencing and the factors that contribute to it.
- Practice communication within the group by sharing your thoughts, ideas, and needs without self-silencing. Encourage and uplift one another, creating a safe and empowering space for everyone to express themselves freely.

Remember, the journey of unlearning self-silencing and reclaiming your voice is a process that requires patience, self-compassion, and support. Together, as a group of ADHD women, you can uplift and empower one another, creating a space where your voices are celebrated and valued.

