

The Unexpected Link Between Migraine Headaches and ADHD

May 24, 2022
Podcast #402

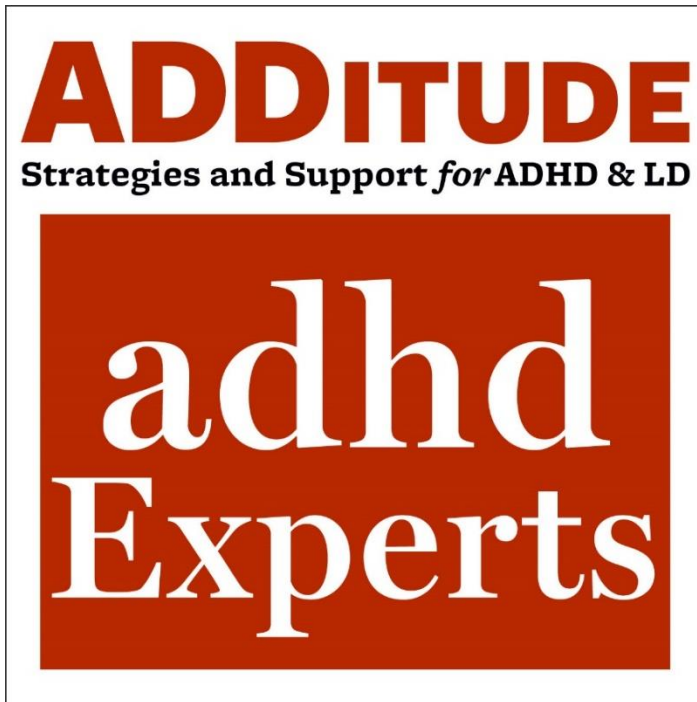
Meet today's expert speaker:
Sarah Cheyette, M.D.



[Sarah Cheyette, M.D.](#), is a pediatric neurologist. She graduated from Princeton University and UCLA Medical School. She is a co-author of the books, [Winning with ADHD: A Playbook for Teens and Young Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#) and [ADHD & the Focused Mind: A Guide to Giving Your ADHD Child Focus, Discipline & Self-Confidence](#).

ADHD Experts Podcast

Episode #402



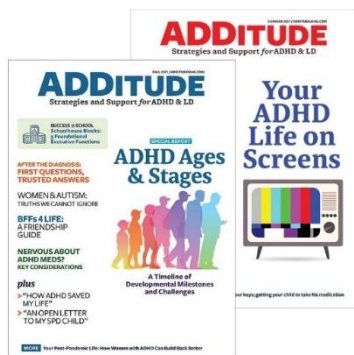
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When Is a Headache Not a Headache? When It Is ADHD!

Sarah Cheyette
M.D.

Palo Alto
Medical
Foundation





**The combination of
headaches and
ADHD is a HUGE
problem that has
not been
recognized.**

**TWO OF THE MOST
COMMON ISSUES
DOCTORS SEE, PUT
TOGETHER!**

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Would you like to solve 2 problems or more at ONCE?

- Get rid of the headaches
- Improve life and school/work functioning
- “Trickle Down” — Less sleep disruption. Less anxiety. Less depression. Less family disruption.



How does ADHD contribute to headaches?

- ADHD creates **stress**
 - People feel behind
- TIME MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS/Procrastination
 - Lead to **lack of sleep**, which leads to headaches
- Impulse control problems
 - Lead to **concussions**, which lead to headaches
- Lack of planning leads to **irregular habits**
 - Poor eating, poor hydration, poor sleep
- ADHD **medication side effects** can cause headaches



How do headaches contribute to ADHD?

- **Headaches create stress and distractions.** People with ADHD do not need stress and distractions.
- **TIME MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS**
 - Headaches become the priority and work gets pushed off
 - Missed school or workdays from headaches
 - People get even further behind
- **Medications** could contribute to sleepiness and loopiness
- Post-concussion headaches associated with **worse concentration** — also cause people to miss school and work
- Can **interfere with sleep**
- Can cause **depression and anxiety**
- **Headaches are another OBSTACLE for ADHD people who don't need additional obstacles.**



Qualitative connections: Sleep disorders



- Anxiety
- Depression
- Medications
(prescribed or not)
can affect your sleep

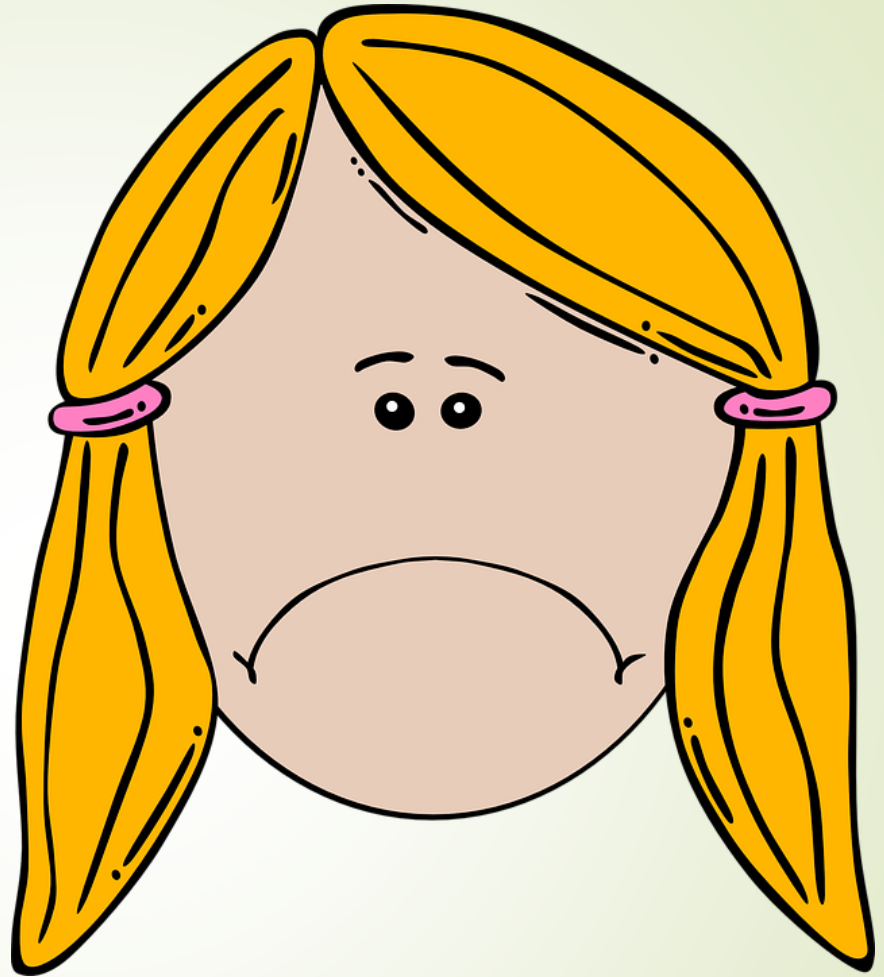


Qualitative connection: Anxiety/ Depression



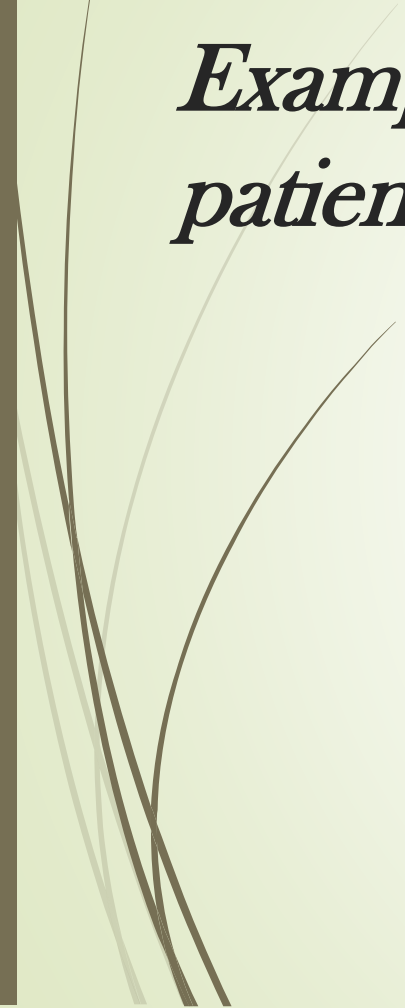
- Worsen sleep
- Create stress
- Medications
(prescribed or not)

*Example
patient: Sally*





Example patient: Sally



- 15-year-old girl with history of headaches “here and there” for a few years, sometimes with her period. Nonspecific.
- Around late October sophomore year, they started to get worse.
- All day every day
- Started taking Tylenol/Ibuprofen/Excedrin daily
- “It didn’t work.”
- Also nauseated



Example patient: Sally

- Started to miss more and more school and activities. Getting farther behind
- Went to pediatrician who referred her to eye doctor and neurologist
- Family history: Some headaches, and Uncle Joe died of a brain tumor



Example patient: Sally

- Maybe occasional marijuana use “to help me sleep.” When she sleeps, she sleeps soundly but “I always feel tired.” Sleeps with phone nearby. Getting 6 hours of sleep.
- “O.K. student,” A’s and B’s in middle school, B’s and C’s in high school so far
- “A lot of pressure.” “Worry about school.” “Worry about friends.” No clear depression.
- Everything worse around her period. “Wwwaayyyy worse,” per mom.
- Soccer player with a history of a concussion about 1-2 years ago.

*Example
patient: Sally*

- Medication for headaches giving her stomach aches and “loopiness.”
- History of always feeling behind at school. Had always stayed up late to do homework due to procrastination. She always wanted to finish the homework but would sacrifice sleep.

*Example
patient: Sally*

- In seventh grade, she missed 1-2 weeks because of nausea
- Teachers always had nice things to say about her — although chatty
- Never liked to read books. Had to read them over and over
- Lots of screen time

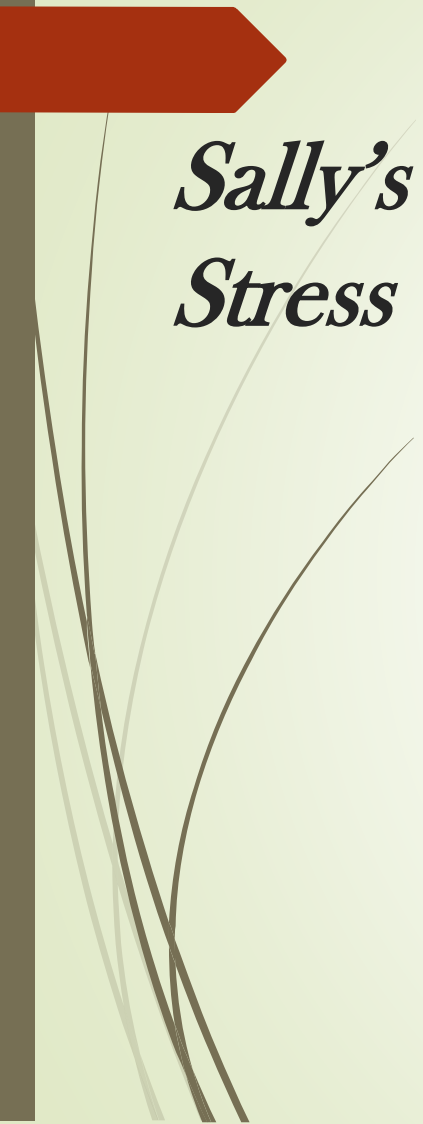
*Example
patient: Sally*

- Would make a lot of silly mistakes
- Misplaced things a lot
- Parents had to repeat instructions a lot: “I thought it was just the way she was.”



Example patient: Sally

- She felt she was smart but that she always had to work harder than other people
- Social benefits of “airhead” — part of her persona
- Homework was “keeping her up until 2 am,” but she didn’t start it until about midnight and she kept getting distracted throughout
- Had to redo assignments as some were turned in late



Sally's Family Stress

- Staying home from school — parent also missing work. Very isolating
- Flunking school
- She and her parents, despite multiple medical tests, were convinced that doctors were “missing something.” Maybe something fatal.
- Going to lots of different doctors
- Financial stressors
- Marital and sibling stressors (had always been chaotic child)



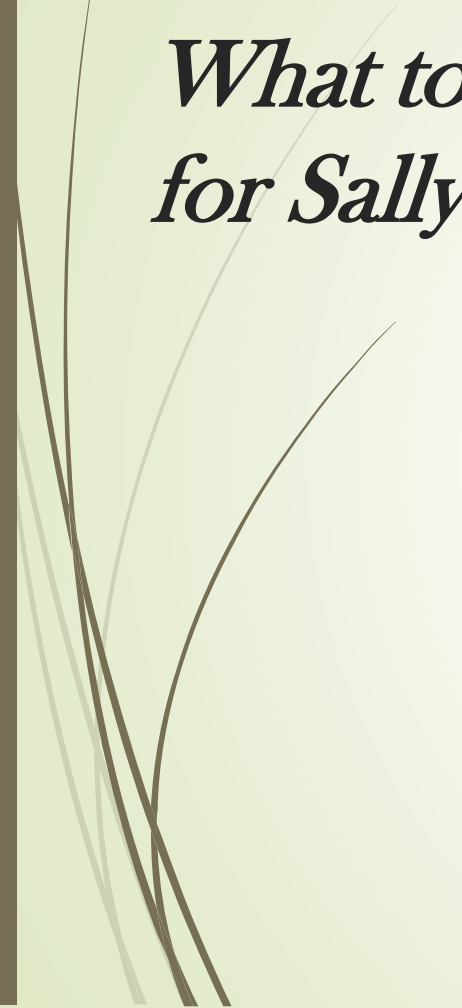
What is Sally's issue?



- Headaches? (Cause or effect)
- ADHD?
- Stress/anxiety/depression including hormonal issues?
- Sleep deprivation?
- Medication effects including marijuana use?
- “Never a reader”/Lots of screen time
- Personal identification as “not a good student”



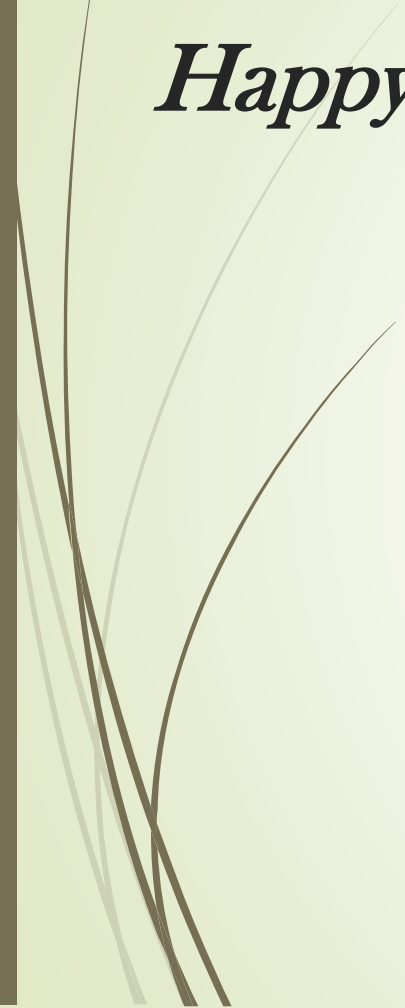
What to do for Sally?



- Fix the headaches?
 - Topamax? Nortriptyline?
(Can worsen concentration)
- OR
- Fix the ADHD and see what happens to the headaches?



Happy Ending:



- We fixed the ADHD
- Headaches got back to “here and there”
- Life got back to normal
- Actually, better than normal
 - Sleep better, mood better, fewer medications, and much less family stress



*If this
happened to
Sally's mother
(adult):*

- Difficulty performing job
- Sleep issues
- Marital stress
- Financial stress
- Inability to care for family
- Self identification as a “failure”

OH MY!



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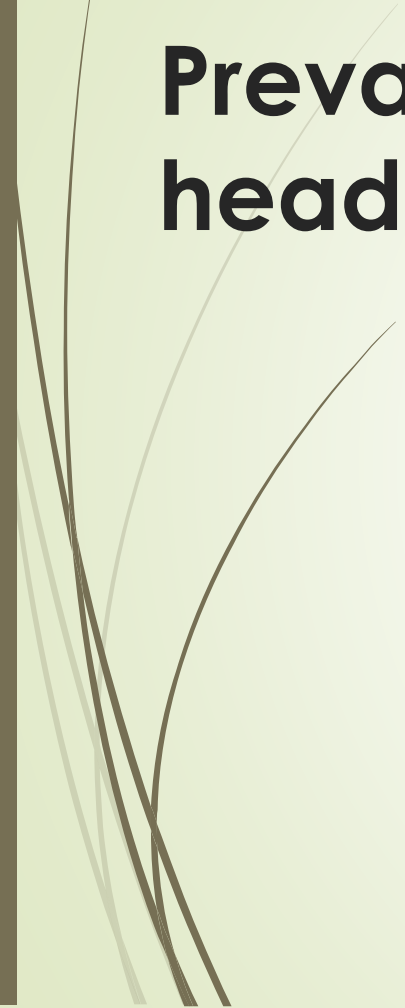


There are many Sallys:

- ADULTS (U.S. population)
 - 247,813,910
- KIDS (U.S. population)
 - Ages 6-11: 24.3 million
 - Ages 12-17: 25.2 million
 - Total of 49.5 million



Prevalence of headaches



- 50-75% of adults have headaches at least once a year
- A third of those have severe headaches at least once a year
- Headache more than 15 days of the month: 1-4% of adults



Number of ADULTS in U.S. with headaches



- 123-185 MILLION people with headaches once per year or more
- 46 MILLION with severe headache once per year or more
- 2-10 MILLION with headaches 15 or more days of the month



Prevalence of headaches in CHILDREN:

- FEWER STUDIES
- 60% of children or adolescents
 - In prepubertal, maybe 20% with significant headaches
 - In adolescents, maybe 50% with significant headaches



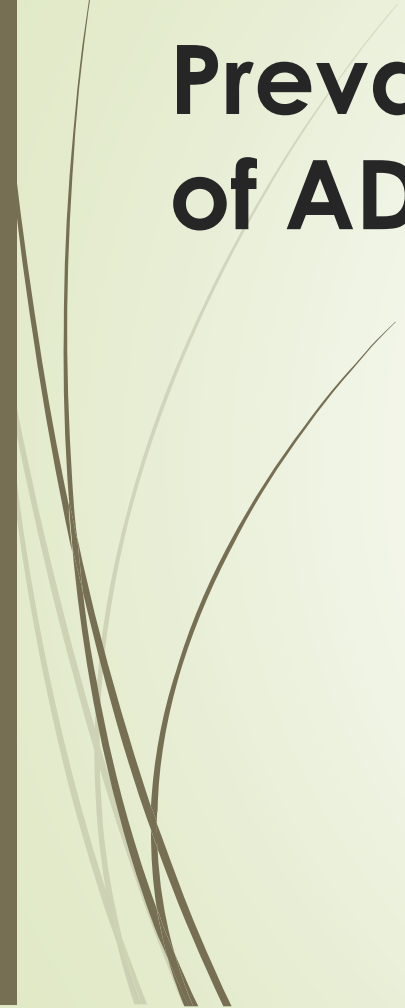
Number of children in the U.S. with headaches



- 50 million kids are ages 6-17
- Half are ages 6-11 ➔ 5 MILLION with headaches
- Half are ages 12-17 ➔ 25 MILLION with headaches



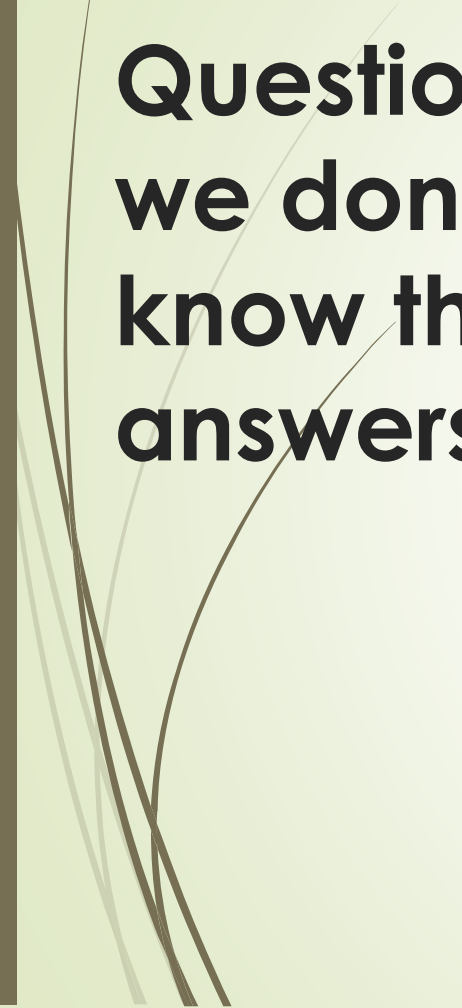
Prevalence of ADHD



- 4-8% of ADULTS= 10-20 million adults with ADHD
- 9.6% of school-age children ages 6-11 = 2.4 million kids
- 13.6% of adolescents ages 12-17 = 3.3 million kids



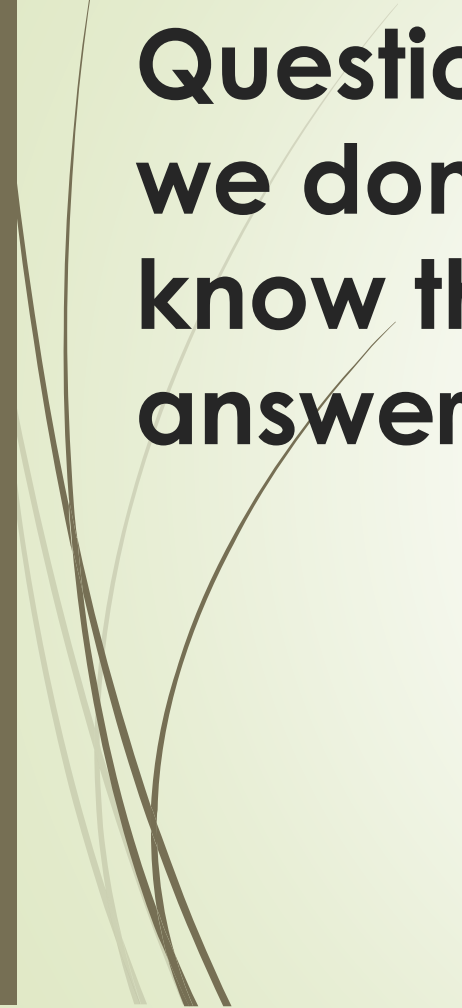
Questions we don't know the answers to



- Of the 46 million adults in the U.S. with severe headaches, how many of them are the 10-20 million who have ADHD?
- Of the 10-20 million adults in the U.S. with ADHD, how many of them have severe headaches?



Questions we don't know the answers to



- Of the 5 MILLION CHILDREN ages 6-11 with headaches, how many of them are the 2.4 million with ADHD?
- Of the 25 MILLION CHILDREN ages 12-17 with headaches, how many of them are the 3.3 million with ADHD?

Questions you should ask yourself:

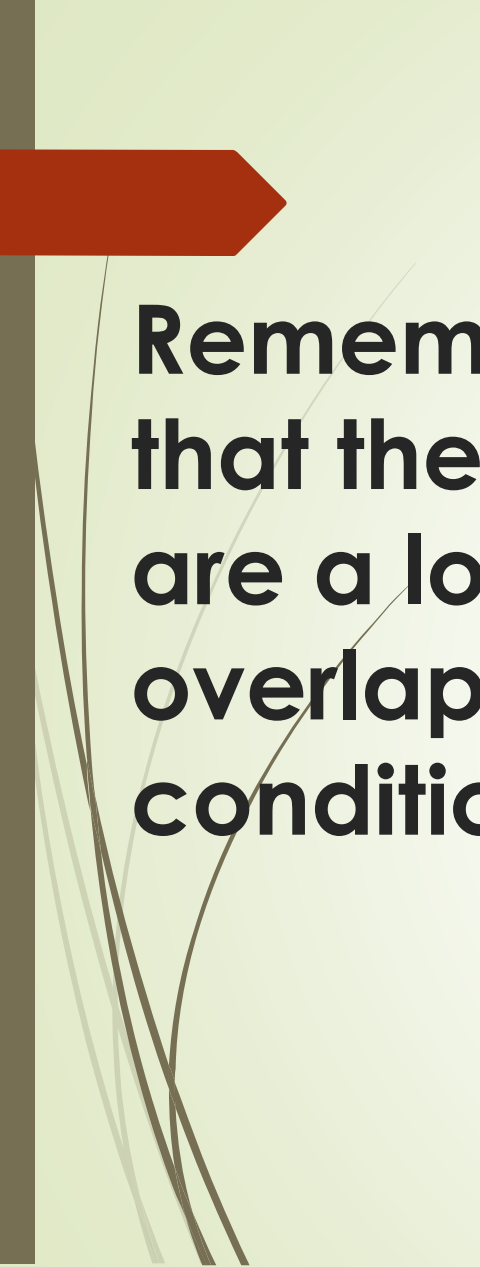
- Which ones are your family members? (Or clients/patients)





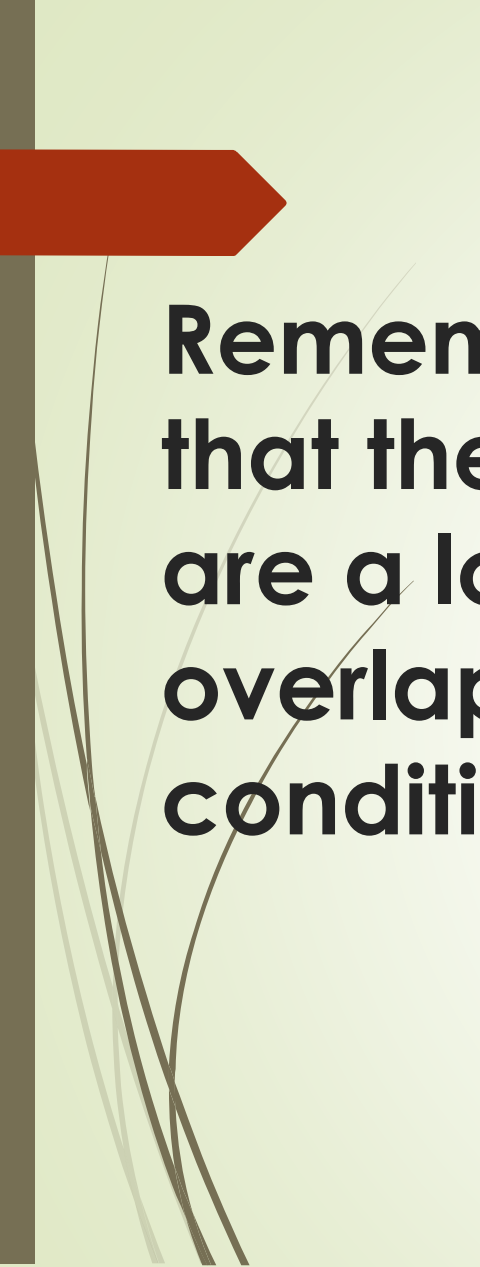
**Remember
that there
are a lot of
overlapping
conditions!**

- ADHD is significantly associated with anxiety and depression
- In adults with ADHD, 20% with major depression, and an additional 13% with more minor depression; significant increase over non-ADHD
- In adults with ADHD, 50% with anxiety
- In kids with ADHD, 33% have anxiety, 17% with depression (significant increase over non-ADHD)



**Remember
that there
are a lot of
overlapping
conditions!**

- Anxiety/depression is a significant comorbidity for headaches: 10-20% of adults with headaches also have anxiety or depression
- MORE UNKNOWNNS in kids with headaches
 - In kids with severe headaches: up to 50% with anxiety/depression
 - In kids with chronic daily headache: 16% anxious, 10% mood disorder

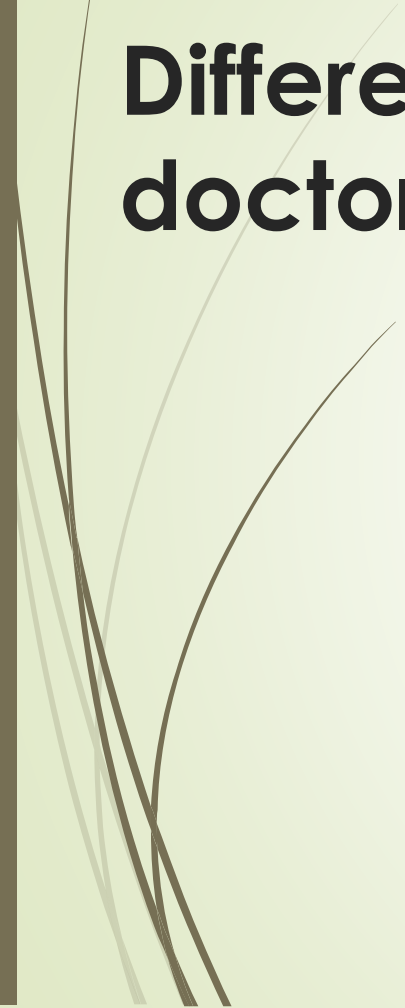


**Remember
that there
are a lot of
overlapping
conditions!**

- Sleep disorder:
 - ADULTS:
 - Definite association between ADHD and sleep disorders
 - Definite association between headache and sleep disorder
 - PEDIATRICS: Fewer statistics, but many suggestions of overlap
 - ADHD and sleep disorders
 - Headache and sleep disorders

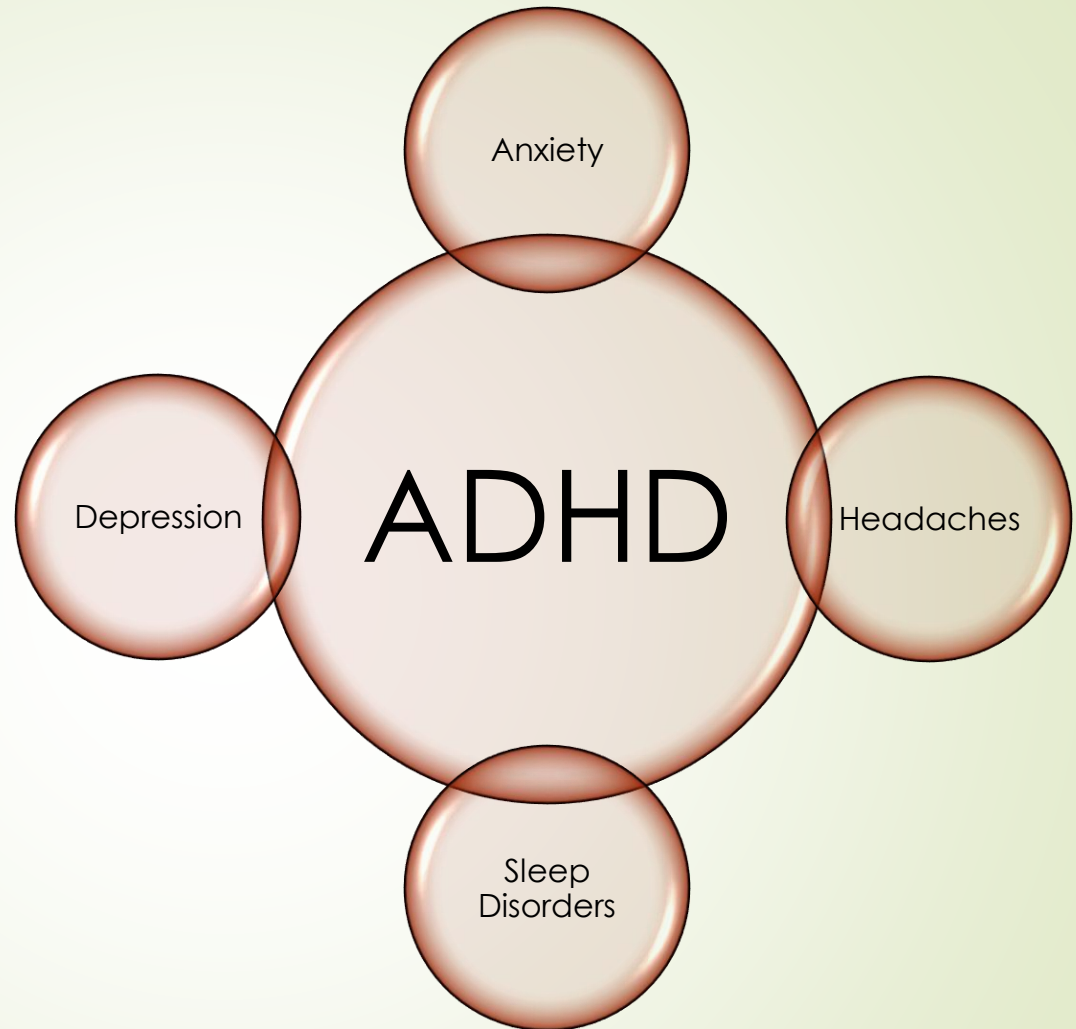


Different doctors



- Neurologists treat headaches. Many don't treat ADHD.
- Psychiatrists/psychologists treat ADHD. They definitely don't treat headaches.

From an ADHD specialist's perspective



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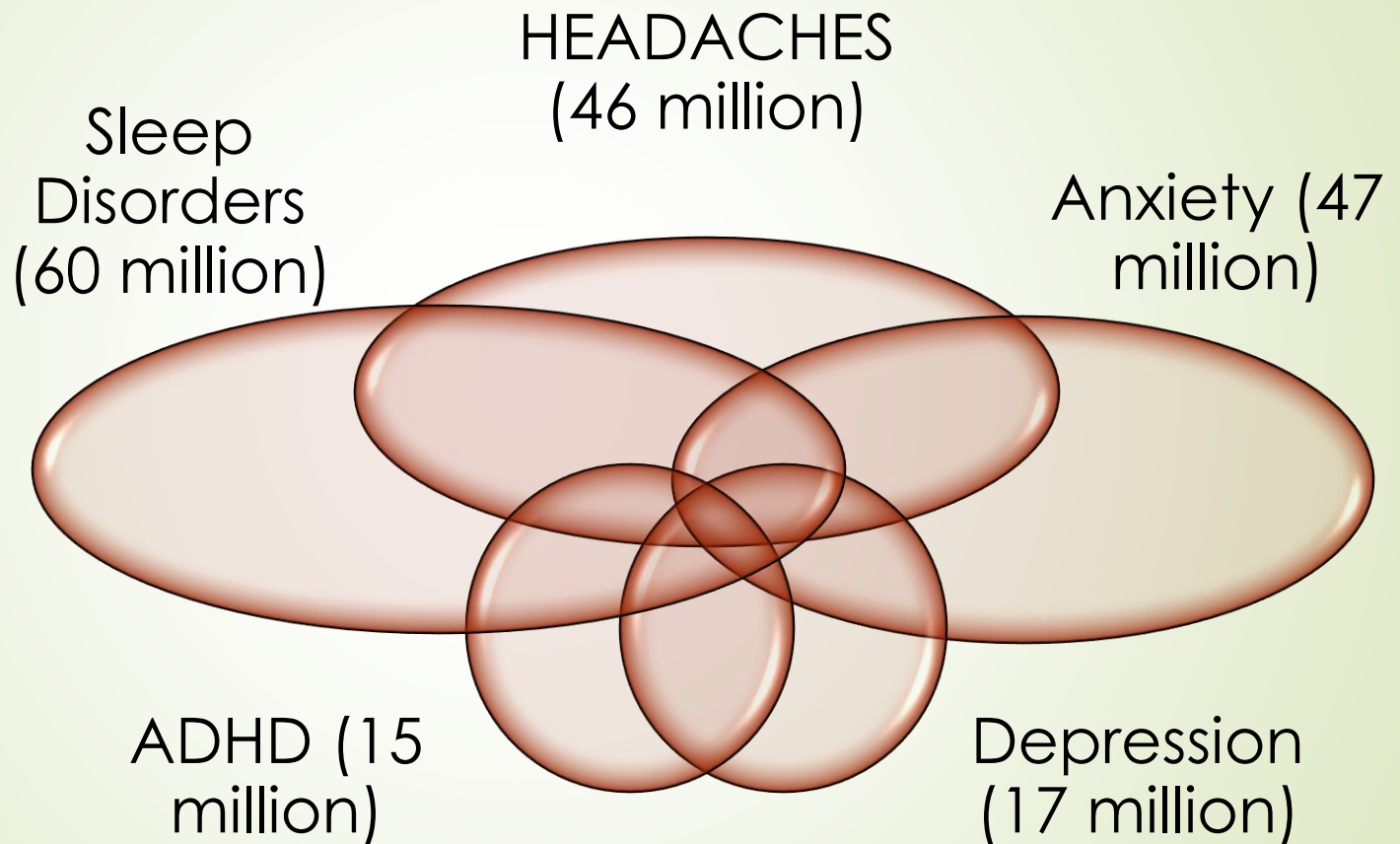


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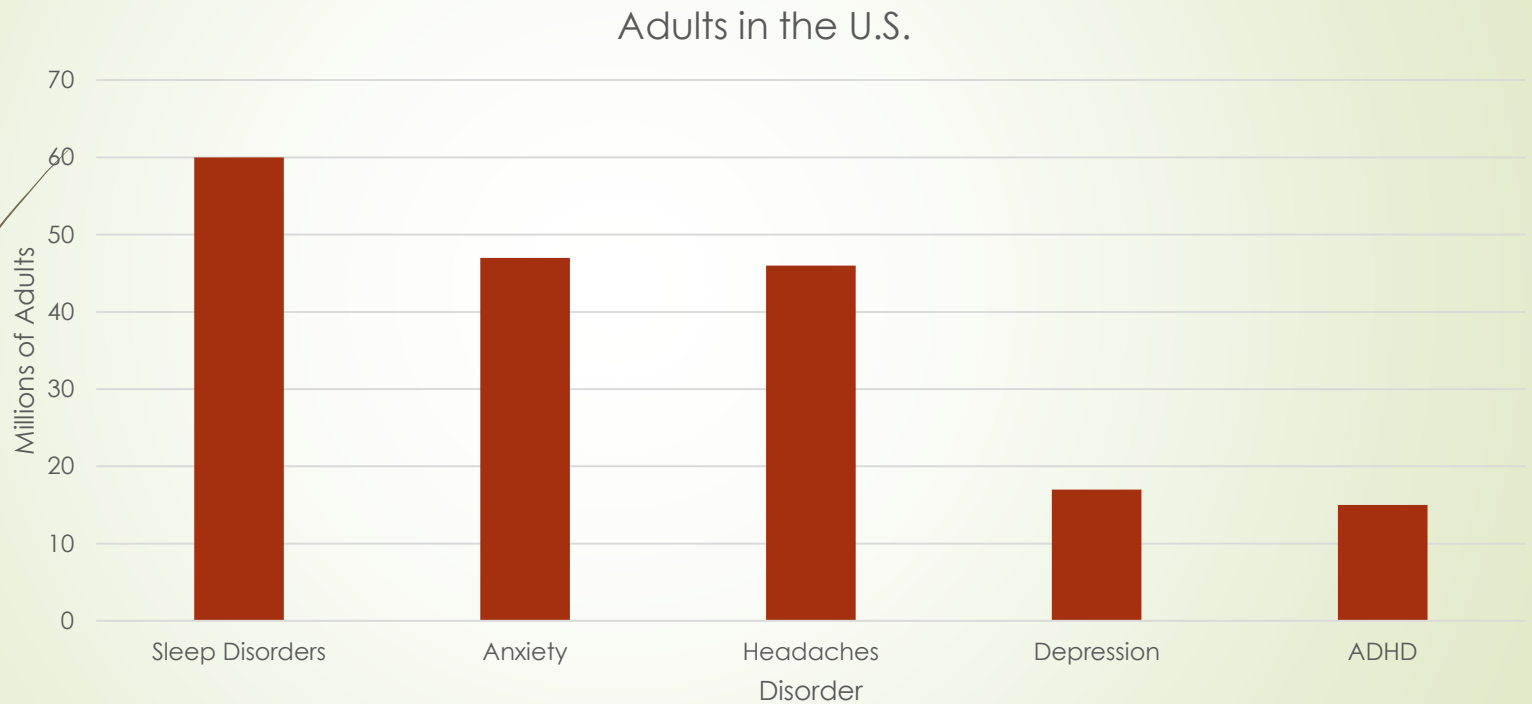
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REALITY: In adults



Adults in U.S. with disorders



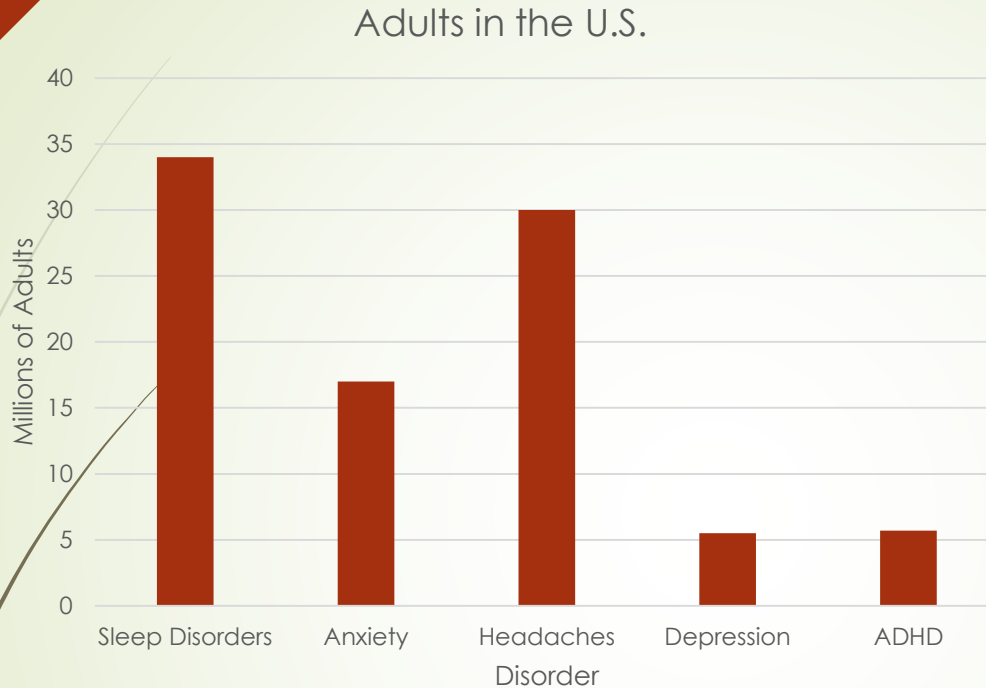
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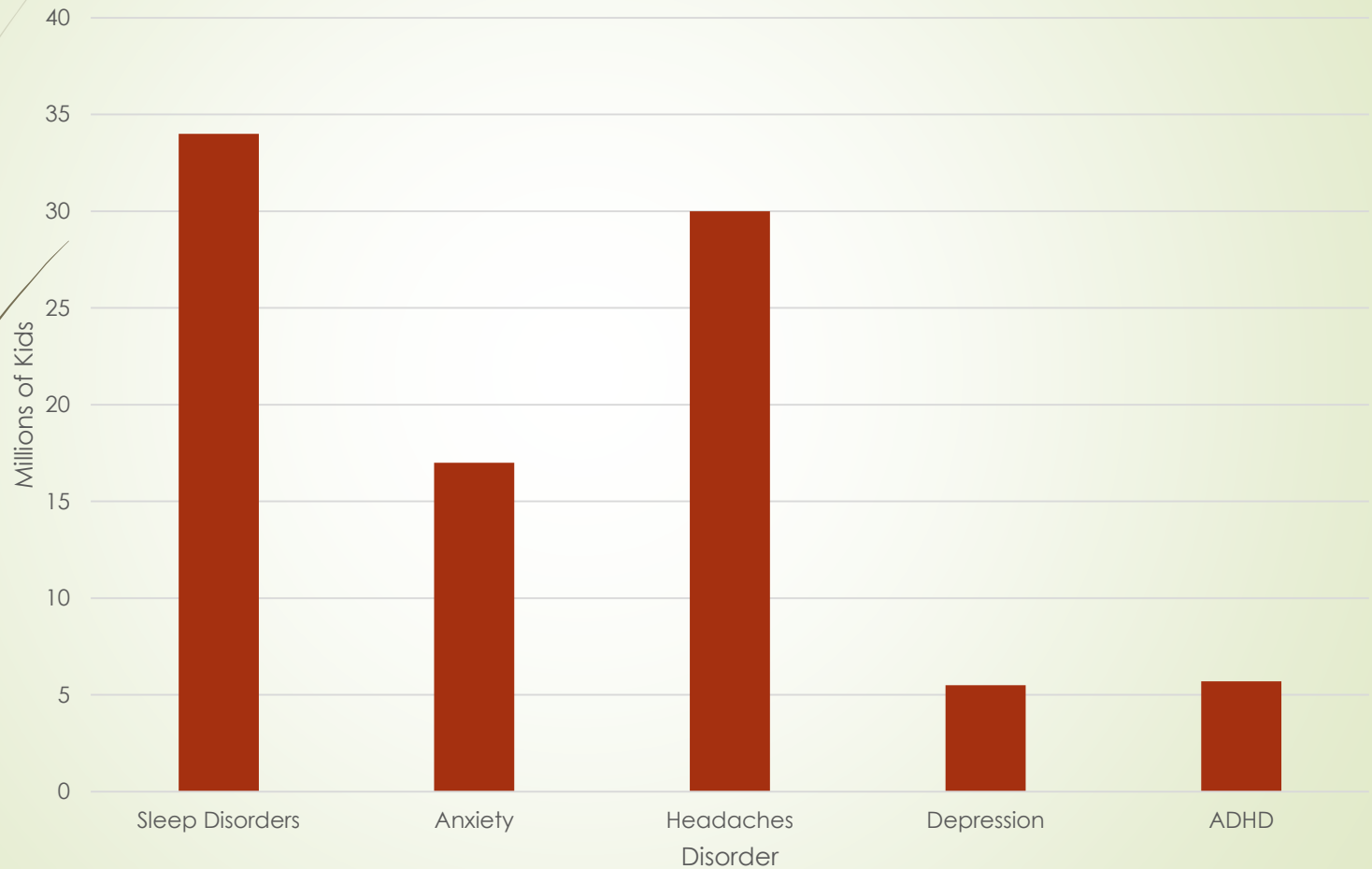


Total: 185 million
out of 247
million adults

Clearly, there is
more overlap
than chance
alone!!

Kids in U.S. with disorders

Pediatric in the U.S.



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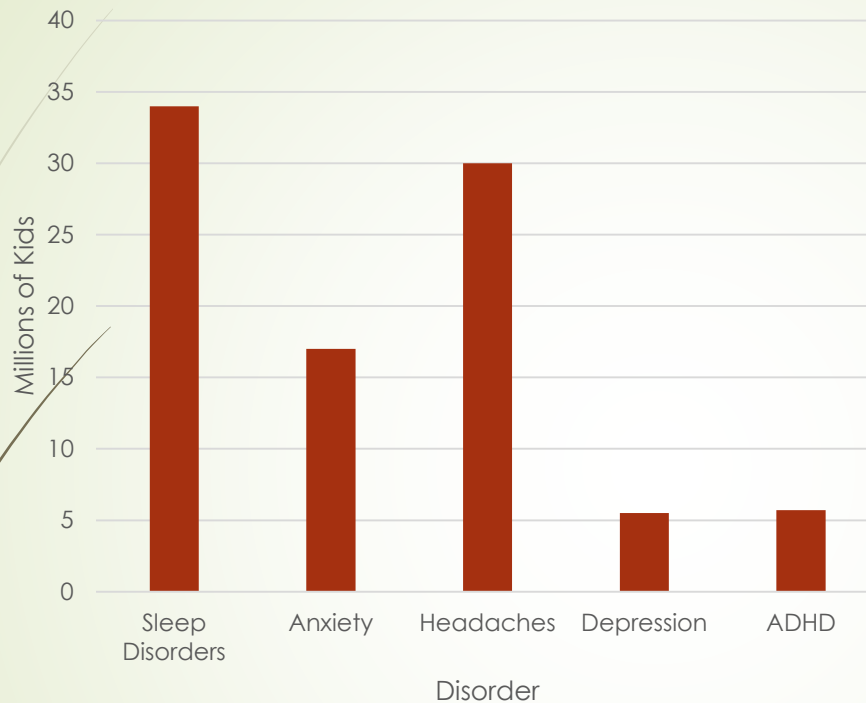


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Pediatric in the U.S.



Total: 92.2
million — out
of 49.5
million?????

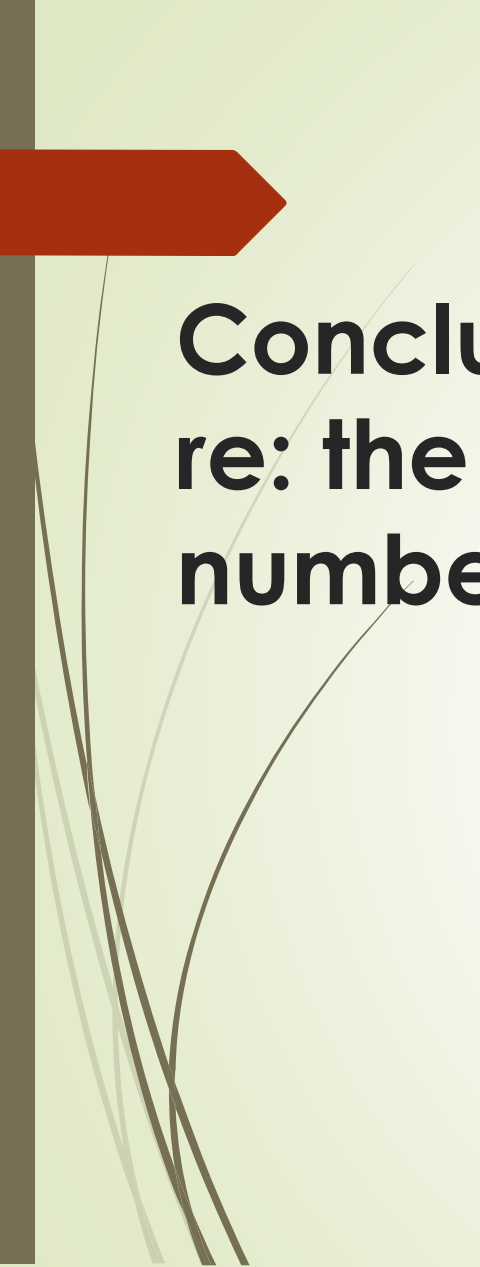
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Conclusions re: the numbers

- Adults: Significant comorbidity
- Pediatrics: Even more significant comorbidity
- All: The statistics are screwed up.



Financial impact of headaches

- \$13 billion per year in the U.S.
 - Cost of medical care
 - Productivity loss
 - A lot of workup for headaches include unnecessary tests—consider ADHD for free.
 - A lot of medication for headaches won't work if there is constant triggering from ADHD—treat the ADHD, and you treat the headaches.



How do you know what to treat first??



- INDIVIDUAL
- What predates what is a guideline
 - If long history of ADHD, then develops headaches, and ADHD undertreated, consider treating the ADHD first
 - If long history of headaches, then develops ADHD types of symptoms, consider the role of the headaches



How do you know what to treat first??



- What's been tried before:
 - If headache approaches haven't worked, try ADHD
 - If ADHD approaches haven't worked, try headache management



Cognitive behavioral approaches that might help both



- Attention to sleep
- Attention to food
- Schedules (migraines often triggered by change in schedule)
- “Soldier On”/Grit/Learn how to deal with failures

Whether you are dealing with ADHD...



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Here's a list of 10
things you can
do to manage
your ADHD...



He lost me at "list."

ADHD
CONFESSIONS

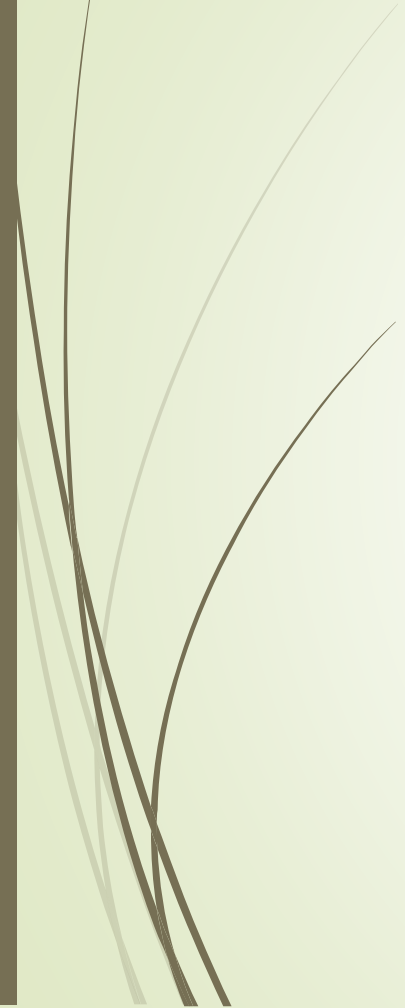
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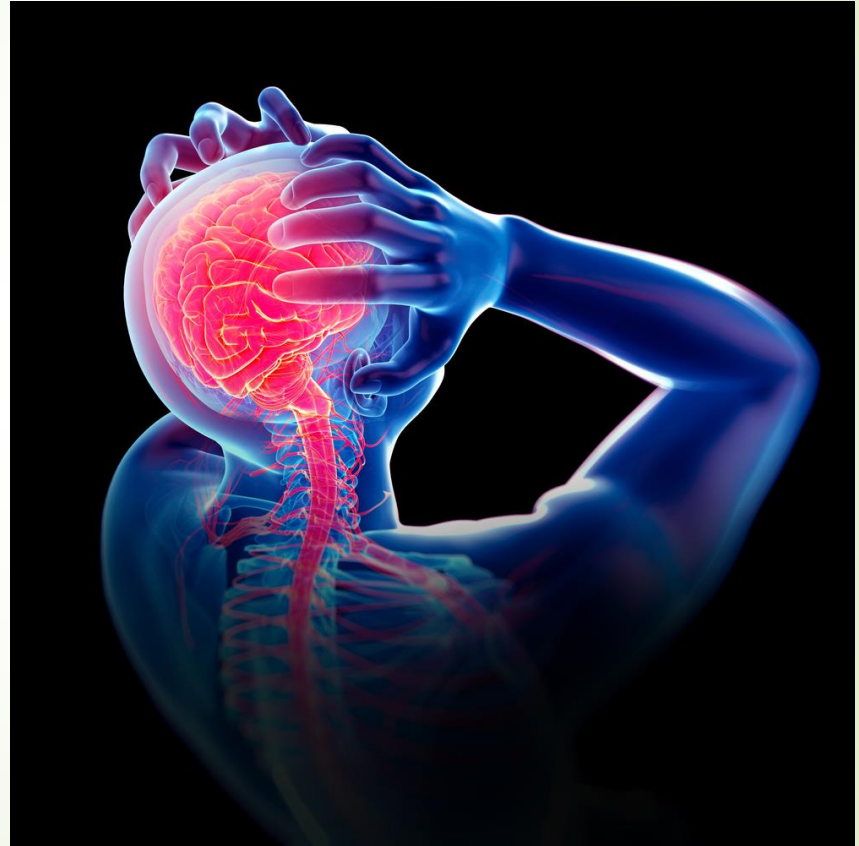
I do not have ducks.

Or a row.

I have squirrels,

and they're
everywhere.

Whether you are dealing with headaches...



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And any other complicating factor like mood issues...



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Or sleep issues...



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And don't forget medication side effects...



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In conclusion, the issues may affect the same person.



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- **Wednesday, June 1, at 1 pm ET**

When Dyslexia and ADHD Overlap: Symptoms, Misconceptions, and Interventions,
with Cheryl Chase, Ph.D.

<https://www.additudemag.com/webinar/dyslexia-adhd-overlap-symptoms-interventions/>

- **Tuesday, June 7, at 1 pm ET**

The Biology of ADHD and Medication Options for Treatment,
with Joseph Biederman, M.D.

<https://www.additudemag.com/webinar/adhd-medication-options-brain-biology/>

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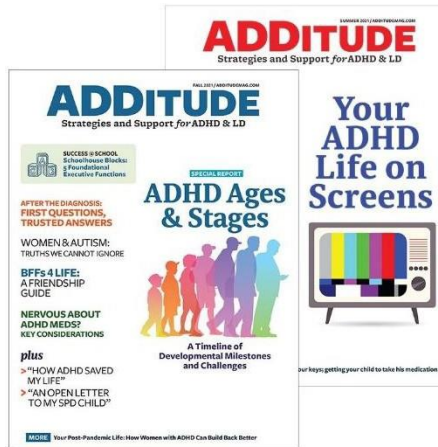
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August 31
ADHD Ages & Stages Part 1: Common Challenges and Practical Strategies for Children with ADHD
Tuesday, August 31, 2021 at 1pm Eastern Time
Find it in your time zone »
with **Meg Leahy, MS, NCC, BCC**
Young children work to develop a range of behavioral, academic, social, and emotional skills. ADHD touches all of these milestones and complicates the picture for parents, children, and educators alike. This webinar examines the unique challenges of ADHD during childhood and surveys research-based strategies, resources, and treatments.

Register now to reserve your spot

September 9
Help for College Students with ADHD: A Parent's Guide to Improving Outcomes
Thursday, September 9, 2021 at 1pm Eastern Time
Find it in your time zone »
with **Kevin Antshel, Ph.D.**
Many adolescents face challenges transitioning from high school to college, but the abrupt loss of parental support and increased demands for self-management can be devastating for young adults with ADHD. Learn how to prepare your teen with ADHD during high school, and how to access services and accommodations on campus.

Register now to reserve your spot