



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/237620/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Powell, L. (2026) The neurodivergent lens: surviving and thriving in academia as an AuDHD woman. *Autism in Adulthood*. ISSN: 2573-9581

<https://doi.org/10.1177/25739581261421101>

© 2026 The Authors. Except as otherwise noted, this author-accepted version of a journal article published in *Autism in Adulthood* is made available via the University of Sheffield Research Publications and Copyright Policy under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

The Neurodivergent Lens: Surviving and Thriving in Academia as an AuDHD Woman

I didn't grow up with a diagnosis. I grew up with notebooks full of lists, skin-prickling dread of ringing phones, and the creeping sense that I was out of step with the world. At school, I was the quiet one. Not the gifted child or the rebel—just the girl who stared out of windows and lost herself in stories while teachers mistook my drifting for daydreaming. I learned early that fitting in meant disappearing.

It wasn't until decades later, in a cramped NHS consulting room with humming strip lights, that a psychologist looked at me with quiet certainty and named the thing I'd always felt: ADHD. Then, a second lightbulb—autism. My life, a puzzle I'd spent years trying to solve, began to make sense.

Academia had already become my world by then. I'd built a career on research, teaching, and the fierce joy of deep thinking. But the path wasn't smooth—it was jagged, bewildering, and often lonely. In meetings, my mind drifted halfway through the second agenda item. Colleagues assigned tasks mid-conversation, and by the time I'd nodded and walked away, the words had already dissolved like sugar in tea. I didn't keep a notebook in my pocket, but I should have done. I carried one only if I thought I might bump into someone who'd give me something to do through fear of forgetting.

I thought everyone felt this exhausted. That everyone came home after a day of teaching, vibrating with unspoken tension, then lay under a weighted blanket, trying to breathe through the crash. I didn't yet understand sensory overload—only that the sound of multiple people talking in a seminar room made my teeth ache, made me feel sick, and cause a physically unpleasant sensation in my head.

For years, I wore a mask. A professional smile. A tidy office. Polite nods in corridors. I taught with energy and rigour, clock-watched until home time, smiled through staff meetings—and quietly unravelled when I got home. I cried in university toilets, pretended I had “just a headache,” and silently berated myself for struggling with things that others seemed to handle effortlessly: spontaneous conversation, tight deadlines, the chaos of an unstructured day.

Imposter syndrome didn't knock. It moved in, unpacked its bags, and repainted the walls.

I told myself to try harder. I built elaborate systems—colour-coded calendars, to-do lists that curled like vines across my desk. But nothing quelled the inner chaos. One day I hyperfocused for fourteen hours without blinking; the next, I couldn't write a single email without spiralling into overwhelm. It was like living with two brains pulling in opposite directions—one demanded speed, novelty, stimulation. The other begged for silence, precision, and control.

This internal tug-of-war wore me down. My ADHD brain leapt into action, grabbed opportunities, said yes to every new project. My autistic brain begged for space, predictability, time to process. The resulting burnout felt like walking through fog with weights strapped to my limbs. I wasn't lazy. I was fried.

Still, I found moments of belonging. Research became a lifeline—a place where my intense focus and obsession with detail became assets rather than quirks. I disappeared into the depths of a literature review for hours, following threads like a detective in a labyrinth. I found patterns where others saw noise. I asked questions others didn't think to ask. And slowly, I realised that my difference wasn't a deficit. It was my edge.

The diagnosis didn't erase the struggle, but it gave it a name, an identity. It gave me language. And in language, I found power.

I began to write differently. I stopped hiding the "I" in my papers. I wove lived experience into research design. I invited autistic and ADHD young people to co-create knowledge with me. Their words cracked open old narratives, replaced deficit with dignity, pathology with pride, and diagnosis with identity. I was no longer just researching neurodivergence—I was living it, naming it, and making it visible in a system that often preferred silence.

The academic world still tugged at the edges of my energy. Emailing drained me. Networking events left me speechless, not from lack of interest but from cognitive overload. I still overthought how to start an email: "Hope you're well" or "Just following up" or "Apologies for the delay"? I knew the rules, but they never felt intuitive. Politeness, for me, was choreography that chipped away at my energy levels every day.

These were the micro-struggles of being neurodivergent in a world built for neurotypicals. The invisible labour of remembering scripts, modulating tone, managing sensory input—it all added up. And yet, we rarely counted it. We talked about workload in hours, not in energy. We measured outputs, not the cost of producing them.

Academia, at its worst, felt like a game I was never taught the rules to. But at its best, it was a space where thinking differently was asset. I advocated for flexible work arrangements, blocked out recovery time, chose collaboration over competition. I found colleagues who "get it"—those rare gems who listened without trying to fix, who respected my rhythm, who didn't make me feel like a problem to solve.

I also became a mentor. Not just in the formal sense, but in the corridor conversations where an early-career researcher or a student whispered, "I think I might be autistic," and I get to say, "Me too. You're not broken. Let's talk." These moments mattered. They were antidotes to isolation.

And yet, the tension remained. I was (still am) a neurodivergent academic in a system that rewarded speed over depth, visibility over authenticity, polish over truth. I fought the urge to overcompensate—to say yes too often, to prove my worth in ways that others weren't expected to. The precarity of academic contracts, the pressure to publish, the performative nature of success—it all amplified the internal noise.

But I learned to listen to my body. To notice the signs of looming burnout. To stop before I fell. I walked my dogs in the morning light, soaked in quiet woods, carved out space to just be. I made time for sensory decompression—a dark room, silence, deep breathing. I stopped apologising for needing what I need.

Now I embrace what I call the 3C Framework:

Clarity—designing my week with intention, setting clear start and stop points.

Connection—surrounding myself with colleagues who understand that accessibility isn't an optional extra.

Compassion—not just for others, but for myself. Especially when I fall short of perfection.

The pandemic, paradoxically, brings relief. Remote working strips away many social and sensory stressors. I have control over my space, my schedule, my sensory input. For the first time in years, I can breathe. I work without the low-level panic of having to mask all day. It teaches me what true accessibility can look like—and how far we still are from it.

As a late-identified woman, I often reflect on what could have been. How many hours I lost to shame, confusion, trying to “be normal.” But I also see the strength in that journey. Those of us who are missed, misdiagnosed, or misunderstood—we carry something vital. We bring lived insight, critical reflection, and fierce determination to make things better for the next generation.

Our voices matter—not just in research about neurodivergence, but in the fabric of academia itself. We know the cost of pretending. We know the power of truth-telling. We understand that inclusion isn't about tolerating difference—it's about redesigning systems so that all bodies, all brains, can thrive.

There's still work to do. Diagnostic pathways remain narrow and exclusionary. Many people—especially women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals—are left out. The lens of neurodivergence is still shaped by outdated norms. Self-identification is often dismissed, despite being the most accessible route for many. We need to widen the frame. We need to do better.

But I remain hopeful. Change is coming—slowly, stubbornly, steadily. And I'm committed to being part of it.

This is not a story of overcoming. It's a story of becoming.