

## Neurodivergent Black Women

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### Abstract

*It is a fact that Black women in America are often handed the short end of the stick, especially when it comes to being treated properly for medical needs. Black women already have a unique intersection when it comes to their race and gender, both being a part of marginalized communities. In this article, I will take a deeper dive into the underdiagnosis of Black women with Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia. Drawing on relevant research and incorporating voices of lived experiences from neurodivergent Black women, I will explain the factors that contribute to this ongoing problem, shining a light on different forms of discrimination. It would be easy to point fingers at who solely to hold responsible for the consistent trend of underdiagnoses for neurodivergent Black women. However, this is a systematic problem that needs to be looked at deeper to find out why this disheartening trend is so continuous and prevalent in society today. Something else that directly affects Black women are cultural issues. For instance, in many communities of color, it is taboo to talk about neurodivergence or to seek medical attention and/or diagnosis for neurocognitive issues. I plan to focus on some possible solutions to this very massive problem and how society as a collective can lend a helping hand to make receiving medical care a less horrifying or overwhelming experience for Black women.*

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### Introduction

Black women die three to four more times than white women during pregnancy (Howell, 2018). This statistic was put here intentionally to catch your attention and show just how much more likely Black women die at the hands of health care professionals. Now stop and ask yourself why is that? And are you in any position to help start a conversation around change and if you are why haven't you done it yet? The medical system continues to fail neurodivergent black

women. Although as a society we are supposed to be forward progressing racism, discrimination, sexism, and cultural issues still exist. The impacts of racism and sexism in health care can be seen in Black infant maternal mortality rates (Amato-Bailey, 2022) and the fact that Black women have a harder time accessing pain management and cardiovascular health care (Exchange, 2019). The intersection of medical racism and sexism can also be seen in the way neurodivergent Black women often go a long

time without being diagnosed or misdiagnosed because their symptoms are mischaracterized due to race and gender (Doyle, 2020).

Black women already meet in the middle of a unique intersection, first being black and a woman at the same time. Being at a crossroads of two marginalized identities is difficult especially when both communities face a form of discrimination. This is what is called intersectionality a phrase coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw a civil rights advocate in 1989 to explain the study of overlapping and/or intersections of social identities related to systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Columbia Law, 2017). This article will focus on neurodivergent Black women with ADHD, Dyslexia, and Autism and explore why this specific group is consistently under and misdiagnosed. Neurodivergent describes those whose brain differences affect how their brain works. This word was chosen intentionally because no one should feel like they are disabled or less than because of their differences. ADHD, Dyslexia, and Autism are all forms of neurodivergence.

### **ADHD**

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. According to John Hopkins (n.d) medicine the top three symptoms for having ADHD are inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. This disorder usually starts in childhood and persists throughout adulthood. Inattention is the lack of attention and difficulty to listen to others. Impulsivity is the quality of being easily swayed by emotional or involuntary urges or by momentary desires, without weighing them rationally. Hyperactivity is the condition of being hyperactive (John Hopkins Medicine, n.d.).

However, Black women don't have the luxury of knowing they have ADHD until they can advocate for themselves much later

down the line or their child is diagnosed, and they realize they had the same symptoms in themselves (Clerkley, 2022). Within Black communities, underdiagnosis continues to happen due to Black women not knowing about ADHD as a possible neurodivergent condition accompanied with inconsistent information (Moody, 2016). Another factor is the lack of research of ADHD in Black women therefore they face challenges getting properly diagnosed. Often the symptoms found in Black women present more so as personality traits such as being spacey, a daydreamer, forgetful, or chatty. Later when reaching out for medical advice, women with these symptoms are misdiagnosed with anxiety or depression that often is ADHD disguised (Clerkley, 2022).

### **Dyslexia**

Dyslexia is a form of neurodivergence which is "a result of individual differences in areas of the brain that process language" (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Dyslexia doesn't discriminate among gender, culture, race, or geographic location; however, it does go under identified in some communities and racial groups. One of the main reasons that dyslexia is underdiagnosed especially in black communities and women is public schools. Schools are often one of the first places where Dyslexia affects performance and behavior. This can look like not wanting to participate in activities such as "reading out loud, summarizing stories, and math" (Mayo Clinic, 2022). When public schools are understaffed and underfunded there aren't enough resources to identify Dyslexic students and get them the help they need (Dyslexia, 2021). Author Onyinye Udokporo is a Black woman who was lucky enough to receive a Dyslexia diagnosis at age eleven. Even with having an early diagnosis for Dyslexia the author still states "Diagnosis is a privilege that so many can not access or afford " (Udokporo, 2022).

**Autism**

Autism is a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interest, and repetitive behavior (CDC, 2022). There is a spectrum for autism because the symptoms can vary depending on the person (Autism Disorder, n.d.). This influences who does or doesn't receive a diagnosis. Caucasians are thirty percent more likely to get an autism diagnosis than African Americans (Najee'ullah, 2020). Black women specifically have a difficulty self-identifying traits of Autism. For example, author Fordingham Brown states in an article that she reflects on her struggles early onset indicators of Autism where the symptom she displayed went against the more normalized repetitive behaviors. She eventually ended up adapting to therefore she would no longer be scolded for the way she interacted in her environment. (Brown, 2021). When medical professionals go to diagnose Black women, they usually go by the average stereotypes that are often used to diagnose autism however because gender and race play a part in how black women are diagnosed. Black women often are not allowed to be vulnerable or show emotion, or, quickly, the first negative connotation that comes to mind because of how society has shaped minds to think about Black people especially Black women.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, one overlapping theme between the three forms of Neurodivergences within Black women is the lack of diagnosis. With low amounts of data to draw relevant conclusions about the issue at hand, it is nearly impossible to validate the experiences of these women when they aren't being

listened to. On a systematic level, we need to connect the marginalized communities with culturally competent resources. Those resources must come from a medical professional that also understands that intersectionality plays a role in health care. Moreso on the interpersonal level, to start a conversation about medical racism, disparities in health care, and systematic sexism, stop and ask yourself the role you have played in these things directly or indirectly? Speaking up on these topics destigmatizes the conversations around Black women reaching out for help and not being afraid to self-advocate. We must all do our part to make sure neurodivergent Black women get the medical attention and assistance they need starting in adolescence, not just as adults. That way a generation of Black women coming up can have the tools needed so they can effectively navigate through life without feeling weird, different, or left out or like they must work harder to fit in.

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