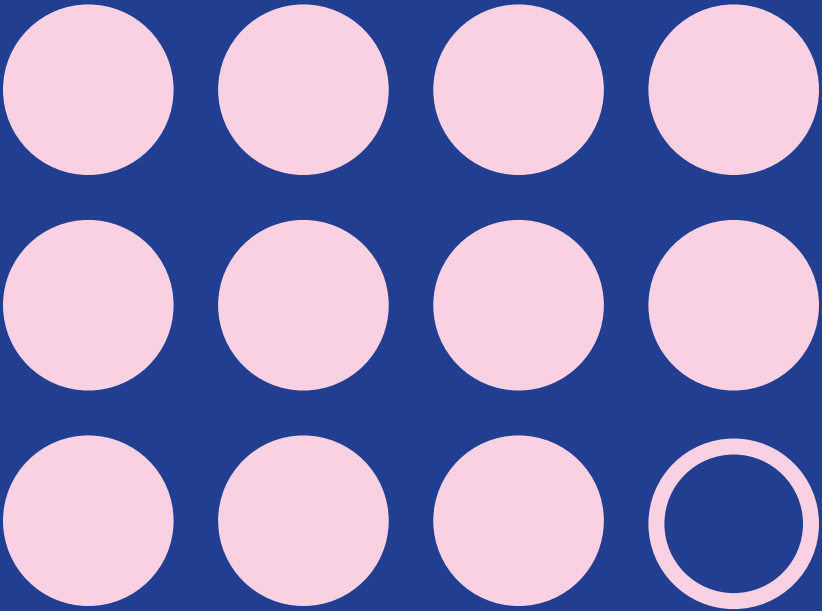


THRIVE presents

Chronically Misunderstood



This is Me

Foreword

In a world that often overlooks the extraordinary within the ordinary, THRIVE, Golin's Employee Resource Group for individuals who identify as disabled, stands as a beacon of resilience, courage, and the indomitable human spirit. This collection is not just a compilation of our employees' experiences, but a testament to the strength and determination that lies within each of us.

As you turn these pages, you will encounter tales of perseverance, innovation, and triumph. Each narrative is a reminder that disability is not a limitation but a unique perspective that enriches our world. THRIVE invites you to see beyond the surface, to understand the depth of human potential, and to join in the celebration of diversity and inclusion.

Our hope is that these stories inspire you to embrace the beauty of differences and to champion a world where everyone has the opportunity to THRIVE.

To those who bravely documented and submitted your stories that helped bring this book to life: thank you. Your courage begets more courage, and putting your experience into words is nothing short of courageous – for that we are grateful.

Lastly, a very special thank you to all the allies and behind-the-scenes supporters that made this book a reality, especially Golin's Global DEI team, and Gisele Gosset and Ashley Wohl for designing this book.

We hope you enjoy!

Co-Chairs THRIVE

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Director, Healthcare

Monica Pohl
Manager, Consumer

Operational Lead THRIVE

Nina Bhagwat
Global Group Executive
Director, DEI

Executive Sponsors

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Natasha O'Dell Archer
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Background

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

THRIVE is Golin's newest global Employee Resource Group, established in May 2023, for employees who identify as medically- or self-diagnosed Disabled. We celebrate the richly diverse and intersectional identities within our community. Everyone is welcome across the visible and invisible disability spectrum (including, but not limited to) – physical, mental, emotional, sensory, intellectual, learning, behavioral, developmental, and neurodivergent. Our name is rooted in our members' desire to not just survive but THRIVE in the workplace. Our mission is to promote acceptance, create an inclusive safe space, destigmatize disability, educate, develop resources, advocate, and empower our members to unapologetically bring their whole authentic selves to work.

Nothing About Us Without Us!

THRIVE'S INAUGURAL HERITAGE EVENT

We hit the ground running with our Heritage event in December 2023 called “Chronically Misunderstood – This is Me”. Aligned to the strategic aims outlined in our Mission Statement, we used the session to amplify voices from our community through the readings of nine different personal reflections from individuals in our group on their lived experiences with their disability. While some were read by the authors themselves, others were read by allies of the group to both respect anonymity of writers when requested, and to emphasize the support our group has from the broader Golin network. These letters were all unique and personalised accounts from Goliners navigating the workplace with a disability. We wanted to use the event to validate the experience of our network. We did this by harnessing the power of storytelling to educate and raise awareness about the realities of working with a disability.

ACCESSIBLE DESIGN

This book is set in Peridot PE, a typeface designed by Foundry5. It is a sans serif with little stroke variation, making it more legible particularly for those with low vision. As opposed to serif fonts, sans serifs lack decorative elements. Their simpler design helps ease the reading process.

Headlines and pull quotes are set in Roca, a typeface designed by Elena Genova. It is a heavier serif, also with little stroke variation. Heavier weights of serifs set at a larger size enhance their readability.

Colors are chosen to meet level AAA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the highest standard of color contrast compliance. Having high contrast between text and background eases both eye and cognitive strain. This also ensures that no matter how the viewer's brain processes colors, all elements will still be readable for everyone.

Leading is set at 1.5 times the size of the text in accordance with accessible design best practices. Ample white space between paragraphs and margins makes for an easier reading experience.

At the bottom of each page, there is a series of twelve circles. These circles serve as a navigation tool, allowing easy access to any of the twelve stories. Each circle corresponds with its respective story — clicking the first circle brings you to the first story, the second circle to the second story, and so on. The highlighted circle indicates the story currently being read. We hope these stories inspire you the way they inspired us.

THRIVE

presents

**Chronically
Misunderstood:
This is Me**



Unravelling the threads of difference

Ever since I can remember, I've felt like an outsider. As a child, I was more drawn to the solitary worlds of video games and television ads than to playground chatter. People often labelled me 'weird,' a badge I wore with a mix of pride and confusion. My parents, loving yet perplexed, witnessed my unique path. It wasn't until I began speaking at five that they first whispered concerns, but like a fleeting shadow, these worries passed.

School was a patchwork of passions and indifference for me. I excelled in subjects that captured my imagination, while others barely scraped by. My parents, baffled and concerned, reiterated the mantra of academic excellence as the key to success. This pressure, a constant hum in my life, was overwhelming, especially given my selective interests.

Navigating through the education system felt like wandering through a maze with no exit. The relevance

of what I learned seemed minimal, and I yearned for a system that recognized and nurtured individual talents and passions.

The question of 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' echoed hollowly, failing to recognize that we, as children, were already whole beings.

Entering the workforce, I felt like an actor in an ill-fitting role.

Entering the workforce, I felt like an actor in an ill-fitting role. Despite achieving notable successes, a gnawing sense of inadequacy persisted. The invisible hurdles of my condition, unrecognized and unnamed, shadowed my every step, leaving me feeling 'not good enough,' a sentiment echoed by frustrated family and managers.

The revelation came with a diagnosis: ADD. Suddenly, the pieces of my life's puzzle clicked into place. This wasn't about inadequacy; it was about surmounting invisible barriers with untold resilience. Relief washed over me, tinged with sadness for what might have been had I known sooner.

But in this knowledge lies power – the power to move forward, to embrace our resilience.

We, the members of THRIVE, are a testament to strength and perseverance. Knocked down, we rise; faced with challenges, we adapt. In our stories lie courage and unyielding spirit. I am proud to be among you, proud to share in this journey of not just surviving, but thriving, in a world that often fails to understand our unique strengths.

GOLIN EMPLOYEE, DUBAI

Loom of resilience

Growing up at the intersectionality of being a minority and coming from a culture where mental health wasn't recognized as a "thing", they were just personality quirks. As I reflect on my journey here at Golin, I feel compelled to share the chapters of my life that have woven into the fabric of my work experiences. Each thread, whether it be anxiety, depression, autism, ADHD, the companionship of a service dog, the shadows of burnout, or the resilience in the face of autoimmune challenges, contributes to the unique mosaic that defines my professional narrative.

Autism and ADHD, while coloring my world with their unique shades, have also bestowed upon me distinctive strengths. The acute attention to detail and innovative thinking that come with these neurodivergent companions have often led to creative problem-solving and a fresh perspective in our projects. A significant part of my journey includes the companionship of a service dog. Denali is not merely a loyal companion but a vital part of my support system. Her presence not only enhances my daily life but also plays a crucial role in fostering a calm and focused work environment.

However, like any compelling story, my narrative also includes the shadows of burnout. Balancing the demands of a dynamic work environment with the responsibilities of health and neurodivergent needs can be challenging. It's during these times that understanding and support from colleagues and management become the guiding light, helping me navigate the intricate labyrinth of burnout. If I'm working to the point of exhaustion, then I'm doing a great job. If I need a break, I'm labelled as lazy or careless.

The ebb and flow of these emotions, at times, add a layer of complexity to the daily rhythm.

In addition to these challenges, anxiety and depression are integral aspects of my journey. The ebb and flow of these emotions, at times, add a layer of complexity to the daily rhythm. When the weight of these struggles becomes more pronounced, this reinforces the importance of a compassionate workplace culture.

Living with an autoimmune condition adds another layer to this tapestry. Each day requires a delicate dance between self-care and professional obligations.

In sharing these aspects of my journey, my intention is not only to provide insight into my world but also to contribute to a workplace culture that embraces diversity and supports the individual narratives that shape our collective story. I believe that by fostering an environment of empathy and understanding, we can create a space where every team member feels valued and empowered. Thank you for taking the time to walk alongside me through these chapters.

GOLIN MANAGER, DALLAS

I am exhausted

I am exhausted

Some days fill me with dread,

The constant worry if I am doing enough,

For a complicated mind, it can be tough

I have lots of little worries,

Like will they accept my difficulties?

Is my eye contact ok?

Sometimes I do not know the right thing to say.

I am constantly on edge, something always
feels wrong,

My days always feel very long

The slightest change in someone's tone can
make me spiral

I protect myself by wearing a mask,

Which is a very tiring task

Changes to my routine bring anxiety,

I like to do things on my own, quietly

Loud noises make me jump,

Which can cause my heart to thump

Large groups of people can be difficult to manage,

It is hard not to see my difficulties as baggage.

Social events are extremely hard,

All of my traits I would happily discard

Busy days bring a certain kind of fear,

As I know, a meltdown is near

My body feels foreign, my head is pounding

I try to calm myself down by grounding

You see this is a regular occurrence,

One that will not and cannot stop

My words will not do justice to how difficult this
can be,

How very hard it is to be someone like me.

VIRGO EMPLOYEE, UK

Meet me halfway

It was the start of a new year, I was a recent college graduate, and I had just landed my first big-girl job. I couldn't have been more proud. It was a big deal for me, transitioning from a brooding, anxious, and aimless young adult who couldn't even imagine her future, to a less existentially angsty, more guided, and self-sufficient one who could finally manage living on her own and being completely financially independent. I had finally made it.

The first few months were wonderful. I had colleagues whom I got along with and a boss who cared for us both professionally and personally. I felt right at home. That was until some teammates started ending their leases or getting eviction notices from our landlords, so to speak. Soon, half of the entire organization had left, and I along with my remaining colleagues found ourselves reeling from the change and uncertainty. If you're someone who has executive functioning difficulties, you can probably relate to the anxious "I'm lost" feeling that the upheaval of an established routine can cause. It feels like the rug has been pulled out from beneath you, and you find that beneath that rug is a pit of quicksand that keeps threatening to suck you in.

When the routine that is crucial to the daily functioning of so many people with ADHD and similar disabilities was ripped from me, I tried to create my own. I tried speaking up for myself and loudly proclaiming the needs of me and my teammates. I continued to ask my many “dumb” questions, to the annoyance of our remaining leaders. These leaders would tell me that I was overcomplicating things, not understanding that my brain interprets information differently and I need to ask questions to execute tasks well.

I began exercising my off-camera privileges during internal meetings when I was feeling anxious or stressed or just needed to focus, even though my new boss would call me selfish for doing so while my other colleagues had their cameras on. I would ask our leaders for greater support, transparency, and clearer guidance while my team struggled with our work, and even gave them clear actionable ways that they could provide said support, but in return they called us “spoiled”, saying we needed to learn to “employ common sense”, and claimed we required too much “hand-holding”.

Ultimately, I quit the job because our leaders majorly sucked! They didn’t care about my needs or requested

accommodations. They revelled in making me feel stupid (and if you have ADHD, you already know how prevalent that feeling can be in us, even without others adding their two cents). They refused to create space for me or allow me to work in the best way I knew how.

They expected me to function exactly as they did and if I didn’t, I was burdening them.

They expected me to function exactly as they did and if I didn’t, I was burdening them. They didn’t see that my questions and my requests were all made because I cared about my role and the purpose of the work and wanted to do a good job. Instead, they saw it as me pestering them for things they had never intended to provide. Every day felt like I either needed to mask myself or go to war with our leaders, as no in-between was ever presented. Exhausted, I waved my white flag of surrender and ended the war by exiting the organization.

MANAGER, GLOBAL HR

Your guide to living and working with ADHD – a letter to my younger self

Dear younger self,

If this letter reaches you during its intended time period (we haven't quite figured out time travel in 2023), you are 22 years old and eagerly waiting to learn if you'll get hired full-time from your PR internship. Spoiler alert, you do. That's not why I'm sending this letter.

Let's cut to the chase. You have ADHD. Your brain sucks at producing dopamine, which is the neurotransmitter responsible for regulating minor things, like emotions, motivation and rewards. Fun, right?

It's why you've felt tired every day of your life since you were about eleven. Your brain is working overtime to try and keep up with a neurotypical world.

Had I not sent this letter, you would have been without this knowledge for another decade. This is because ADHD in women is massively misunderstood, even amongst healthcare professionals. Adult women often make it to their early 40s before they get a diagnosis.

Living undiagnosed had a profound impact on my self-esteem. I felt lazy, crazy, dumb, and overemotional. I wished for 'a different brain'. I was terrified of being exposed for the fraud I felt I was, and often joked that I'd benefit from a lobotomy.

In reality, my brain – ahem, our brain – is just different.

I don't want you to spend the next decade of your life feeling defective.

I don't want you to spend the next decade of your life feeling defective. So, at the risk of altering your timeline, I've compiled a brief guide to living and working with ADHD.

- 1. Do You:** Having a different brain means you need to do and process things, well, differently. Don't be afraid to put your foot down and insist on working in a way that works for you.
- 2. Take a Damn Break:** You know those moments when you're 'in the zone'? That's called hyperfocus. When you hyperfocus, it may feel intoxicating to power through a 12+ hour day, but you will pay for it with burnout the rest of the week. Step away from the computer. Atta girl.
- 3. Control What You Can Control:** You're passionate about your career, but it also means you get stressed, upset or over-invested in the little things. This isn't surprising. Most people don't know emotional dysregulation is a principal ADHD symptom. As much as it pains me to say it, you can't control everything. But, with tools like talk therapy and medication, you can better control how these things affect you.
- 4. Be Kind to Yourself:** Even with medication, therapy and coaching, you will have off-days. Don't punish yourself by overworking. Tomorrow will always be another day.

- 5. Unmask:** Trying to be someone you're not is exhausting, but you'll feel a pressure to talk, think and work in certain ways early in your career. It's only when you let this pressure go that you achieve your full potential. Shed the mask. Speak up in meetings. Let the best parts of yourself – your creativity, critical thinking, resourcefulness, and quirky personality – shine.

I'd love to tell you life with ADHD gets easy, but I haven't quite made it there, at least not yet. But I can say you'll accomplish more than you ever thought possible.

You will be promoted, much more than once. People will fight to have you on their teams. When you talk – as long winded as you may be – your colleagues will listen. You will be a leader.

And despite all the struggles, mistakes and setbacks, I'm pleased to say you will get through all your toughest days. In fact, you won't just survive. You'll thrive.

Yours Truly,
Your 32-Year-Old Self

FORMER GOLIN EMPLOYEE

Befriending my brain: Navigating work with a late ADHD diagnosis

When I thought about contributing a piece about what it's like living and working with ADHD, I agonized over whether to write it; whether to do it anonymously or to disclose my disability; what to write, exactly; and how long it should be. Eventually, I decided to not only write it but to attach my name. In the spirit of THRIVE's mission statement, I want to celebrate the diverse identities within our community, including mine. I want to make sure that we and others who have yet to live out loud with their disabilities are able to not just survive but thrive in the workplace.

And then, as I sat down to write, I spotted in the call for submissions a word count guideline that was much shorter than what I'd imagined writing. In true ADHD fashion, not only did I ruminate over the piece to the point of exhaustion, not only did I dread writing it because I find it difficult to break up tasks into small

steps, therefore procrastinated on starting, but I also thought it would take me eons to write until I actually... read the directions. Cue the self-aware laughter.

But the self-awareness I have now about how my brain is, simply, built differently than most is valuable. In school, I stressed myself out so much to get the best grades possible in my advanced and AP classes. I spent hours on homework every night and often couldn't get to bed when I was supposed to – my brain never wanted to turn off – so I didn't get enough sleep. I pulled my first all-nighter in 11th grade to write a paper I'd put off until the eleventh hour. But no one in my life thought this was particularly worrisome. I was just a smart, driven student with more ambition than discipline. I'd figure out the time management thing eventually. I'd get better at exercising my willpower to stay on task with age and experience. Right?

I held so much shame – why am I like this?

That didn't happen, and I felt worse about it as time went on. I held so much shame – why am I like this? How can I be so smart in some ways and so stupid in others?

Why can't I just focus on what needs to get done?
Why can't I get it together? These feelings followed me at work and elsewhere. They were always there, speaking poison in my ear.

Even after years of suspecting, I didn't get my ADHD diagnosis until I was 37.

I'm still learning about my neurodivergent brain and how it interacts with the world around me – a world that it wasn't designed for.

I'm still learning about my neurodivergent brain and how it interacts with the world around me – a world that it wasn't designed for. It's why I still struggle with going to bed and waking up early. It's why you might notice I'm still online long after 6pm most days and working into the night – it takes me longer to get my work done for a whole host of reasons, plus by the time evening rolls around I've tuckered out my hyperactive brain so much that it may be the only time I can truly focus. It's why I don't remember the important thing our client said in the meeting, even though I thought

I was paying attention. It's why I can't hold as many details in my head about a project at any given time, even when you think I should be able to answer a simple question about it. It's why I told you I could get something done in an unrealistic timeline – though it sounded realistic in the moment – then either ask for more time as the deadline approaches or work until midnight the night before it's due.

I'm also still unlearning the guilt, the negative self-talk, and the impossible expectations for myself that I'd never dream of holding others to. I've made a lot of progress, though, and it's helped to realize that my ADHD gives me some unique advantages, too – it's why I can be quick with a joke, insight, or observation. My brain's supercharged pattern recognition is to thank for that – it's also why I'm a great proofer and copy editor. It's why I'm sensitive, empathetic, and always willing to lend an ear. It's why I can pick information or rationale from out of nowhere to support a claim or a direction to go in. It's why I'm really good at research. It's why I can easily connect the dots and see the big picture. It's why I'm resilient. It's why I'm calm, cool, and collected in a crisis.

As I made the decision to contribute, it occurred to me that by sharing, I could light the way for someone

else who sees themselves in it. If I didn't sign my name, I wouldn't be living according to my personal values of transparency, vulnerability, and authenticity. And I'm not sure if you know this but being forced to act out of alignment with your values is really, really hard for neurodivergent people to do!

I hope reading this helps – whether it's to know me better, know yourself better, or know better what we in THRIVE handle every day.

SVP GOLIN HEALTHCARE, NYC

Not my superpower

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is not my superpower. There, I said it.

My disorder is not inscribed in comic sans, with zingy lightning bolts and bulging 'BOOM' speech bubbles. It can be a deep darkness flooded with adrenaline, cortisol, panic and pain.

I could leave it there and say, "Thanks for coming to my TED Talk" – a contender for the most miserable? Maybe. But it's not all doom and gloom. Let me explain.

OCD, plus the tribulations it has presented me with, has given me a depth I didn't want – but now that I have it, I might as well use it for good.

OCD, plus the tribulations it has presented me with, has given me a depth I didn't want – but now that I have it, I might as well use it for good.

When you live between the light and dark, that's when the grey appears – OCD's arch nemesis in its quest for certainty. My superpower is seeking beauty, or at least calm, in the grey areas despite my mind's insistence of rigidity.

Depth of difficulty creates space; even the deepest of ravines are, by form, inverted peaks. And while the disorder itself doesn't give me super-human strength or the skill to leap tall obstacles in a single bound, I have come to understand that my learned ability to claw through it certainly does.

DIRECTOR GOLIN, APAC

Gotta catch them all

I collect symptoms like Pokémon. As a seasoned trainer in invisible chronic illness, I've become quite skilled at catching my symptoms in their various forms. Here are my 2023 stats:

- In January, I stumbled upon an Intolerable Ice-Pick Pain, a second generation Pokemon that has since evolved into fourth generation Insomnia
- In May, I caught Heart Palpitations (first generation) that I've evolved into Sporadic Fainting Episodes (second generation, rare)
- I've tried at least 20 different medications and supplements with 40 different side effects, and mastered the art of maxing out my Health Savings Account
- In October, I hit a record 35-day Migraine streak
- This year alone, I've seen a total of 9 different specialists who have 9 different ways of asking "Are you sure you're drinking enough water?"

Sometimes I can anticipate my symptoms (Migraine, for instance, typically appears in the afternoon, after accidentally drinking caffeinated tea), and sometimes I can't (Light-headedness for example, makes a rude habit of coming when I least expect it—during a meeting, on my first day of work, on a date, etc.). And although my stats are impressive, I didn't develop the skill for catching these symptoms on my own. As any humble trainer, I must give credit to one of the environment's cruellest toxins for getting me into the chronic illness business: black mold.

Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS) is the full name of my condition. It's a progressive, multi-system, multi-symptom illness characterized by extended exposure to biotoxins and water damaged buildings. For most, their normal immune response can flush out biotoxins with ease – but I'm special.

...leaving me with an amalgamation of ambiguous, evolving symptoms that puzzled every doctor I went to.

Black Mold first came to me when I was 21 and hasn't left my side since. As my unique genetic make-up prophesied, one day, after living in a moldy house for three years, a switch flipped, and my body suddenly forgot how to identify and eliminate the smallest of toxic spores. So, like any toxic thing, these spores made a home in my body's most precious systems and started wreaking havoc, causing inflammation everywhere – my brain, my muscles, my lungs, my gut, my thyroid, my heart – leaving me with an amalgamation of ambiguous, evolving symptoms that puzzled every doctor I went to.

I was eventually saved by a savvy functional medicine practitioner who was willing to hear me out and believe that the symptoms weren't all in my head. After a long detox treatment, I was able to get my inflammation and therefore my symptoms under control, but I will forever need to manage my exposure. New symptoms are always just around the corner for me to catch – every old home, water damaged building, and vintage clothing store is teeming with mold spores, prepared to wipe me out. So, I have to protect myself by avoiding those places, which with work office buildings,

grandparents' homes, unanticipated pipe bursts, and an unquenchable desire to be a cool, eco-conscious clothing thrifter, can be unavoidable.

But as my symptoms evolve, so do I. After 7 years of training with CIRS, I have fewer breakdowns after inconclusive test results, I give myself more treats after frustrating doctors' appointments, I joined a monthly support group, and I've finally grown accustomed to saying, "I'm sorry", less and "I need" more.

A recognizable diagnosis always makes justification for other people easier to digest, but many of us live with an expansive question mark where that diagnosis should go.

Unfortunately, I'm still at a place where the only vehicle I can think of to describe this experience is Pokémon, because people are more familiar with that than a lot of invisible illnesses that members of our THRIVE group navigate every day. A recognizable diagnosis always makes justification for other people easier to digest, but many of us live with an expansive

question mark where that diagnosis should go. So, we continue navigating life, quietly catching Pokémon after Pokémon until we get an answer.

Gotta catch them all.

—— DIRECTOR GOLIN HEALTHCARE – NYC

Hiding in plain sight

When you see me I am smiling
Laughing even
But you have no idea that most mornings
I am lying on the floor
For some time
In pain

I live in daily physical pain
Because of an illness I never asked for
A condition that found me
And crippled me
But in a way that you cannot see

So I take my pain medications
I pick myself up off of the floor
I get my clothes on
Put on my teams smile
And I show up
Even though I am hiding how much I hurt

You may not think I should be doing all that I do
But having my job is not a treat
It is a necessity
To take care of myself
And keep the medications coming
That allow me to keep hiding

So I hide
And I hide again
And I hide in plain sight

GOLIN EMPLOYEE - US

The other side of burnout

“What is wrong with me?” This is the question I kept asking myself. For years it felt like I was living in a fog.

For most of my life, I'd struggled with anxiety. When the pandemic hit in 2020, my life as I knew it began to unravel. My anxiety intensified, I lost the structure of my workday, the days and hours began to blend, and the world was seemingly on fire, but there was nothing I could do to control it. I consumed myself with work, taking on more and more until I was utterly overwhelmed and reaching my breaking point. I entered a continuous state of sleeplessness, panic attacks and burnout. This cycle repeated itself over and over, year after year.

Then, finally, I got my answer. One year ago, in May of 2023, I was diagnosed with ADHD. This diagnosis changed my life.

Suddenly, the fog began to lift, and for the first time in my life I felt like I was waking from a long nap.

As I dug into what it means to have Inattentive ADHD, my entire life began to make sense. The crippling anxiety that consumed me. A brain that rarely left fight-or-flight, my chronic exhaustion, my sleeplessness and my inability to turn my brain off. My constant need to overwork and people-please to the point of burnout.

It's estimated that 50-75% of women with ADHD remain undiagnosed, which means I'm likely one of millions.

I belong to the “lost generation” – a group of women and girls who have been living with undiagnosed ADHD. It's estimated that 50-75% of women with ADHD remain undiagnosed, which means I'm likely one of millions.

I've spent the last year learning about myself through a new lens. I've experienced grief and frustration for the time I lost. But I've gained newfound clarity and a path forward.

I now realize nothing is wrong with me. As I dove deeper into research and exploration, I suddenly saw and understood all the gaps. I'd spent a lifetime learning to exist and work in systems not designed for me.

Research suggests that up to 20 percent of the global population is neurodivergent. Neurodiversity refers to the diversity of the human brain. Each individual thinks, communicates, and processes information in a unique way.

That's one in five people. This includes those who have disclosed their diagnosis, those who keep it hidden due to the lack of understanding and stigma, and those who are unaware and remain undiagnosed. This includes our colleagues, friends, family and business partners.

When people with different ways of seeing the world come together, there is bound to be miscommunication and misunderstanding.

When people with different ways of seeing the world come together, there is bound to be miscommunication and misunderstanding.

It's no secret that burnout across organizations has been on the rise. I can't help but wonder if this is all interconnected.

While being neurodivergent has come with many challenges, I can now see that many of my strengths are because of my divergent thinking. I'm a systems thinker, pattern seeker, and problem solver. If I have the information, I can distill complex problems, how they all connect, and identify solutions. If I'm able to block all distractions, I'm able to hyperfocus and leave no stone unturned in the work I do. It has helped me remain calm under pressure. It helps me lead with compassion and allows me to be in tune with what others need.

My experience has profoundly impacted my leadership approach and vision. My nervous system has shifted. I'm now embracing complexity with grace.

I've reached the other side of burnout.

In a world where being neurodivergent is seen as a bad thing or an "accommodation," we must provide, we all lose.

Imagine what can be achieved if we can learn to understand each other and communicate properly.

As leaders, colleagues and mentors, we have a choice to do something about this.

This isn't about providing accommodations. It's about gaining a deeper understanding of how people think, communicate, and process information.

By embracing the full spectrum of neurological experiences, we empower every individual to contribute their best.

Diversity of thought is crucial for fostering innovation and creativity. By embracing the full spectrum of neurological experiences, we empower every individual to contribute their best. We can build high-performing teams not in spite of our differences, but because of them.

However, we cannot expect our people to perform at their best without breaking down communication

barriers and implementing changes to bridge the gap between neurodiverse and neurotypical team members.

We must strive to listen and understand each team member, adapt our communication styles, and redesign systems and processes to enable each individual to thrive and reach their full potential. This isn't just inclusive; it is essential for our future.

This is a call to action for all of us to listen, learn, and lead with a renewed commitment to inclusivity, understanding and compassion.

SVP GOLIN, DALLAS

I have a hard stop

Turning 30 – a momentous age which movies, longreads and anxious Instagram posts are written about – hit me harder than most. Mere days before my birthday, a simple accident at home began a journey of varying degrees of agony and disability that culminated with me balled in the foetal position next to my Christmas tree, a few days before turning 35. I spent those days in unending pain, passing out rather than sleeping and wailing rather than forming any words, ironically during a week I had booked as holiday. As a person who was – until that point – physically incapable of switching off, taking time out or setting boundaries to protect myself instead of pushing myself harder for approval, I was forced to stop. I physically couldn't go anywhere. My body seized onto that holiday – a pre-planned, approved and scheduled window in my relentless professional trajectory – and physically forced me to rest.

Several years later I am so grateful for that hard stop by my body, which has still not fully recovered and likely never will, but that can do incredible things and should not be taken for granted for the position it is in after working hard to get better. I am – subsequently with a renewed energy – a passionate

advocate for ensuring that our bodies (that put as much in to work as our minds do) are properly protected and respected at work, and I've been so grateful to THRIVE for appreciating that part of the disability conversation and hope it will continue to be supported at Golin in future years.

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And I can appreciate what happened, as it was only after being confronted rather rudely with limits in my physical health that I took the plunge and addressed my mental health. My ongoing struggle with depression is another piece of the puzzle that led me to being in the position – crouched by the Christmas tree – that I was in, and one I'll be grateful for the support of THRIVE as I continue down that road.

They say to work through your problems; I quite literally worked through mine and risked my health long term to do so, partly out of fear of the imaginary

cries of 'lazy' by the wider media narrative, 'not a team player' by phantom versions of my colleagues and 'a failure' by my own inner demon. I know that I am none of these things (and am working towards being able to say that more confidently), but I am very glad to have a community of people who are unafraid to be honest about the struggles they face when their individual circumstances intersect with the working world and are also unafraid to set boundaries to put themselves first. It's something I'm pleased to be learning at last.

DIRECTOR GOLIN - UK

Coming home to myself

When I was growing up, I always felt 'different'. I noticed things others didn't and interpreted life around me from an angle that many found hard to understand. I was fortunate to have the support of some family and friends who, even though they couldn't necessarily put my difference in words, still held space for me and celebrated my 'quirkiness'.

As I got older, I started to understand why being 'different' can feel scary sometimes. I witnessed how people would pick-and-choose from my 'quirks' and denied me the freedom to fully express myself. Slowly, other's perception of me and feeling the need to belong started a battle within me. A battle between feeling accepted and showing up as my most authentic self.

When I turned 16, I started to realize how the fear of being an 'outcast' was affecting me physically as well as mentally. How I held myself back from enjoying the things I loved. How I made myself small to fit in boxes not meant for me. And even though I didn't know

what was so different about me, I decided to start doing more research and reaching out for help.

To me, it was just different – and who said difference is bad?

At first, this involved very difficult conversations with my family and listening to them insisting I'm 'normal' and that 'there's nothing wrong with me'. It definitely surprised me because I never saw my difference as something that made me less 'normal' or that anything was 'wrong'. To me, it was just different – and who said difference is bad?

After years of advocating for myself and all people who felt the things I felt, I finally got my official diagnosis at 22. It felt validating to be able to speak to someone who not only understands me on a deeper level, but also holds such a compassionate space for me.

As an autistic person, it was often challenging to navigate my way through life while often feeling misunderstood. So, I try to always use my voice to advocate for all neurodivergent folks who are

hesitant to say something. I also learned to manage myself in ways that are healthy and empowering, and that continue to fill my cup with confidence and love.

I'm grateful I fought for my right to show up as me. I believe my story also allowed me to remain curious and non-judgemental towards others who present themselves in ways that could be deemed 'unfamiliar' or 'different'. I hope that as the years go by, more and more people start having these conversations and allow themselves to approach neurodivergence with a loving, supportive and open heart.

GOLIN EMPLOYEE, TORONTO

Glossary

Accommodations/Reasonable Adjustments: A reasonable accommodation – known in the UK and Australia as a reasonable adjustment – is a modification used to make the workplace accessible for people with protected characteristics.

ADHD: Formerly described as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder. ADHD is a highly genetic, brain-based syndrome that has to do with the regulation of a particular set of brain functions and related behaviours. People with ADHD show a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity–impulsivity that interferes with day-to-day functioning and/or development.

Anxiety: Anxiety is typically described as a feeling of apprehension or dread in situations where there is no actual real threat and is disproportionate to the situation faced. Unlike stress, anxiety persists even after a concern has passed. In some cases, anxiety can escalate into an anxiety disorder and can affect day-to-day life.

Autism: Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

Autoimmune conditions: These encompass a broad category of diseases in which the person's immune system attacks their own tissue.

Burnout: Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.

Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS): Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS), also called biotoxin or mold illness, is a severe health condition caused by prolonged exposure to certain biological toxins, leading to a wide range of symptoms that significantly impair daily life and wellbeing.

Depression: Depressive disorder (also known as depression) is a common mental disorder. It involves a depressed mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities for long periods of time. Depression is different from regular mood changes and feelings about everyday life. It can affect all aspects of life, including relationships with family, friends and

community. It can result from or lead to problems at school and at work.

Executive Functioning: The brains' processes of planning, organizing, processing instructions, and multitasking.

Masking: A process by which a person changes or "masks" their natural way of being, to conform to social pressures and norms. Although everyone can find themselves masking at times to "fit in" in certain contexts, the masking required by neurodivergent people in un-inclusive environments can be especially draining – and lead to mental health problems including depression, anxiety, as well as burn out.

Neurodivergent: While all brains are different, having certain clusters of traits can lead to a shared identity with others and/or to a medical diagnosis: for example, an identity as autistic, as an ADHDer, or as both. It's estimated that around 1 in 5 people may identify as having one of these neurodivergent identities.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health problem. It has two main parts that are connected, obsessions and compulsions.

