



## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Brain Health IS Women’s Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we are discussing the importance of understanding and protecting women’s brain health and performance throughout their lives.***

Women have unique brain health concerns and are nearly twice as likely to develop brain illnesses, such as dementia, depression, and anxiety. To truly understand women’s brain health means promoting brain health and performance and reducing risk of brain illnesses over the course of their lifetime.

According to [McLean Hospital](#), biological differences between men and women have an impact on brain health, but societal differences between the genders also influence the development of brain illness and the treatment received. From early childhood through older adulthood, there are brain illnesses that primarily affect women and others that impact women differently.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the more common brain illnesses diagnosed in early childhood and can significantly interfere with school and life performance. Symptoms of ADHD include difficulty focusing, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity — symptoms that are easier to identify in boys. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, boys are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than girls. Girls are just as likely to develop the disorder, but unfortunately, the symptoms of ADHD (see “What You Can Today to Protect Your Brain Health” below) in girls may present differently or be harder to see.

Anxiety and depression, brain illnesses that impact women across their lifespan, often first appear during adolescence, possibly triggered by the physical and biological changes happening in their bodies. Again, both of these brain illnesses also appear in males, but research shows that females are twice as likely as males to experience depression and anxiety. These illnesses are

often compounded in females by reproductive system-related hormonal changes that can contribute to premenstrual syndrome (PMS), premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), postpartum depression, and associated with menopause (see “What You Can Today to Protect Your Brain Health”).

Nearly two-thirds of the Americans over the age of 65 living with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia are women. In addition, more than two-thirds of the people providing care for someone with Alzheimer’s or dementia are women. As life expectancy continues to increase, dementia will likely affect even more women.

Another concern for older women is alcohol use. The negative brain and physical health effects of too much alcohol are well known — heart and liver problems, memory issues, mood disorders, as well as an increased risk of cancer and a weakened immune system. But age-related changes in the body place older adults who drink alcohol at even greater risk. According to a recent article in the [Harvard Gazette](#), one survey found that between the years of 2001 and 2013 alcohol use disorder among people over the age of 65, especially women increased more than 100 percent.

What can we do to protect the women in our lives from these brain illnesses? By looking after each other, being aware of and destigmatizing the symptoms of brain illness, understanding how the symptoms may be different in women, and advocating for early diagnosis and treatment, we can protect the brain health and performance of women across their lifespan.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

*The key to understanding brain health in women may be in understanding the symptoms of some of the most common brain illnesses that can affect you, a girl or young lady, or a woman you love.*

- **ADHD.** The most common symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in girls include:
  - Withdrawal or isolation.
  - Low confidence and low self-esteem.
  - Anxiety.
  - Difficulty keeping up in class and with schoolwork.
  - Trouble paying attention.
  - Verbal aggressiveness.
  - Not listening.
- **Depression.** You may see these changes in females who are depressed:
  - Sleep, either sleeping more often or not at all.
  - Eating, such as eating more often or not at all.
  - Lack of enjoyment in activities that used to bring pleasure.
  - Mood swings, moving quickly from happiness to anger and sadness.
  - Thoughts of self-harm.
- **Anxiety.** The most common ways that anxiety may appear in girls include:
  - Complaints of physical illness, like an upset stomach, nausea, or frequent headaches.

- Excessive worry.
- Too much or not enough sleep.
- Avoiding school or work for vague reasons.
- **Alzheimer's disease and dementia.** Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease may include:
  - Forgetting the names and faces of loved ones.
  - Inability to manage executive functions, such as paying bills or balancing bank accounts.
  - Difficulty performing day-to-day activities, like personal hygiene, getting dressed, or household chores.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is creating brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, **because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).