

Barriers, Burnout, and Belonging: Experiences of Student Pharmacists with ADHD in Pharmacy Education

Abstract:

Background: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is commonly studied in children and adolescents, yet little research focuses on the experience of students with ADHD in graduate health professional programs. Students with ADHD are less likely to complete undergraduate degrees and may face additional barriers in rigorous professional programs. Limited data exists on how pharmacy programs can better support neurodivergent learners.

Methods: This qualitative study explored the academic experiences of student pharmacists with ADHD at the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville School of Pharmacy. Current Doctor of Pharmacy students with a self-reported ADHD diagnosis participated in structured interviews conducted between October 2025 and February 2026 following IRB approval (#3273). Interviews examined students' academic experiences, perceived challenges, and strategies for success. Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes among students.

Results: Between the seven 3rd and 4th year students interviewed, six major themes emerged: groupwork is perceived as both beneficial and discouraging; meaningful learning often occurred outside the classroom; traditional classroom environments lacked adaptability for neurodivergent learners; experiential learning during clinical rotations was highly beneficial; neurotypical peers and faculty often lacked understanding of ADHD-related challenges; and supportive peer communities were essential for student well-being.

Conclusions: Student pharmacists with ADHD reported significant challenges within traditional classroom environments but described experiential learning and peer support as critical to their success. These findings highlight the need for increased faculty awareness, adaptable learning environments, and intentional support systems to promote equity and inclusion for neurodivergent students in pharmacy education.