

How do I manage my money while I'm struggling with my mental health?

Taking control of your finances is challenging for many people, but for this week's listener, a 40-year-old Virginia man, ADHD and bipolar diagnoses complicate the situation even more. Host Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez turns to licensed therapist Amber Hawley for strategies to effectively manage your money while also dealing with mental health challenges.

Margaret: With bipolar, I mean, it's this high, like this euphoric, out of control. I just felt so good, just finding a sale or a deal.

Gigi: Sometimes I just sit in a dark room and go, I don't know why I'm working so hard I really wish I had somebody that else that I could just get, you know, what, I'm in a tough place. And I'm just really ready to just give up.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: This is Money Confidential, a podcast from Real Simple about our money stories, struggles and secrets. I'm your host, Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez. And today our guest is a 40-year-old, Virginia-based listener who we're calling Hugh—not his real name.

Hugh: I have ADD and bipolar. It makes budgeting in general hard. Not that I'm using that as an excuse.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: While Hugh received an ADD diagnosis, short for attention deficit disorder, we do want to note that the American Psychiatric Association has since removed the subtypes of ADD with hyperactivity and ADD without hyperactivity, and now simply uses ADHD short for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—so we'll be using the current nomenclature, ADHD for the remainder of the episode.

Hugh: I remember the summer I was going into sixth grade, my brother was going into fifth, we went on a road trip to Texas. My maternal grandparents at the time they lived in Waynesboro, Virginia, so we stopped there and grandma gave us cash.

She made sure she mentioned to us, "Don't open this till you get to Texas." By the time we got to Texas mine was blown. I bought pens, those little bitty, Mead notebooks, I don't even know if they make more. And, something else, I don't even remember.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: Hugh, like many of us, has struggled with managing money, and with ADHD and bipolar diagnoses, a lot of traditional money management advice doesn't resonate or feel practical. In spite of these challenges, Hugh was still able to move out on his own last year—but he still relies on the occasional support from his family to buy groceries and pay for some essentials.

Hugh: I think I have enough to cover something, then it's like, oh, wait, no, I don't. I would love to not get my parents' help. Because my parents are senior citizens themselves, so I feel like in a way I'm taking their money. And I'll likely not be able to pay them back.

It's to the point where I don't like taking advantage of their kindness, and I know at a certain point, they're going to be like, no, figure it out yourself. Most recently, my dad gave me about a \$600 loan he transferred into my account so I could cover rent and other expenses.

My parents, they get so invested in it and, like, it's not fun. And if someone, even like my sister-in-law holds me accountable, it's different. She can step back and look at stuff more objectively, then my parents or me, or even my brother can.

I did have a friend. He was helping me out and we would have meetings about once a month or so. But, we disagreed on certain things. He wanted me, once I paid off my credit card to destroy it and close the account, and I'm like, "But I need a credit history." I stopped working with him because we were butting heads too much.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: When you did go through that process of becoming debt free, what made you able to stick to that?

Hugh: I don't even know, I mean it's weird because I went back into debt. I still haven't paid it off, I don't think. But, I don't know, I mean, I just I can't even remember, I just can't. I have an Excel where I track my expenses and money coming in and I color code it.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: When you're looking at your Excel spreadsheet, how do you feel?

Hugh: I'm kind of like, why did you buy that? And, certain things I'm like, okay, that maybe could have waited.

It's kind of hard to objectively say, Wait, this is a need, but it's not an urgent need, versus it's not a necessity right now, it can wait.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: What financial advice needs to change?

Hugh: I mean once I disclose that I have bipolar people's physical reaction changes. But, I think more people being more understanding that I don't have a neurotypical brain, and most of my life, I've been forced to think that way, and that doesn't work. And that's what I think a lot of people don't get.

Diagnoses aside, life is very subjective, we each see life, live life through our own individual lens.

But going back to your question about what could be different and stuff? I think financial experts just asking, what would work best for you? Just ask me, and at least if I don't give you a straight answer, I can give you some answer that you can work with.

People have, especially the bipolar end, misconceptions of what that is because what you see in movies and on TV, you see the sensationalized worst stuff.

I was five years old when I was diagnosed with ADD. And, of course, the med at the time was like, ritalin they put you on. And, by 1993, is right after the Texas trip and there was a field trip

we went on, and I got brought back early for something I did. I don't even remember exactly and I was hospitalized, inpatient. And, I learned later from one of my therapists that that was when they diagnosed me. They took me off ritalin.

They're treating the bipolar part of it because you put me on the stimulants for ADHD if they don't mix with bipolar meds. So, it's like, which one do you want to treat? The bipolar is the more serious of the two, and I'm okay with that. I personally like myself on my meds.

Just even a few years ago, I did not like the guy I saw in the mirror. Now, I wouldn't mind shaking his hand and being his friend.

Mentally ill people are also marginalized, and people have their preconceptions about any mental illness.

And, I will say, it's a shame. But like shame, stigma thrives in the dark. And, I'm only one guy and I can only do so much, but let's bring it out of the dark.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: After the break, we'll explore more of the misconceptions surrounding mental health and what that can mean for managing our money with licensed therapist Amber Hawley.

Amber Hawley: There's this assumption that, oh, if you have ADHD, then you clearly aren't a numbers person or you can't be in finance.

And yet I work with so many people who are CPAs or bookkeepers, or they're in the finance industry. And it's because everybody's kind of shows up different. If you're interested in something, it's going to be easy to focus on that. Your ADHD shows up somewhere else.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: That's Amber Hawley, a licensed therapist who specializes in working with ADHD and neurodiverse individuals.

Now, if you are someone for whom it does show up with your finances or your work. What are some of the things that people can do?

Amber Hawley: Even though I just said we can't make assumptions that people with ADHD can't be really great with money or like awesome budgeters. I do see a lot of people that do struggle with this. And there's some reasons why that shows up. There's the impulsivity. We also have to realize that money is—it's not just about numbers. You can be great at numbers, but it's an emotional issue. And any time we have any kind of negative thoughts or resistance we can make things so much bigger and harder than they need to be.

And so you might get that advice—well, you just have to do it. You just have to suck it up and do this thing. It's like saying you have to find the cure for cancer. It feels that difficult. It's that much of a mountain to climb.

I remember once this woman saying, well, if it's painful enough, you'll eventually do it. And I was like, hmm, sweetie. That is not how ADHD works. Because yes, we are often in severe pain over this thing, like if we're struggling with our budgeting or we're struggling with our spending habits, or we just feel like it's so chaotic and I don't even want to look at it. That comes up a lot.

I mean, most of the entrepreneurs I work with don't even have budgets. Not a personal budget, let alone a business budget. And so they're feeling like they're just in this chaos and without any information it's like, well, how do you make decisions? How do you make choices? What do you do?

And so there are strategies that you can employ that work with how your brain works to try to get through these things. And some of it is just taking that step back and like recognizing, okay, what keeps coming up here?

I like to use an example like taxes, because for years it's like, I have everything in place. There's no reason my taxes shouldn't be done on time. And yet every year it's a Herculean task to get my taxes done on time. And so I had to figure out, okay, what are the things that I can put in place that make that easier for me, and that address that resistance I have?

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: Is that something that you think has to be customized to each person?

Amber Hawley: I think there were some general themes that do work. Like in general, I say if something is really painful for you or you find that you really struggle with it, stop doing it. Outsource it. Like when I work with people who are really struggling with their finances or getting their taxes done, and then they tell me like, they're doing it all themselves. Don't do that. There are so many options now it's not that expensive, and frankly, even if it was, it's worth every single penny, not to deal with that stress and to have a professional do it. This is why we have these people.

So there are some things like that like outsourcing, there's other techniques that we use, like body doubling. So having somebody there to help you stay focused and on task especially when it's things that you don't want to do, because if it's something you love, you probably have no problem getting stuff done.

So having just somebody sit with you, they don't even have to be working on the thing or talking to you, but having somebody sit with you, knowing that you are saying, okay, this is exactly what I'm working on.

Because then when you go like, oh, I just got a message on my phone or, oh, I'm going to go do this. It brings you back to focus. So that's another strategy.

Even with all the people I've worked with, I find there are people who are really good about setting that external goal and then just achieving it. As long they have a focus—as long as it's really clear for them, but for many others, because our brain is working differently, and when we actually try to focus on something, our brain is supposed to fire up and with ADHD, it doesn't. And so the harder you try, the less able to focus you are and so that's the conundrum for us.

So just having that person there can be really helpful. Now for some people, it has to be somebody that they actually respect. For other people it could be, you know, Joe, Bob off the street. And for other people, it's like, no, I need somebody that I would actually feel bad disappointing to be that person who's with me.

I was talking to somebody and we were talking about how, even if you have somebody who's supporting you and helping you get stuff done, you say, 'oh, okay as soon as I hang up this call I'm going to send you that email,' or 'I'm going to do that thing you just asked me to do.' And

this is somebody who works for you. But as soon as you hang up, you literally forget. It just completely goes out of your mind. So the strategy—it's not rocket science—but sometimes we're so in our routines where I was like, okay, I'm no longer leaving the call. Let's do this now, you sit here and look at me while I go and type the thing that you're asking me for. Because I want to give it to you. I desperately want to, and I will completely forget the second we are not face-to-face.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: Our listener is struggling, not only with what we're talking about here, but on top of that, he's diagnosed bipolar. Accountability has been useful to him in certain circumstances, but that full transparency of saying, 'Oh, I also have bipolar' is kind of difficult because he has had the experience so many times of people's entire demeanor changing as soon as he says that.

Amber Hawley: That's the heartbreaking part. There is still such a stigma around mental health, even though I'm seeing more and more people being a little more accepting of ADHD. When people hear bipolar, it feels so foreign to them because I don't think it is as talked about. And when it is, I think the examples that are being given are showing people who are manic and just volatile and unpredictable, and that feels scary to people. And so, yeah, there's these preconceived notions of what that means, and not really understanding what people with bipolar actually look like or how they show up or how they are in the world.

And I think the key is finding people to support you. And unfortunately, having to go through kind of a vetting process and making sure that they have the knowledge and understanding of what bipolar is and some people, if they're already in your life, it might be worth giving them resources to educate themselves.

But other people, if you're just going around looking for somebody to help support you in the struggles you're having, you don't really want to take the time and energy. Like it's not your job to educate other people. They should be doing that. So I think I would be looking for providers who seem like they're actually putting efforts into understanding people and understanding what that means.

We need empathy for ourselves because we've grown up in this dogmatic understanding of money and how to approach it.

And we've heard it for so long that it becomes our own narrative. And so we beat ourselves up and we have all these stories about how we're not good with money, all of our scarcity stuff or all these money mindset issues that we have. And when we have those kinds of resistances or those kinds of pushbacks, that's where I think that neurodiversity comes in and makes it even harder to move forward.

Because we think like, I have to figure out how to fit into the box by only using options that are in the box instead of just being kinder to ourselves and understanding like it's okay for us to have our own journey, to have our own priorities, to do it how we want to do it.

And in fact when we're in a place of shame, we don't make good choices. So we kind of need to start with that. And I think that empathy starts with ourselves and then seeking out people who also meet you with that empathy. If you're going to a financial expert to get support and to get help and they're being very judgmental, that's not going to be a conducive place for you to make changes.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: What does letting go of shame look like?

Amber Hawley: Well it's a huge process. It can show up in almost all of our behaviors and decisions about how we run our life, especially if they don't fit the quote unquote norm of what we think we're supposed to do. It's really about accepting that who we are and what we need is okay.

If all you're doing is just beating yourself up, you're not actually going to take that step back and look at it and say, oh, okay, let me reflect on, did this serve me? Was this something that I feel good about in the end?

I'm thinking about even impulsive spending, like, why am I wanting to buy this thing? Or why is this important to me? And yes, you can create behaviors or little habits around trying to shut off that automatic loop. But I think ultimately it goes back to, I'm still a good, worthwhile person, even if I like to buy pretty shiny things sometimes.

It's not, I'll be acceptable once I start toeing the line. It's like, you are wonderful and acceptable right now. And how can you support yourself positively to get your needs met and make the changes you need to make so that you're feeling better. Because obviously if it's causing you pain, like if you're continually going into more and more debt and it's stressing you out, then that's not helping you either.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: I also think it's a lot more complex than numbers on a spreadsheet.

Amber Hawley: Yes. And numbers on a spreadsheet do not tell us anything about how good of a human being you are and how you are showing up in the world and what you have to contribute. They're just one metric to let us know about our money.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: So we talked a little bit about how this kind of neurodiversity shows up in our finances. How do you see it show up in the workplace?

Amber Hawley: Well, it's somewhat similar. It's about this idea that there's one right way to do things, like this is the way you should do it.

So we see this with like, "Oh, you know, you're so great. You're fantastic. You're so smart and creative. And you do all these great things for the company, but you're always 30 minutes late and that's a problem for us." And part of me is like, well, I wish some of these businesses would start to expand on their idea of what it means to be like a good employee or the value that somebody brings to a business. Of course there are those exceptions. Like if you have the kind of job where literally somebody can't leave a desk until you show up to take over the desk that becomes problematic, right?

I hear this from so many people who are even at the executive level who are feeling this pressure of like, I have to work from this time to this time. And what ends up happening is they'll even say like, well, I do that and I feel this pressure to be there.

And so I'm there, but then I can't actually focus on my work until everyone leaves. And so then they end up staying extra late, but they don't feel that they can have this conversation with their boss or even just do it for themselves and know like, hey, as long as I'm getting my work done that shouldn't be a problem, but they feel that pressure to like, but everybody shows up at nine and so I must show up at nine and then they end up staying until 8:00 PM.

And then they're getting very little time with their family. They're getting almost zero downtime. So they're just feeling burnt out. They can't really show up for the people they love and care about, they can't really show up for the things that give them joy or bring them passion in the way that they want to, all because they have to fit this norm. And so that's where I really am an advocate of having those conversations with your supervisor and talking to them about 'Hey, I'm all about getting my work done and I work a little bit differently. This is what I need.'

Something I talk to clients about is teaching people how to work with you as well. Like what is your ideal way? And of course there's flexibility, but I think we need to start having those conversations.

It's about finding what is that life and lifestyle and work and way of being in the world that speaks to me and is good for me. And I can still want to try new things and have goals for myself, maybe it's somebody in debt, right?

Like I'm not going to feel shame or terrible about what led me here. And so I'm not operating out of this place of lack or stress, or like I'm a terrible person, but I can still want to work towards having more stability in my finances or paying off debt or whatever that thing is.

In fact, your ability to achieve things will be heightened by the joy that you feel every day like having gratitude about the things, the good things in your life right now, having gratitude about your running water or the people in your life. Or you had a really good day or a really good moment, that kind of stuff actually does propel us into achieving those bigger things because it's just inviting more ease into our life.

When you train your brain to focus on positive things or to be grateful, or to be happier, to have contentment it helps us be more resilient. And so as we work towards these bigger goals that are, you know, a little bit scarier out there pushing our envelope, it actually helps us it's actually an asset.

Stefanie O'Connell Rodriguez: Whether you're living with a mental health diagnosis or not, we could all use a little more self-compassion and empathy when it comes to managing our money.

Instead of beating ourselves up over the things we struggle with and the norms we don't fit into, we can flip the script and ask ourselves—how *can* I make this work for me?

Maybe it's seeking out financial professionals to whom you can outsource tasks you typically procrastinate or struggle to stick with, or connecting with a friend or a community that can provide accountability with positive reinforcement and support, as opposed to judgment and shame.

Maybe it's starting conversations with your managers and colleagues about the ways in which you work a little differently and the things that help you maximize your performance that might differ from the norm.

Remembering that wherever the numbers ultimately fall on the spreadsheet of your financial life, while you can always work to make improvements and move toward your money goals, those numbers are ultimately just a measure of your money, not your worthiness or goodness or what you have to contribute as a human being.

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