

ADHD: Not Just for Kids Anymore

Most people think Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is just for kids. They think of the boy who can't sit still. But this is only part of the picture—most kids with ADHD become adults with ADHD. Unfortunately, most adults with ADHD receive no treatment or are misdiagnosed and receive inappropriate and ineffective treatment. Fortunately, most of what works so well for kids with ADHD is just as effective for ADHD adults. (ADD is the old term for ADHD, but some people still use it.)

Diagnosing ADHD in Adults

Although we all have our “ADHD moments,” to qualify for the diagnosis requires that someone meet certain specific symptoms. These symptoms fall into two subtypes. Most people are familiar with the first subtype which is hyperactive/impulsive. These symptoms are easy to observe, at least in children. As one presenter said, “The school janitor can diagnose the hyperactive/impulsive kids.” During late adolescence, the hyperactivity and impulsivity tend to quiet down, so that the child who couldn't sit quietly through a fifteen minute meal becomes an adult who feels antsy when watching a movie.

The hyperactive symptoms include:

- Fidgety
- Difficulty remaining seated
- Overly active
- Difficulty doing things quietly
- Often on the go
- Talks excessively

The impulsive symptoms include:

- Blurts out answers
- Difficulty waiting one's turn
- Interrupts or intrudes on others

There are also people with ADHD who don't have much difficulty with the hyperactive/impulsive symptoms, but instead have difficulty with inattention. Unlike the hyperactive/impulsive people who are pretty obvious about their symptoms, the predominantly inattentive folks are much quieter about their difficulties. By contrast, one often can't tell that the inattentive person isn't paying attention or is scattered in his thoughts.

The inattentive symptoms include:

- Careless mistakes
- Difficulty sustaining attention

- Doesn't seem to listen
- Poor follow through
- Difficulty organizing
- Avoids sustained mental effort
- Loses things
- Easily distracted
- Forgetful

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Although these symptoms seem pretty straight-forward, it can be easy to misdiagnose something else as ADHD or to miss the diagnosis, so if someone suspects that she has ADHD, it's best to be evaluated by a trained mental health professional with specific experience with ADHD in adults. In order to qualify as ADHD, the symptoms have to have been present from childhood, be present in multiple situations, and cause significant impairment.

What Does Adult ADHD Look Like?

Of course everybody is an individual, but there are certain common traits shared by many ADHD adults. As we move from adolescence into adulthood, we are expected to be more responsible and to increasingly run our own lives with less direction from others. Unfortunately, many ADHD adults really struggle with this. They know what they are supposed to do, but have great difficulty actually doing it. They can probably do it sometimes, but success in life usually requires doing the right thing at the right time, every time. Most things in life have a high price for even occasional slips—like losing bills before paying them; forgetting to meet a friend somewhere; getting to work late; etc. In a thousand small ways, ADHD adults shoot themselves in the foot. As a result, people often see them as irresponsible or selfish and can't understand why they don't just do better. There's a book about ADHD with a title that says it all: *"You Mean I'm not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?"* Before the diagnosis is made, those are often the assumptions that people make to explain the ADHD person's self-destructive behavior. After all, why else would someone do these things?

Understandably, ADHD can cause a lot of frustration for the ADHD person, but also for family, friends, romantic partners, coworkers, and bosses. The ADHD adult often shows great potential but has equally great difficulty living up to that potential—which is sometimes worse than having no potential at all. As a result, there is a constant sense of anxiety about what disastrous thing will happen next, followed by crashing disappointment when things do go bad. This is a very difficult way to go through life. Fortunately, there is effective treatment available for those who work at it.

Effective Treatment

Often the first step in treating ADHD is medication. The good news is that the current medications are generally quite safe and very effective. Certainly there are risks and side effects with any medication, but there are also risks and side effects to not treating ADHD—that whole "Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy" thing. Therefore, I often recommend at least trying medication to test the benefit. It doesn't make every problem suddenly disappear, but it does make it much easier to do what needs to be done and with less effort. There's a great saying that "pills

don't teach skills" and it's definitely true, but it's a lot easier to learn those skills when your meds are right, as long as you are motivated to work at it.

I always recommend that people with ADHD, and their families, learn as much as they can about ADHD. Partly this is a matter of getting rid of the unproductive blame and guilt that the person has accumulated over the years of struggle. If you understand how ADHD is a neurological condition, it's easier to let go of those painful feelings. Of course, ADHD is not a Get Out of Jail Free card—you still need to be a productive member of society. Learning about what kinds of strategies tend to be helpful for folks with ADHD makes it easier to make the necessary changes without trying a bunch of strategies that are less likely to help. (The Resources section below has a number of places to get good information about ADHD.)

A therapist can work with the ADHD adult (and possibly family members) to understand how ADHD has impacted the person's life and why it is that certain things worked out the way that they did. Undiagnosed and untreated ADHD has a profound effect on someone's life that is much more powerful than good intentions, a loving family, or strict teachers. After a lifetime of struggle, many ADHD adults also suffer from some depression or anxiety which makes it even harder to apply themselves effectively. A therapist can help the person let go of those unproductive feelings and take a more active approach to success. In addition, many ADHD adults benefit from coaching to teach the skills that were missed along the way (like time management, organization, prioritizing, etc.) and that are causing so many problems in daily life. This coaching can be done by a separate coach or by the therapist.

ADHD Resources

There are two great nonprofit organizations that advocate for those with ADHD. The first is CHADD (www.chadd.org) which publishes a monthly magazine, holds an annual conference, and does outreach and education. There are also more than 150 local chapters that hold one or more monthly meetings and support groups and can provide local resources. There is also the Attention Deficit Disorders Association (ADDA, www.add.org) which focuses exclusively on adults with ADHD. Both have excellent websites with lots of good information. The ADD Warehouse (www.addwarehouse.com) has an extensive list of books and other materials related to ADHD.

It can be overwhelming sometimes to understand the impact of ADHD, find qualified help, stick with treatment, and change ingrained habits. Fortunately, the investment of time, energy, and money is usually well worth it. Swimming upstream against untreated ADHD takes a lot of effort with not enough to show for it. With an accurate diagnosis and effective treatment, all those good intentions can really amount to something.

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