

Is the Problem ADHD or Motivation?

Families and friends of ADHD people often struggle with this question. The trouble is, ADHD can look like a motivation problem—“if only you cared more, then you would do better;” “if only you tried harder, then everything would be fine,” “if only. . .” In other words, the ADHD person just has to apply himself more. The other person will point to the fact that the ADHD person does great when the activity is interesting. Or maybe the he can do well on something sometimes, but not always, which is confusing to people.

Most likely, the difficulties that the ADHD person is having are due to both ADHD and motivation, especially before the diagnosis is made and effective treatment implemented. People with ADHD tend to have certain characteristic weaknesses that cause certain characteristic difficulties. For kids and teens, these difficulties are especially obvious in the classroom and when doing homework; for adults, these difficulties are especially obvious when they have to be organized or use their time most effectively. Just like anyone, they don't enjoy doing things that hit their weaknesses or that too often work out badly, so they don't fully apply themselves. Tah dah! Motivation problem.

Misunderstanding

When we try to understand other people, we tend to assume that they do things for the same reasons that we do things. We assume that everyone else has the same motivations that we do. For example, if someone without ADHD forgot to do something, it may be because she didn't really care that much about it—“if something is important, I will remember it.” Therefore, if someone else (perhaps with ADHD) forgets to do something, the first person will assume that it must be because that task wasn't important to the second person. After all, if it was important to him, he would have made a point of remembering. This is actually pretty logical, especially since the second person seems to remember some things pretty well, at least some of the time.

This is called attribution, which basically means that we make assumptions about people's motivations based on their actions. After all, we aren't inside their heads, so we make the best guesses we can based on what we can see. A second useful term here is attribution error, which says that we sometimes base those assumptions too much on our own motivations which may be different from the other person's. Until we know someone well, it's easy to guess incorrectly about her motivations. Even when we do know someone well, it can still be easy to jump to our own automatic reactions, especially if it doesn't make sense otherwise. This is especially true of undiagnosed ADHD. If someone doesn't know that there are neurological reasons for the person's mistakes or shortcomings, it's easy to assume that the problem is one of motivation—or worse. There's a book on ADHD called, *You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?* The title alone captures this attribution error perfectly—without the neurological explanation, these less than flattering explanations are all that's left.

This is why an accurate diagnosis is so important. As with any condition, the first step is diagnosis because that tells you which interventions will be the most likely to be effective. Without an accurate diagnosis, it's too easy to try strategies that won't help or to try lots of things randomly. For example, when I hurt my foot while running, an x-ray told us we were dealing with a broken bone, rather than a tendon strain. That meant that a walking cast would be more helpful than massage and ice. Without that diagnosis, we would have wasted a lot of time trying interventions that wouldn't have helped.

Things Can Be Different

Once the diagnosis of ADHD is made, it automatically suggests that certain sorts of strategies are likely to be helpful because they have been helpful for others with ADHD. Unfortunately, by the time an ADHD diagnosis is made, the person and family are usually burned out and frustrated, especially if it's an adult who has struggled through his entire life wondering if he's just lazy, stupid or crazy.

Therefore, half the battle of effective treatment is to get the ADHD adult (and maybe also his exasperated family) to buy into the idea that things can be different if he really applies himself in some new ways. The problem is that he's heard all that before but doesn't have much to show for it, so it makes sense that he will be skeptical. After all, why should this time be any different? He's already gotten all sorts of obvious advice that makes sense but doesn't work, like "just make a to-do list every morning" or "pay all of your bills as soon as they arrive."

The irony is that the problem does become one of motivation as well since they have learned that not much changes, at least not for long. New plans and programs do well for a little while when everyone is excited, but then real life crashes in and all those new good habits go down the drain.

It takes guts to try something new, especially after repeated failures. Nobody wants to be disappointed again. Sometimes it feels less bad to fail by not trying than it does to try something and fail. When it comes to dealing with longstanding difficulties, one of the hardest things for a clinician to do is to convince the person that things can indeed be different if they try these new strategies. The key is to believe it enough to, at least grudgingly, give it a shot. Try it enough to see if there is something to it. Fortunately, success is self-reinforcing, so as the person and family begin to see improvements, it's easier to keep up that motivation for change. Of course, the more people who do things differently, the better the odds of success. So, the family may need to change some of their ways as well if the ADHD person is to make significant changes.

Keeping the Momentum Going

Of course there are always ups and downs, but as successes begin to mount, it's easier to muster the motivation to apply the strategies that will help with the ADHD difficulties. The trick then is to keep that motivation strong when the inevitable back-slides occur. Rarely is success a straight line. Expect the slips and recover as quickly as possible to avoid undoing the hard fought progress. Eventually the progress will begin to top out and things won't change quickly anymore. Rather than getting disheartened, this may be the time to celebrate successes while also accepting that there may be a limit to how much progress can be made. Sometimes happiness is achieved by changing your expectations.

So, as your family struggles through learning those new habits that don't come easily, give yourself a pat on the back. Remember, if it was easy to do, you would have done it long ago.

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