

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

(ADHD)

Description of the Disability

(Also called Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Minimal Brain Dysfunction, Brain Damage, Minimal Brain Damage, Hyperkinesis, Hyperactivity, and Organic Drivenness.)

Also see entry on Learning Disorders

Attention Deficit Disorder is a cognitive disorder that causes difficulty with sustained concentration and with controlling impulsivity. This makes it hard for individuals with ADHD to stay focused on a task or conversation for very long. There are three main features of ADHD (listed below), although they will not be present to the same degree in all individuals. A particular individual may only show one or two in any obvious way. The features are:

- **Distractability** – easily distracted by noises, movement, smells, or even their own thoughts. This may make the person seem not to care about the task at hand.
- **Hyperactivity** - restlessness, difficulty sitting still. This may make the person seem "difficult" or hard to manage.
- **Impulsivity** – difficulty controlling impulsive behaviors. This may affect the person's social skills.

ADHD is a lifelong, congenital, non-degenerative condition and appears to have genetic origins. It is popularly thought of as a childhood condition, but most children with ADHD will continue to have it as an adult. Some children appear to “outgrow” their ADHD symptoms, but they usually have simply learned effective coping mechanisms for managing the symptoms as they matured. Other individuals continue to display ADHD symptoms as adults. One adult with ADHD describes it as having a “multi-tasking mind” that is always bored and always searching the environment for interesting events. This viewpoint emphasizes the potential strengths of the disorder rather than focusing on difficulties with concentration.

In adults, ADHD can lead to frequent job changes or loss of jobs, and problems with gambling or impulsive spending. Some people with ADHD respond to the challenges of the disorder by becoming obsessively organized. ADHD in adults can also cause difficulty in social situations when individuals interrupt others, talk off the topic, talk too long on one topic, speak too bluntly, or have difficulty following conversations. On the other hand, people with ADHD may have high energy levels, which can be very appealing in social situations.

In addition to the characteristics above, individuals with ADHD may show “hyperfocus” behavior. This is, paradoxically, a state of very high concentration during which the individual may lose track of time and lose awareness of anything else going on. During hyperfocus, individuals are able to process information rapidly, remember details effortlessly, and make decisions very quickly. Hyperfocus tends to happen regarding rapidly changing and very

engaging events, such as computer games, action movies, or sporting events. Some people with ADHD have found hyperfocus very useful when working in hospital emergency rooms or doing computer programming. Hyperfocusing sessions may last for hours at a time and trying to interrupt the sessions may annoy the person.

Many individuals with ADHD are very creative and have successfully used this in finding a career. Individuals with ADHD may also have high energy levels.

Incidence Statistics

- ADHD affects between 3% and 5% of children, perhaps as many as 2 million children in the US.
- Two to three times as many boys as girls have ADHD.
- 95% of children with ADHD are helped by taking a stimulant medication.
- 1/2 of these children continue to need medication as adults.
- 1/3 of children with ADHD will have symptoms diminish at adulthood.

Common Treatments, Medications, and Side Effects

Drug therapy is the most common treatment for ADHD. The most commonly used drugs for ADHD are stimulants – which gives a person “mental energy” to stay focused. The stimulants used include Adderall, DextroStat, Dexedrine, Cylert, and Ritalin (the most commonly used drug). These drugs work very quickly and have very few side effects. However, they often require several doses during a day. See drug entry on CNS Stimulants for side effects

Tri-Cyclic Antidepressants (TCAs) are also used to treat individuals with ADHD. These drugs change the levels of several neurotransmitters in the brain and seem to improve concentration for individuals with ADHD. The advantages of these drugs include requiring only one dose a day and helping to decrease mood swings. However, they often take longer to start working and have more potential risks than the stimulants. Wellbutrin(r)(bupropion) is another antidepressant that has shown to be effective, although it is not a TCA. See drug entry on Tri-Cyclics and on Wellbutrin for side effects.

Possible Functional Issues

- Difficulty following conversations
- Difficulty organizing things
- Intimidated by large tasks
- Difficulty completing large tasks

- Forgetful of daily tasks
- Easily Distracted
- Difficulty processing detailed verbal instructions
- Poor time sense (no intuitive feeling for 5 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.)
- Impulsivity
- Impulsive shopping or gambling
- Frequent job changes
- Aggression
- Insensitivity to social cues
- Non-stop talking
- Inability to sit still for long periods of time
- Difficulty driving (tendency to have car accidents)
- Hyperfocus (extreme concentration)
- High creativity
- High energy
- Preference for rapidly changing environments
- Mobility, strength, and coordination are not affected

Possible Secondary Issues

- Low self esteem
- Depression
- Drug abuse
- Alcohol abuse
- Learning disorder (see entry on LD)

Initial Interview Considerations

Initial Questions

- How do they feel ADHD has affected their ability to work?
- What other conditions do they have that cause functional difficulties?
- What medications are they taking? Are there any significant side effects?

- What sorts of things do they feel they do well?
- What kinds of things help them cope with life better? What tactics or situations?
- What times of the day are better for them, as far as being able to concentrate and stay on task?
- What times of day do they seem to have more energy?
- What kinds of things are especially distracting?
- Are they able to drive? Had they had many driving accidents?
- Have they had many other kinds of accidents, such as falls or cuts?
- Do they find that having a similar routine every day helps them remember things? Or does it make things more boring?
- Do they work best with no one else around to distract them, or do they stay on task better with others around?
- What are their hobbies? Are they members of any clubs? (social skills)
- Do they consider themselves very creative?
- How often do they ever experience hyperfocus? Is it for any consistent type of activity?

Initial Observations

- Do they seem to lose track of the conversation?
- Are they able to follow explanations?
- Do they fidget and seem to have trouble sitting still?
- Are they able to read social cues well?

Interview Accommodations (if any)

- If necessary, gently steer the conversation back on track
- Repeat or review things if the person seems confused
- Confirm that they understand their options, what decisions they need to make, and what actions they need to take
- Suggest that they write down any things they have agreed to do following the meetings (forward records, get a checkup, apply for financial aid, etc.).
- Call the individual a few days after the meeting to follow up and remind them of the things they were going to do (if any).

Possible Accommodations and Assistive Technology

- Teaming with an individual who is detail oriented, as a counter balance
- Flex time to avoid periods with distracting activity in work environment
- Telecommuting (work from home) for portions of the week
- Headphones or white noise machines to mask distracting noises
- Tape recorder to record reminders and To Do lists
- A private office, a desk in a quiet area, or a desk faced away from high activity
- Short term tasks with frequent changes to new tasks
- Multiple short-term deadlines rather than a few long-term deadlines
- Frequent breaks
- A place to exercise during lunch or breaks
- Scheduling of “boring” tasks during a time of day when the individual has high energy
- Frequent project reviews with supervisor or co-worker, to keep on task
- Extra time for trainings associated with jobs
- Job coaching or mentoring from a co-worker
- Being excused from non-essential meetings at work
- Limited paperwork

Career Planning Issues

Individuals with ADHD can be successful in a wide variety of careers, ranging from medical physicianto computer programmer to police officer. Careers involving topics of personal interest can help the individual stay focused. It is best to avoid careers involving a lot of paperwork, long hours on one task, or detail-oriented tasks. Careers with rapidly changing environments can be very appropriate, as can careers involving a lot of physical activity. An individual with ADHD may be very creative and have high energy.

Some possibilities include:

- Teaching or training (if there is not too much paperwork involved)
- Store or restaurant night-manager positions (if not too much paperwork)
- “Action” jobs – fireman, policeman, emergency room technician (if the requisite skills are present)
- Sales and promotional jobs

Emerging Issues

- Recognition of adult ADHD as a real condition
- Drug treatments for ADHD
- Challenges for ADHD parents raising children who also have ADHD

Additional Information Resources

- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD) - www.chadd.org
- National Attention Deficit Association - www.add.org
- The Attention Deficit Information Network - www.addinfonetwork.com
- Students with ADD, ADHD, and Learning Disabilities (SAALD) - www.adult-add.org
- National Institute of Mental Health - www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/adhdmnu.cfm