

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER IN ADULTS

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June 2005

Are you easily distracted? Do you tune out in meetings? Are you disorganized? Do you procrastinate, or have trouble finishing projects? When you read, do you often have to reread a paragraph or entire page because you were daydreaming? Are you drawn to high intensity situations? Do you have a hard time relaxing? Do you tend to say or do the first thing that comes to mind, without considering the consequences?

I see many adults in my practice who answer “yes” to these questions, and are surprised to learn that they may have Attention Deficit Disorder. ADD, or ADHD (the H is for hyperactivity) used to be thought of as a childhood disorder that was outgrown, however *we now know that at least two thirds of children who have ADD/ADHD will continue to have it into adulthood*. Some of my clients were told they had it as a child, but others made it to adulthood without understanding why they couldn’t concentrate on schoolwork or were always in trouble for blurting out the wrong thing or doing something dangerous.

People with undiagnosed ADD/ADHD are often misunderstood and get labeled as disorganized, daydreamers, procrastinators, underachievers, “hyper”, lazy or stupid – while the reality is that they are often highly intelligent, creative and talented individuals who just can’t get all of their mental ducks in a row (and swimming in the same direction at the same time!) for long enough to get anything done.

Actually, ADD is a misnomer – what these individuals have is not a “deficit” of attention per se, but rather *an inability to regulate attention properly*: while they are easily distracted much of the time, at other times they demonstrate powers of concentration that are laser-beam intense. ADD’s chief characteristics are distractibility, impulsivity and hyperactivity. Not everyone has the hyperactivity, however – some just have a hyperactive mind, without the restless or impulsive behavior.

ADD/ADHD tends to run in families, which is evidence for a genetic pre-disposition. It also seems to be associated with depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder. Substance abuse can be a co-occurring problem, as individuals with this disorder often self-medicate, either with alcohol to help them relax, or with stimulant drugs like cocaine or methamphetamine, which have the paradoxical effect of calming their hyperactivity - in the same way that Ritalin, a prescription stimulant, helps children with ADHD.

While medication can help, the best treatments for adult ADD/ADHD involve some kind of counseling or coaching to learn to manage the distractibility and impulsivity. If you think you may have ADD, or would like to learn more about it, an excellent book on the subject is “Driven to Distraction” by Hallowell and Ratey (two psychiatrists who have ADD). You can also go to www.add.org, the website for the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, which focuses on support and resources for adults with ADD/ADHD, or contact me.

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