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Adult ADD / ADHD

Signs, Symptoms, Effects, and Treatment

Life can be a balancing act for any adult, but if you find yourself constantly late and disorganized, overly distracted and forgetful, and overwhelmed by your responsibilities, you may have adult ADD/ADHD. Attention deficit disorder impacts many adults, and its wide variety of frustrating symptoms may hinder everything from your relationships to your career.

Learning about the signs and effects of adult ADD/ADHD is the first step toward understanding the challenges and identifying your own symptoms. Once you understand the difficulties that come with ADD/ADHD, you can learn to compensate for areas of weakness and take advantage of your many strengths and talents.

Understanding ADD / ADHD in adults

Attention deficit disorder is not just a problem in children. If you were diagnosed with childhood ADD/ADHD, chances are, you've carried at least some of the symptoms into adulthood. But even if you were never diagnosed with ADD/ADHD as a child, that doesn't mean you can't be affected by it as an adult.

ADD / ADHD: It's not just for kids

Attention deficit disorder often goes unrecognized throughout childhood. This was especially common in the past, when very few people were aware of ADD/ADHD. Instead of recognizing your symptoms and identifying the real issue, your family, teachers, or other parents may have labeled you a dreamer, a goof-off, a slacker, a troublemaker, or just a bad student.

Alternately, you may have been able to compensate for the symptoms of ADD/ADHD when you were young, only to run into problems as your responsibilities increase. The more balls you're trying to keep in the air—pursuing a career, raising a family, running a household—the greater the demand on your abilities to organize, focus, and remain calm. This can be challenging for anyone, but if you have ADD/ADHD, it can feel downright impossible.

The good news is that, no matter how it feels, the challenges of attention deficit disorder *are* beatable. With education, support, and a little creativity, you can learn to manage the symptoms of adult ADD/ADHD—even turning some of your weaknesses into strengths. It's never too late to turn the difficulties of adult ADD/ADHD around and start succeeding on your own terms.

Myths and Facts about ADD / ADHD in Adults

MYTH: ADD/ADHD is just a lack of willpower. Persons with ADD/ADHD focus well on things that interest them; they could focus on any other tasks if they really wanted to.

FACT: ADD/ADHD looks very much like a willpower problem, but it isn't. It's essentially a chemical problem in the management systems of the brain.

MYTH: Everybody has the symptoms of ADD/ADHD, and anyone with adequate intelligence can overcome these difficulties.

FACT: ADD/ADHD affects persons of all levels of intelligence. And although everyone sometimes has symptoms of ADD/ADHD, only those with chronic impairments from these symptoms warrant an ADD/ADHD diagnosis.

MYTH: Someone can't have ADD/ADHD and also have depression, anxiety, or other psychiatric problems.

FACT: A person with ADD/ADHD is six times more likely to have another psychiatric or learning disorder than most other people. ADD/ADHD usually overlaps with other disorders.

MYTH: Unless you have been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD as a child, you can't have it as an adult.

FACT: Many adults struggle all their lives with unrecognized ADD/ADHD impairments. They haven't received help because they assumed that their chronic difficulties, like depression or anxiety, were caused by other impairments that did not respond to usual treatment.

Source: Dr. Thomas E. Brown, *Attention Deficit Disorder: The Unfocused Mind in Children and Adults*

Signs and symptoms of adult ADD / ADHD

In adults, attention deficit disorder often looks quite different than it does in children—and its symptoms are unique for each individual. The following categories highlight common symptoms of adult ADD/ADHD. Do your best to identify the areas where you experience difficulty. Once you pinpoint your most problematic symptoms, you can start to work on strategies for dealing with them.

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Trouble concentrating and staying focused

Adults with ADD/ADHD often have difficulty staying focused and attending to daily, mundane tasks. For example, you may be easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds, quickly bounce from one activity to another, or become bored quickly. Symptoms in this category are sometimes overlooked because they are less outwardly disruptive than the ADD/ADHD symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity—but they can be every bit as troublesome. The symptoms of inattention and concentration difficulties include:

- “zoning out” without realizing it, even in the middle of a conversation.
- extreme distractibility; wandering attention makes it hard to stay on track.
- difficulty paying attention or focusing, such as when reading or listening to others.
- struggling to complete tasks, even ones that seem simple.
- tendency to overlook details, leading to errors or incomplete work.
- poor listening skills; hard time remembering conversations and following directions.

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Hyperfocus

While you're probably aware that people with ADD/ADHD have trouble focusing on tasks that aren't interesting to them, you may not know that there's another side: a tendency to become absorbed in tasks that are stimulating and rewarding. This paradoxical symptom is called hyperfocus.

Hyperfocus is actually a coping mechanism for distraction—a way of tuning out the chaos. It can be so strong that you become oblivious to everything going on around you. For example, you may be so engrossed in a book, a TV show, or your computer that you completely lose track of time and neglect the things you're supposed to be doing. Hyperfocus can be an asset when channeled into productive activities, but it can also lead to work and relationship problems if left unchecked.

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Disorganization and forgetfulness

When you have adult ADD/ADHD, life often seems chaotic and out of control. Staying organized and on top of things can be extremely challenging—as is sorting out what information is relevant for the task at hand, prioritizing the things you need to do, keeping track of tasks and responsibilities, and managing your time. Common symptoms of disorganization and forgetfulness include:

- poor organizational skills (home, office, desk, or car is extremely messy and cluttered)
- tendency to procrastinate
- trouble starting and finishing projects
- chronic lateness
- frequently forgetting appointments, commitments, and deadlines
- constantly losing or misplacing things (keys, wallet, phone, documents, bills)
- underestimating the time it will take you to complete tasks

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Impulsivity

If you suffer from symptoms in this category, you may have trouble inhibiting your behaviors, comments, and responses. You might act before thinking, or react without considering consequences. You may find yourself interrupting others, blurting out comments, and rushing through tasks without reading instructions. If you have impulse problems, being patient is extremely difficult. For better or for worse, you may go headlong into situations and find yourself in potentially risky circumstances. You may struggle with controlling impulses if you:

- frequently interrupting others or talking over them
- poor self-control; addictive tendencies
- blurting out thoughts that are rude or inappropriate without thinking
- addictive tendencies
- acting recklessly or spontaneously without regard for consequences
- trouble behaving in socially appropriate ways (sitting still during a long meeting, for example)

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Emotional difficulties

Many adults with ADD/ADHD have a hard time managing their feelings, especially when it comes to emotions like anger or frustration. Common emotional symptoms of adult ADD/ADHD include:

- sense of underachievement
- doesn't deal well with frustration
- easily flustered and stressed out
- irritability or mood swings
- trouble staying motivated
- hypersensitivity to criticism
- short, often explosive, temper
- low self-esteem and sense of insecurity

Common adult ADD / ADHD symptoms: Hyperactivity or restlessness

Hyperactivity in adults with ADD/ADHD can look the same as it does in kids. You may be highly energetic and perpetually “on the go” as if driven by a motor. For many people with ADD/ADHD, however, the symptoms of hyperactivity become more subtle and internal as they grow older. Common symptoms of hyperactivity in adults include:

- feelings of inner restlessness, agitation
- tendency to take risks
- getting bored easily
- racing thoughts

- trouble sitting still; constant fidgeting
- craving for excitement
- talking excessively
- doing a million things at once

You don't have to be hyperactive to have ADD / ADHD

Adults with ADD/ADHD are much less likely to be hyperactive than their younger counterparts. Only a small slice of adults with ADD/ADHD, in fact, suffer from prominent symptoms of hyperactivity. Remember that names can be deceiving and you may very well have ADD/ADHD if you have one or more of the symptoms above—even if you lack hyperactivity.

Effects of adult ADD / ADHD

If you are just discovering you have adult ADD/ADHD, chances are you've suffered over the years for the unrecognized problem. People may have labeled you “lazy” or “stupid” because of your forgetfulness or difficulty completing tasks, and you may have begun to think of yourself in these negative terms as well.

Untreated ADD/ADHD has wide-reaching effects

ADD/ADHD that is undiagnosed and untreated can cause problems in virtually every area of your life.

- **Physical and mental health problems.** The symptoms of ADD/ADHD can contribute to a variety of health problems, including compulsive eating, substance abuse, anxiety, chronic stress and tension, and low self-esteem. You may also run into trouble due to neglecting important check-ups, skipping doctor appointments, ignoring medical instructions, and forgetting to take vital medications.
- **Work and financial difficulties.** Adults with ADD/ADHD often experience career difficulties and feel a strong sense of underachievement. You may have trouble keeping a job, following corporate rules, meeting deadlines, and sticking to a 9-to-5 routine. Managing finances may also be a problem: you may struggle with unpaid bills, lost paperwork, late fees, or debt due to impulsive spending.
- **Relationship problems.** The symptoms of ADD/ADHD can put a strain on your work, love, and family relationships. You may be fed up with constant nagging from loved ones to tidy up, listen more closely, or get organized. Those close to you, on the other hand, may feel hurt and resentful over your perceived “irresponsibility” or “insensitivity.”

The wide-reaching effects of ADD/ADHD can lead to embarrassment, frustration, hopelessness, disappointment, and loss of confidence. You may feel like you'll never be able to get your life under control. That's why a diagnosis of adult ADD/ADHD can be an enormous source of relief and hope. It helps you understand what you're up against for the first time and realize that you're not to blame. The

difficulties you've had are symptoms of attention deficit disorder—not the result of personal weakness or a character flaw.

Adult ADD/ADHD doesn't have to hold you back

When you have ADD/ADHD, it's easy to end up thinking that there's something wrong with you. But it's okay to be different. ADD/ADHD isn't an indicator of intelligence or capability. Certain things may be more difficult for you, but that doesn't mean you can't find your niche and achieve success. The key is to find out what your strengths are and capitalize on them.

It can be helpful to think about attention deficit disorder as a collection of traits that are both positive and negative—just like any other set of qualities you might possess. Along with the impulsivity and disorganization of ADD/ADHD, for example, often come incredible creativity, passion, energy, out-of-the-box thinking, and a constant flow of original ideas. Figure out what you're good at and set up your environment to support those strengths.

Self-help for adult ADD / ADHD

Armed with understanding of ADD/ADHD's challenges and the help of structured strategies, you can make real changes in your life. Many adults with attention deficit disorder have found meaningful ways to manage their symptoms, take advantage of their gifts, and lead productive and satisfying lives. You don't necessarily need outside intervention—at least not right away. There is a lot you can do to help yourself and get your symptoms under control.

- **Exercise and eat right.** Exercise vigorously and regularly—it helps work off excess energy and aggression in a positive way and soothes and calms the body. Eat a wide variety of healthy foods and limit sugary foods in order to even out mood swings.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** When you're tired, it's even more difficult to focus, manage stress, stay productive, and keep on top of your responsibilities. Support yourself by getting between 7-8 hours of sleep every night.
- **Practice better time management.** Set deadlines for everything, even for seemingly small tasks. Use timers and alarms to stay on track. Take breaks at regular intervals. Avoid piles of paperwork or procrastination by dealing with each item as it comes in. Prioritize time-sensitive tasks and write down every assignment, message, or important thought.
- **Work on your relationships.** Schedule activities with friends and keep your engagements. Be vigilant in conversation: listen when others are speaking and try not to speak too quickly yourself. Cultivate relationships with people who are sympathetic and understanding of your struggles with ADD/ADHD.
- **Create a supportive work environment.** Make frequent use of lists, color-coding, reminders, notes-to-self, rituals, and files. If possible, choose work that motivates and interests you. Notice how and when you work best and apply these conditions to your working environment as best you can. It can help to team up with less creative, more organized people—a partnership that can be mutually beneficial.

Living with ADD / ADHD: How to Help Yourself

There's hope for adult ADD/ADHD—no matter how out of control your life is, no matter how frazzled and frustrated you feel. With structure, support, and a personalized toolkit of self-help strategies, you can learn how to get organized, efficiently manage your time, take control of your finances, improve job performance, and boost your social skills.

Read: [Self-Help for Adult ADD / ADHD: Tips for Managing Symptoms and Getting Focused](#)

When to seek outside help for adult ADD / ADHD

If the symptoms of ADD/ADHD are still getting in the way of your life, despite self-help efforts to manage them, it may be time to seek outside support. Adults with ADD/ADHD can benefit from a number of treatments, including behavioral coaching, individual therapy, self-help groups, vocational counseling, educational assistance, and medication.

Treatment for adults with attention deficit disorder, like treatment for kids, should involve a team of professionals, along with the person's family members and spouse.

Professionals trained in ADD/ADHD can help you:

- control impulsive behaviors
- manage your time and money
- get and stay organized
- boost productivity at home and work
- manage stress and anger
- communicate more clearly

Treatment and therapy for adult ADD / ADHD

Therapy for adults with ADD/ADHD can be helpful for both the emotional issues related to the disorder and practical, day-to-day issues.

- **Talk therapy** – Adults with ADD/ADHD often struggle with issues stemming from longstanding patterns of underachievement, failure, academic difficulties, job turnover, and relationship conflict. Individual talk therapy can help you deal with this emotional baggage, including low self-esteem, the feelings of embarrassment and shame you may have experienced as a child and teenager, and resentment at the nagging and criticism you receive from people close to you.
- **Marriage and family therapy** – Marriage and family therapy addresses the problems ADD/ADHD can create in your relationships and family life, such as conflicts over money problems, forgotten commitments, responsibilities in the home, and impulsive decisions. Therapy can help you and your loved ones explore these issues and focus on constructive ways of dealing with them and communicating with each other. Therapy can also improve your relationship by educating your partner about ADD/ADHD.
- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** – Cognitive-behavioral therapy encourages you to identify and change the negative beliefs and behaviors that are causing problems in your life. Since many individuals with ADD/ADHD are demoralized from years of struggle and unmet expectations, one of the main goals of cognitive-behavioral therapy is to transform this negative outlook into a more hopeful, realistic view. Cognitive-behavioral therapy also focuses on the practical issues that often come with ADD/ADHD, such as disorganization, work performance problems, and poor time management.

Support groups for adult ADD / ADHD

A support group not only gives you the human encouragement you need to keep working on your issues, but also gives you frank feedback on how you come across to others. A support group for ADD/ADHD:

- reduces the isolation of struggling with your disorder,
- gives you a place to express your feelings to others who truly understand, and
- lets you share strategies for success.

Usually a therapist or other mental health practitioner leads an ADD/ADHD support group, making sure that you feel supported and that others listen to your feelings and reactions.

ADD / ADHD coaches and professional organizers

Behavioral coaches and professional organizers are not a replacement for therapy, but they can be a valuable supplement to an ADD/ADHD treatment plan.

Behavioral coaching

In contrast to therapists, who help adults with attention deficit disorder work through emotional problems, coaches focus solely on practical solutions to problems in everyday life. Behavioral coaches teach you strategies for organizing your home and work environment, structuring your day, and managing your money.

ADD/ADHD coaches work with you on areas such as:

- prioritizing
- motivation
- time management
- procrastination

ADD/ADHD coaches may come to your home or talk with you on the phone rather than meet with you in an office; many coach-client relationships are long-distance.

Professional organizers

A professional organizer can be very helpful if you have difficulty organizing your belongings or your time.

A professional organizer can help you:

- reduce the stress that clutter creates
- get and stay organized
- save time by organizing your belongings more efficiently
- create a schedule and stick to it
- streamline your workflow
- set up a system for paperwork, filing, and bills

A professional organizer comes to your home or workplace, looks at your setup, and then suggests changes.