

Adult Attention Deficit Disorder

Grant L. Martin, Ph.D.

Introduction

Joe can't sit still in church or meetings. He squirms his way through movies and TV watching, clicking from one channel to another. He can't stand waiting for anybody or anything, and avoids lines like the plague. Read a book? Are you kidding? Joe's mind wanders so far and so fast he has no recall of what he has read.

Jim's friends call him the absent minded professor. While Jim is obviously quite bright, he is very forgetful and disorganized. He has a hard time finishing whatever he starts and will tend to switch from task to task in a haphazard way.

Sally is known for her three D's—Disorganized, Distractible and Discombobulated. She is distracted by the smallest event. She has trouble finishing even routine tasks. She tries to pay attention, but her mind wanders even while attempting to listen to one-on-one conversations. Sally also will erupt into a rage over small frustrations or irritations.

Do these adults have some type of diagnosable disorder, or are they just hassled and frazzled citizens living in a frenzied world? While we can't tell from these brief descriptions, we do know the features of distractibility, restlessness and impulsiveness are key characteristics of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These are the same characteristics observed in children.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is used to describe persons who have chronic impairments in their thinking ability that affects their capacity to function in school, work, and social relationships. Persons with ADHD have more problems getting organized for work-related assignments. They have trouble attending to details and in sustaining attention and effort for assigned tasks. They may also have difficulty ignoring distractions, in keeping track of things, and in remembering what they are doing. Some adults with ADHD are chronically impulsive and hyperactive, but many will have difficulties primarily in the area of inattention and distractibility.

Research suggests that 6 to 8 percent of elementary school-age children have some type of ADHD. However, attention disorder is not just a problem of childhood. Recent studies indicate that about 50 to 80 percent of ADHD children continue to experience problems with ADHD impairments in adolescence and adulthood. There may be five million adults with ADHD. The features that show up in adults are quite similar to those in ADHD children. There is some tendency for hyperactive children to lose some degree of their hyperactive characteristics as they move into adulthood. However, the inattentive, forgetful and distractible features tend to persist.

ADHD adults are at greater risk for a variety of problems. Studies have shown the individuals with ADHD are more likely to have problems with school functioning, thinking skills, social skills, substance abuse, legal difficulties, and even things like speeding tickets, and auto accidents.

Symptoms and Signs of ADHD

There are three categories of primary symptoms of ADHD: inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Inattentive features would include having difficulty with details or a tendency to make careless mistakes, sustaining attention, listening, finishing tasks, organization, sustaining mental effort, losing things, being easily distracted and being forgetful.

Hyperactive characteristics include being fidgety, having a hard time remaining seated or staying in one place, feeling restless, difficulty completing activities that require quiet, feeling tense or driven, and talking too much.

Impulsive symptoms include blurting out answers, difficulty awaiting turns, and often interrupting or intruding on others.

There are numerous other secondary symptoms of ADHD that are often seen by counselors who work with attention deficit adults. These include a chronic sense of underachievement, low self-esteem, frequent procrastination, and the starting of many projects but trouble with follow through. Also seen is a tendency to be easily bored, a high need for thrill seeking or constant stimulation, and the tendency to be impatient and a low tolerance for frustration. Many adults with attention disorder also display mood swings, depression, and a tendency toward addictive behavior. In addition they often have family histories with ADHD symptoms, or the presence of addictive behaviors or other problems with impulse control or mood.

It should also be pointed out that most ADHD adults are creative, intuitive, talented or intelligent in many ways. Even if disorganized and distractible, many of these persons have gifts and abilities that are worthy of cultivation and affirmation.

Causes of ADHD

The exact causes of attention disorder are not fully understood. However, with the large effort being put forth to discover its origin, we have begun to gather convincing evidence of numerous factors associated with ADHD. The first category includes various agents that can lead to brain injury or abnormal brain development. This can include trauma, disease, fetal exposure to alcohol and tobacco, and early exposure to high levels of lead.

Diet has been proposed by some as a factor in attention disorder. However, there is no consistent scientific evidence that sugar in any form, additives, preservatives, nor the presence or absence of vitamins or minerals are a significant cause of ADHD symptoms. What we eat is a major factor in our health and well-being. Some children and adults may have definite negative reactions to certain elements in their diet. If so, this information should be used to guide their eating habits. Yet, at this time, there is no persuasive evidence regarding diet as a significant source for ADHD.

The major evidence points to diminished activity in certain brain regions and heredity as the most likely cause of most forms of attention disorder. From the available research on the brain, ADHD is essentially a problem with “putting on the brakes”. When you step on the brake pedal of your car, that action is transmitted, by means of brake fluid flowing through the brake lines, to each of the wheels of your car. The increased pressure of the brake fluid then activates the braking mechanism on the wheels, and you begin to slow down. However, if you are low on brake fluid, or have a leak in the system, the brakes may not respond precisely the way you want. You may want to stop or slow down, and step on the brakes, but nothing happens. This is roughly, what happens in the brain of a person with ADHD.

The cause of ADHD is understood to be dysregulation of certain neurotransmitters in the brain which make it harder for a person to sort out or regulate certain internal and external stimuli. These deficits in brain neurochemistry make it harder to concentrate and focus. Several neurotransmitters, including dopamine and norepinephrine, probably affect the production, use and regulation of other neurotransmitters, as well as the functioning of some brain structures. These problems with regulation of certain brain functions seem to be centralized in the frontal lobes which makes it more difficult for an ADHD person to control input from other parts of the brain. The frontal region of the brain, which is just behind the forehead, is said to control the “executive functions” of our behavior. The executive function is responsible for memory, organization, inhibiting behavior, sustaining attention, initiating self-control, and planning for the future. Without enough dopamine and related neurotransmitters, the frontal lobes are understimulated and unable to perform their complex functions effectively.

Distractibility and inattention, from a brain function perspective, are the failure to “stop” or tune out unwanted internal thoughts or outside stimuli such as a voice in the other room, or a bird outside the window. Rapid mood changes and hypersensitivity are the results of the brain having more difficulty moderating those parts of the brain which regulate motor movements and emotional responses. Finally, an ADHD person’s difficulty with hyperactivity and impulsive behavior may stem from frontal lobe deficiencies which make it hard to wait, delay gratification and inhibit actions. All of these characteristics can then interfere with a person’s memory and ability to learn and efficiently process information.

Whatever the exact nature of the brain structure of chemistry behind ADHD, there appears to be a strong genetic basis for its occurrence. Studies show that between 20 and 30 percent of all ADHD children have at least one parent with attention disorder. Studies of identical and fraternal twins have found a significantly higher incidence of ADHD in identical rather than fraternal twins. This strongly suggests a genetic predisposition to the disorder. Studies in molecular biology also support the idea that ADHD is an inherited condition.

The scientific support for the fact that ADHD is a genetically based neurobiological disorder can be a great help to adults with attention disorder who have previously believed they were lazy, stupid or careless. These symptoms we have described are not just a result of poor parenting, faulty education, lack of self-control, insufficient motivation or lack of trying. While each of these factors can intensify or complicate the problems associated with attention disorder, they are not the basic cause for the condition. This fact can be a great source of empowerment and liberation for the adult who has struggled with self-blame and shame for years. Attention disorder is neurobiological problem that has significant impact in the daily life of the ADHD adult. It is not their fault, yet we can offer hope because of the many strategies available to help one cope with this disorder.

ADHD and Individual Responsibility

Having touched on the neurobiological causes of ADHD, we still need to emphasize the place for individual responsibility. Once an attention disorder has been diagnosed, each person must be accountable to learn how to deal effectively with the problems associated with ADHD. The presence of the disorder should not be an excuse for irresponsibility. "I'm sorry I was late and forgot to pick you up. You'll have to excuse me because I have an attention disorder, " might be the plea of some ADHD adults. This is not the proper perspective.

For example, it is not a person's fault that he has become nearsighted and requires correction for adequate vision. It is his responsibility to wear his glasses so that he has adequate vision, especially when driving, so that he is not a danger to others. This principle also applies to adults with ADHD. It is not their fault they have the condition, but it is their job to learn how to cope and accommodate in the most effective manner possible. This not only brings a greater level of personal

accomplishment and satisfaction, it also contributes to harmony and trust among the ADHD adult's family and friends.

Diagnosis of ADHD

In spite of the increased knowledge about attention disorder, the accurate diagnosis of this condition remains somewhat difficult and subjective. There is no single test for an attention disorder. The process will involve tracing patterns of behavior through childhood and adolescence, as well as evaluating the person's current emotional, social and intellectual problems. All of this should be completed by a professional trained in the area of diagnosis and treatment of ADHD. We should remember that attention disorder is relative uncommon and affects only about 2 to 5 percent of the adult population. While it is a very real condition that accounts for the distress in many adults, it is important to be cautious and thorough in coming to a final diagnosis.

Generally, the diagnostic process should include the following areas of assessment. The first is a review of the person's childhood with the purpose of identifying the defining characteristics of attention disorder. This includes the features of inattention, and/or impulsivity and hyperactivity. Even if the person was never identified as having ADHD, the process will endeavor to determine if some of the features were present but never diagnosed. Old report cards, teacher evaluations, past test results, self-descriptions, background information forms and descriptions from family members may be used.

The second component is to identify if there are current ADHD symptoms present in the day-to-day functioning of the adult. This part of the evaluation will look for both the primary and secondary signs and symptoms described earlier. Clinical interviews, rating scales, selective tests, job evaluations and corroborative descriptions by family, friends, or work associates are used here.

The third aspect of the diagnosis is to confirm that these symptoms are producing impairment in many areas of the person's life, such as on the job, in school, social acceptance, daily responsibilities, relationships, marriage, and emotional adjustment. The same methods of interview, review of past documentation, and rating forms as used previously, will be applied to this diagnostic feature.

The final aspect of the assessment process is to identify other medical or emotional conditions that might masquerade as attention disorder or may be occurring along with the ADHD. This would include screening for alcohol and related substance abuse problems. A thorough medical and psychological history, along with specific tests will be used to help determine the most effective course of treatment for the person's particular constellation of symptoms. Many persons with attention disorder also have some type of learning disability. Consequently, tests of learning potential and achievement may be given to identify the role of learning in a person's difficulties.

If you suspect you may have ADHD, discuss the idea with your medical doctor. If you are seeing a mental health professional, ask his or her opinion. If it seems appropriate, ask them for a referral to someone with expertise in the diagnostic procedure. Another way to find a professional trained in diagnosing adult attention disorder is to check with a local chapter of CH.A.D.D. (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder, 499 NW 70th Avenue, Suite 109, Plantation, FL 33317, phone-305-587-3700, web site-www.chadd.org). They may be able to help you find an experienced professional in your area. You may also know others who have attention disorder and who have gone through the process. Ask them who they used and what was their degree of satisfaction with their resource. Another good web site is www.help4adhd.org.

In selecting a professional, you will want to know his or her level of training and experience in working with adult ADHD. Ask about the nature and cost of the assessment as well as the possible

progression and components of treatment. To be successful, your care provider should be personable and concerned about your situation. He or she should be able to communicate and explain things to you in an open and understandable manner, as well as respond to your questions in a favorable way. Your provider should also be open to family involvement in your treatment, as well as to other aspects of a multi-disciplinary or team effort on your behalf.

If you are a Christian, you will also be looking for a professional who has a sensitivity and ability to deal with spiritual issues and is one who can relate faith and practice to your needs. Your pastor may be a source of referral for Christian professionals. You may also want to look up Christian counseling centers in your area and ask if they have a person on staff who specializes in adult ADHD. Remember, just because a person is a Christian doesn't mean he or she has the other qualifications you need. Be sure to ask the various questions described earlier.

Treatment of Adult ADHD

Approximately 70 to 90 percent of adults with attention disorder find their symptoms improve with medication. These persons are more able to concentrate on formerly difficult material or tasks. They are able to maintain more self-control, and they are able to calm those restless behaviors.

As helpful as medication can be, it is not a cure or a panacea for all the problems associated with ADHD. There are some for whom medication does not work. And even for those who find benefits from medication, there are usually a host of associated features that require continual help in the form of therapy, training, or education.

Medication. Because medication has proven helpful with a vast majority of ADHD adults, drug therapy has become a chief element in the treatment process. Two types of drugs have been proven to be most effective in treating attention disorder. The first are stimulants, such as Ritalin, Concerta, Metadate CD, Dexedrine and Adderall which are believed to increase the amount of dopamine available to the brain. In some way these medications increase the braking power of the brain over behavior. The result is often improved ability to concentrate, sustain attention and maintain effort on a task. Strattera is a newer nonstimulant medication that is sometimes helpful.

Sometimes other medications prove helpful. This includes antidepressants such as Tofranil, Norpramin, Elavil, Wellbutrin and Prozac. These drugs were developed to treat depression, but they have been found to be helpful with many of the symptoms of attention disorder. Apparently, these drugs increase the amount of norepinephrine and serotonin, as well as dopamine, available for work within the brain, especially in the frontal lobe region. They restore a proper balance of neurotransmitters to the brain which allows messages about concentration and behavior to be more efficiently processed. These medications can also be used along with stimulants when there are accompanying problems with moods, such as depression, anxiety, and panic reactions, or problems with sleeping. The results may include less irritability or temper outbursts, somewhat happier or elevation of mood, and less anxiety or worry.

There can be side effects with any of these medications. This can include difficulty sleeping, decreased appetite, irritability, headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, dry mouth, diarrhea, and anxiety. How you will be affected depends on many factors. Which drug or combination of medications will work best for any given individual depends on their own particular brain chemistry and constellation of symptoms. The process of finding the correct medication and the appropriate dosage is often a process of trial and error. So you will need to take a patient and persistent approach to the process. (Not easy when you have ADHD!) The good news is that the majority of people with attention disorder report that coping with the side effects and/or having to try several different medications or dosages, is a small price to pay for the benefits medication eventually provides. Each person has to make their own decision about the relative merits and disadvantages of the medication.

Additional Aspects of Treatment. There are numerous components to a comprehensive treatment plan for attention disorders. This can include education about ADHD, individual and family counseling, career counseling and planning, skill building in time management and organization, support groups, coaching, and treatment for addictive behaviors.

Usually, if drug or alcohol abuse, or other serious addictions are present, the first order of business is to start a treatment program for these issues. Work on the ADHD features will not be effective if the person is actively caught up in an addictive cycle.

The educational process begins with the diagnostic process and continues when a positive diagnosis is reached. Now the person needs complete information about ADHD and how it affects his or her life. Books, tapes, classes, seminars, and support groups can play an important part in fulfilling the educational component of treatment.

Counseling will often be an important part of learning to deal with the emotional, relational, spiritual and practical aspects of attention disorder. Traditional insight-oriented psychotherapy generally has not proved effective for dealing with ADHD symptoms. However, a lifetime of frustration and failure can leave some adults with a need for the healing of emotional and psychological wounds. For those, individual therapy will be helpful. Others will choose to focus on behavior strategies and skill building for concerns such as time-management, procrastination, money management, and memory assistance which will help them accommodate or compensate for their attentional deficits.

Memory problems are frequently a cognitive deficit experienced by many persons with ADHD. Working with a counselor or consultant, such a person could establish compensatory memory systems. This can include written memory devices such as a daily planner, electronic systems such as a pocket computer, auditory reminders such as a tape recorder or electronic timer, and task-specific aids such as a pill alarm or melodic key-finder.

Marriage and family counseling can be an opportunity for family members to be educated about the realities of ADHD and how problem solving, conflict resolution, parenting, communication skills and team work can be applied to the situation.

It will be important to set realistic goals and then devise appropriate, but manageable plans and sequences of objectives to achieve those goals. Sometimes, the ADHD adult may need to hire a consultant for specific projects, such as organizing their home or office, and then monitoring of their progress so that the organization can be maintained.

Career counseling and planning can be very helpful. Many ADHD adults are mismatched to their jobs. They may be very good at meeting people, for example, so they go into sales. However, when required to complete the paperwork attached to client follow-up, many persons with attention disorder run into problems. Career counseling can help identify personal strengths and match them to the best work environment.

The concept of coaching has been applied to the process of learning more effective ways to cope with the problems associated with ADHD. A coach is someone, usually not a family member, who is willing to communicate with the ADHD adult several times each week for several months. Either by phone or in person, the person communicates with his or her coach and they review goals and plans necessary to implement desired changes. This accountability relationship provides ongoing feedback, encouragement, and instruction which makes movement toward established goals more successful. For the Christian, it is also a format in which prayer and fellowship can be used to nurture a person toward greater spiritual fulfillment.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is a reality affecting millions of adults. While there is no cure, a great deal of knowledge can be applied to the processes of diagnosing and treating this disorder. There is every reason to be hopeful. May God bless as you take this information and apply it to yourself or to someone you love.

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