

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – ADHD Some basic facts

This condition affects 3-6% of the general population, so in a school class of about 30 there would be likely to be on average one to two children with ADHD.

- [Many of these children are not diagnosed, simply because their ADHD is not recognised. Adult ADHD is even less recognised.
- [ADHD is difficulty with self control or self-regulation, and is therefore often misunderstood. It is a hidden disability.
- [All ADHD children have problems of Inattention, Hyperactivity and Impulsiveness but the severity of each and the balance between them can vary from child to child.
- [ADHD commonly continues into adulthood.
- [ADHD can show as hyperactive and impulsive,
or as inattentive (often called ADD)
or as all three factors combined.
- [The outcome for an individual young person depends on their balance of symptoms and how these are managed at home, in school and other environments.
- [ADHD is often combined with other difficulties such as dyslexia, sleep problems, bedwetting, and co-ordination problems.
- [People with ADHD seem to live in the present. They have trouble planning ahead, are not motivated by rewards at a later date, don't learn from past mistakes, and are bad at judging time, so are often late and rushed.

The three diagnostic criteria - Inattention, Hyperactivity and Impulsiveness

Inattention

Inattention is not so much *lack* of attention as *too much* attention. With ADHD it is very difficult to focus on one thing and filter out irrelevant sights, sounds, feelings and thoughts.

Paying attention doesn't just mean concentrating. We have to: focus on the right thing at the right time
divide focus between two things when necessary
and be able to shift focus to move on to the next important task.

These are all common problems with ADHD.

Some of the results of Attention problems

Poor time-keeping	Difficulty sustaining attention on a task
Easily distracted	Difficulty maintaining a train of thought
Disorganised	Difficulty following instructions
Loses essential things	Leaves things unfinished
Repeatedly forgetful	Makes careless mistakes
Difficulty following and joining in a group conversation	

Because inattentive ADHD people have these problems they can appear rude, uninterested, incompetent, uncaring or lazy.

The mental exertion required for them to complete a mundane task, or even start the task, is much more than for a non-ADHD person.

It is common for them to feel overwhelmed.

Hyperfocus

When a person with ADHD manages to settle on one thing it can be a relief and some then block everything else out. They forget about the important thing they were going to do next and find it hard to change activity. When struggling to concentrate (on what they are saying as well as doing) they might snap at anyone who interrupts.

Symptoms of inattention cause difficulties at primary school and these difficulties often increase at secondary school.

When the problems of ADHD are not understood by family or teachers, the result for the child will often be under-achievement, failure and criticism, which in turn can result in depression and loss of motivation, or anger and oppositional behaviour.

Girls with ADHD may be undiagnosed because they tend to have mainly inattentive characteristics whereas boys are more likely to be disruptive.

Hyperactivity

Hyperactivity is described as random, excessive activity when compared with other children of the same age (or other adults)

In children, hyperactivity can be seen as, for example:

- Running and climbing in inappropriate situations
- Unable to play quietly, and always on the go
- Fidgeting and unable to sit still for any length of time
- Chewing (e.g. pencils, fingernails, tv controllers, clothes)
- Impatience

In adolescents and adults, hyperactivity can be:

Talking too much	Talking very fast
Fidgeting	Impatience
General restlessness	Racing thoughts

Obvious physical hyperactivity lessens with age but a typical hyperactive 17 year old might have the activity level of a typical non-ADHD 7 year old.

In spite of their hyperactivity, a person with ADHD may also suffer from inertia, and may be a heavy sleeper, though others may find it hard to fall asleep or have disturbed sleep.

Impulsiveness (Impulsivity)

ADHD is often thought of as hyperactivity and distractibility but it is the impulsiveness that is most likely to lead a child or young person into trouble.

Acting and reacting quickly, according to instinct, or governed by emotion, with little thought about the consequences, even when these are obvious, is one of the most difficult aspects of ADHD.

In children impulsiveness shows as:

Lacking self-control

Interrupting

Impatient, finding it difficult to wait their turn

Saying things rashly, may be tactless or rude

Rushing work, making careless errors

Losing temper easily

In adolescents and adults, impulsiveness may show as all the above, plus:

Rushing into decisions and then regretting them

Overspending and impulse buying

Generosity when cannot afford it

Over-commitment of time

Lashing out at people or things

Enthusiastically starting new things without preparation

Jumping into, and giving up on, jobs, relationships, projects, interests

Risky behaviour of various types, e.g. trying drugs, unsafe sex, fast driving.

ADHD and Executive Function/ Executive Skills

Difficulties in ADHD are often described as weaknesses in executive skills or executive functioning. Executive functions are those workings of our brains that help us to be organised, to plan, make decisions and decide priorities, to use what we have learnt in the past, to keep in mind our goals for the future, and act in our own best interests.

WORKING MEMORY

Holding information and facts in mind while we use them and relate them to other facts or activities.

With ADHD, working memory can be 'blinky', and get easily overloaded.

SELF ACTIVATION

Getting started, paying attention and getting things finished.

More difficult with ADHD, so people leave things to the last minute.

SENSE OF TIME

Monitoring the passage of time and planning accordingly.

With ADHD, people often spend too long on some things and don't allow enough time for other things.

REMEMBERING TO REMEMBER

Remembering the right things at the right time, or returning to something after an interruption.

With ADHD people can sometimes forget altogether or remember when it's too late.

CONTROLLING EMOTIONS

Having feelings without acting on them, being able to tolerate frustration, thinking before acting or speaking.

People with ADHD tend to feel strong emotions and act on them more than other people.

HINDSIGHT and FORETHOUGHT

Remembering and learning lessons from the past, thinking ahead to the likely result of different actions, then using the past and future to guide the present and make good decisions.

People with ADHD tend to react too quickly to be able to make use of the knowledge they have.

Different researchers have created slightly different lists of Executive Functions.

This one is from Ari Tuckman, (Executive Functions Workbook) based on Russell Barkley

What causes ADHD?

About 80% of ADHD is inherited.
Many genes are thought to be involved.

The balance of neuro-transmitters (brain chemicals) is different in the ADHD brain.

The parts of the brain affected seem to be the frontal lobes which govern self-control and 'Executive Functions'.

The ADHD brain probably evolved through the benefits it brings but the demands of school, many types of jobs, and typical modern living, doesn't suit it so well.

Potential advantages of ADHD characteristics

Originality

Creativity and inventiveness

Ability to focus intensely when interested

High level of energy and exuberance

Entrepreneurial flair

Quick reactions can be good in emergencies

Risk-taking can lead to discoveries and achievements

ADHD in Adults has been officially recognised in the UK since 2008.

If not diagnosed until adulthood, people with ADHD have usually had problems of depression and /or anxiety. Employment and relationships are also often adversely affected. Alcohol or drugs are sometimes used as a way of controlling feelings and symptoms.

With hyperactive-impulsive type ADHD they may have had problems throughout their school life, whereas with mainly inattentive ADHD it is sometimes only when reaching A levels or University that major difficulties become obvious when the lack of structure and support make it impossible to achieve and cope.

Getting a diagnosis means the adult can start to learn about ADHD, understand themselves better, and learn strategies to help with their specific challenges, for example organisation, time management, and strong emotions. Possible sources of help include an ADHD Coach, self-help books and joining a Support Group.