

Adults with ADHD

By Dr. Christopher Green

Adult ADHD first came to be noticed when paediatricians recognised that some of the parents of children in their care had the same symptoms as their children. It is believed that at least 50% of ADHD children will bring some of the features of their condition into adulthood.

We are told that some of the most creative, driven and famous people in today's society are adults with ADHD. Unfortunately, not everyone who grows up with ADHD has such a success story; many of the adults we see have one thing in common, a secret feeling of failure. These are clever people who have had to struggle twice as hard for everything. This has left them with an inner feeling of inferiority, underachievement and immense frustration. Hopefully, with the new understanding of ADHD in childhood and its acceptance as an appropriate adult diagnosis, this situation is about to change.

The Picture

Adults have very much the same difficulties as children with ADHD. The school problems now become work problems. The hyperactive-impulsive behaviours usually mellow but there remains a restlessness and a tendency to impulsive actions. Those who study find it difficult to organise and finish assignments, information is not easily remembered and they forget as they read.

The greatest attribute and the greatest disability of adult ADHD is the restless, circling brain. As this spins, a cascade of thoughts intrudes into the mind. Occasionally this brings immense creativity and invention, but more often it distracts the mind from the important issue of the moment. This inner restlessness is at its worst when there is boredom and lack of structure. It is at its most focused in times of crisis, imminent deadlines and the heat of battle.

The most frequent complaints:

- Inability to concentrate
- Lack of organisation
- Forgetfulness and poor memory
- Poor self-discipline
- Inability to establish and maintain a routine
- Confusion, trouble thinking clearly
- Inability to perform up to intellectual level in study
- Performance on job below level of competence
- Difficulty in finding and keeping jobs
- Depression, low self-esteem

ADHD in Day-to-Day Life

The adult with ADHD may have a restless mind, a restless body, an impulsive temperament, poor short-term memory, attention deficit, 'circular speech' overfocused interest, and difficulties with organisation. Let's look at these and other behaviours in more detail.

A restless mind

Adults tell us they have a ‘busy brain’. As they sit in a lecture, their mind is bouncing round all sorts of ideas, most of which have nothing to do with the topic. “Did I lock the car properly?” “Should I have a hamburger on the way home?” “I wonder who is winning the football?” Adults with ADHD can’t stop distracting themselves, particularly when things are boring. In outside life their heads are alive with ideas, but these thoughts are rarely captured and turned into action. When this creative potential can be harnessed there is true brilliance, but for most to the time it is an immense annoyance to those with the ADHD and the people they live with.

A restless body

Though the activity of ADHD is at its worst in the early years, many people remain busy in adulthood. A few continue with an almost childlike hyperactivity while the majority are restless, with occasional bursts of busyness. This restlessness is shown as jiggling feet, clenching the jaw, flitting eyes, tapping, clicking pens, doodling, or just appearing ‘overcharged’. If the adult can harness this drive and energy, they can be amazingly productive. Unfortunately, it’s hard to live with so much busyness.

Impulsive ‘sparky’ behaviour

The worst excesses of impulsivity have usually mellowed by the later years, but some adults are still remarkably hot-headed. They get into trouble with unwise spending, poor business decisions, unthinking outbursts, and unpredictability. Adults with ADHD are more accident-prone than others and at greater risk of injury on the roads. This impulsivity and lack of self-monitoring make the ADHD adult an inconsistent parent. They alter the rules, explode inappropriately and can’t let the irrelevant behaviours pass unnoticed. This results in the ADHD child being more difficult to manage. Sometimes we wonder if we should be treating the parent before the child.

Poor short-term memory

Though long-term memory is generally good, the short-term memory is a particular problem in adults with ADHD. Ideas come quickly and evaporate unless recorded immediately. Instructions and information are forgotten unless backed up by a written note. Poor memory is an immense irritation to those with ADHD who hold their life together with notes, lists, memory jogs, and the tightest of structures.

Inattentive-distractable

While the circling brain of ADHD distracts from within, annoyances in the external environment steal attention from outside. Those with ADHD become rapidly bored and lose their focus. They miss the steps of instructions. They can read a page with little thought for the print that has passed their eyes. Minor irritations can become immensely distracting: the drip of a tap, the flicker of a fluorescent light, the workmate’s sniff, or the drone of a neighbour’s lawnmower. Attention usually sharpens in times of high energy and crisis, but working with a drama-driven adult is a stressful and ageing experience. Adults with ADHD find it difficult to get organised and do what needs to be done. For them, procrastination is the greatest curse, and once they have started on a task it is hard to sustain energy, then finish on time. Work is unevenly divided, with most effort allocated to the least important activity. There is often an inability to estimate time, which results in missed appointments and taking on more than can be managed.

“All or nothing” response

It seems that some ADHD adults have no middle ground, they are either in fast forward, stop, or in full reverse mode. There is a great tendency to jump in, boots and all, and when interest drops, rush off in another direction. All this impulsive coming and going is immensely stressful.

Hyperfocus – preoccupation

Those with ADHD are inattentive but they can also get stuck, preoccupied and overfocused. An idea hits the mind, and is pursued to death. This determination and single-mindedness has made many famous ADHD adults great, but it can also be quite destructive. When the preoccupation is negative or self-critical, some adults become almost paranoid. In a relationship, the overfocus on other agendas can make the adult unavailable or distant to their partner.

Disorganisation

Forgetfulness, distractability, impulsive actions and poor time management are a recipe for chaos. Disorganisation is one of the most common concerns of the adult with ADHD and here strict structure averts total turmoil. Those who succeed are almost obsessive in their pursuit of order, they know that once they drop their guard, all falls apart. Some of the most successful ADHD business people are held together by a supportive partner or secretary, who acts as their frontal lobe.

Circular speech

Most ADHD adults have good speech skills, but some wander all over the place. Good communication starts by introducing a topic and taking the listener along a predictable course. Circular talkers start appropriately but keep adding, correcting and sidetracking. This characteristic is painfully evident when I listen to the teaching tapes made by some of the high profile psychiatrists who have ADHD themselves.

Social clumsiness

Adults with ADHD have a genuine wish to get on well with their workmates and be successful in their relationships. Unfortunately there are parts of this disorder which lead to social stress. Many fail in their relationships as they don't sense the usual cues that guide socialisation. It is easy to become so engrossed in our own agenda that we forget the needs of those who depend on us. The impulsive behaviour can cause adults to be erratic, short tempered and unpredictable. Though it is the ADHD adult who is the cause of these social problems, they can become paranoid that the other 'ratbags' are at fault and don't want to be friendly. It's no wonder that emotional and work relationships can hit such lows.

The most common problem for adults with ADHD is one of weak reading and spelling. Many ADHD adults do not read for pleasure and are poor spellers, but they cope. A few have major ongoing reading and writing problems, which cause immense frustration and demoralisation for these intelligent adults.

Protecting Relationships

The risk of marriage stress, broken relationships and sole parenthood is greatly increased in adult ADHD. There are no miracle cures but if we are alert to the danger areas, much of the trouble can be avoided. Partners of ADHD adults often feel there is little appreciation of their emotional needs. If partners can try to stop for a minute and think how others feel, things do get better.

Think before you act

When our adult lives are tough, it is important not to dump on those we love. The adult with ADHD speaks and acts before thinking but they must try to be aware how this explosion or insult feels for others and learn to step back, walk round the block, take deep breaths or practise relaxation. It is easy to act impulsively, it is hard to repair the damage after the event. When disciplining children, an ADHD parent needs to think before they open their mouth. Is this important? Is it worth fighting over? Am I interfering in my partner's discipline? Impulsivity leads to overspending, misuse of credit cards and poor money management. Business decisions should not be made without careful thought.

Sex and ADHD

With such a growing interest in adults, sex is a frequent topic at seminars. Some adults keep such strange hours it is quite a feat to get both partners in bed and awake at the same time. Successful sex requires concentration and this is a weakness in ADHD. Some psychiatrists claim that prescribing a stimulant to females with ADHD has a marked effect on their sex life. It is presumed that this keeps the inattentive mind on track.

ADHD in the workplace

Adults with immense pace and activity need space and an outlet for their energy. Busy people need to release pent up energy. Getting into the habit of exercise helps. Disorganised slow readers and writers should avoid high-intensity paper-pushing jobs. Structure, organisation, time management, sustaining energy and maintaining relationships are vital to success at work. Attention and memory are usually weak so it is important to record important instructions in a notebook or on tape. Memory jogs such as rhymes and mnemonics can be helpful. Periods of concentrated work with short breaks work well. Avoid distractions such as talkative co-workers. It is rarely advisable to tell your workmates you have a 'disorder' but be quite frank about your weak spots. "I have a hopeless memory and need to write things down". "I'm a bit of a hothead". "I've never been able to spell".

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