

Adult ADHD Living with Late Diagnosis

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A newfound wave of self-discovery has ascended among adults as they navigate more accessible information about mental health. The fields of neuroscience and psychology are evolving at a rapid pace. As we gain a greater collective understanding of the mind, many people start to have questions and realizations.

What Does ADHD Feel Like?

Imagine an invisible weight tied to your ankle, making every challenge more difficult. All the while, you're unaware it's there until finding out one day. That's the reality for many who receive a late ADHD diagnosis. Some individuals find this out after decades of believing others were simply "better at handling life" than they were.

ADHD, also formerly referred to as ADD, impacts every area of a person's life, including school, work and social relationships. Diagnoses have increased among younger generations, with a diagnostic prevalence of 8.8% of children according to the National Center for Health Statistics and 2.5% of adults according to the American Psychiatric Association.

What Does ADHD Look Like?

John Hopkins Medicine claims there are two main presentations of ADHD, hyperactive and inattentive. Individuals can also have combinations of these types. Inattentive ADHD is characterized by distractedness and being lost in one's thoughts.

Alternatively, hyperactive ADHD is characterized by impulsivity and hyperactivity. Women tend to display inattentive symptoms, making them more likely to go undiagnosed.

Unmanaged ADHD can be harmful in the workplace. "Time blindness" refers to the inability to gauge the passage of time. An article from Cleveland Clinic describes this phenomenon which can result in missing deadlines and showing up late to work. Lack of attention to detail and inability to multitask can lead to mistakes, which may place a person's job in jeopardy.

Struggling with verbal instructions, disorganization and forgetfulness can also cause issues in the workplace. Individuals with ADHD often hop from job to job due to getting fired or becoming bored of the position. A study by Medscape General Medicine found that only about a third of participants with ADHD were employed full-time. People with ADHD also tend to start many projects but fail to finish them.

Adults with ADHD may find everyday tasks like chores challenging. Excessive daydreaming, difficulty maintaining focus and frequently misplacing items can make simple tasks seem impossible. Remembering appointments is also a struggle for ADHD adults due to disorganization. Many with ADHD also struggle with an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality. This means if something is not in their immediate field of vision, it's forgotten.

ADHD has a profound impact on social life. People with ADHD may frequently interrupt conversations and jump from topic to topic, which can lead to others becoming frustrated. A study by Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry found about half of children with ADHD experience social rejection by peers, which can lead to poor self-esteem. Rejection-sensitive dysphoria (RSD) is also common. RSD causes an extreme aversion to criticism and perceived rejection. This often leads individuals to withdraw socially.

Easy Accommodations

Even without a formal diagnosis, many aspects of ADHD are easy to accommodate. For improved focus, try noise-cancelling headphones or earbuds. These cancel out background noise and minimize distractions. Short breaks and completing tasks in increments can also make projects feel more manageable.

"Body doubling" is something that many with ADHD find helpful. It's the simple act of doing work alongside another person. It adds motivation and the subconscious incentive of being perceived, adding pressure to complete the work.

Timers, to-do lists, and post-it notes are excellent tools for workers who struggle with time blindness, planning and remembering tasks. They often can be written off as a business expense. Fidget items and lock boxes can help improve focus. Fidget items work by providing tactile stimulation, while lock boxes are made to put away distracting items like smartphones or rewards for completing a task.

If a workplace is aware of an employee's ADHD, they can provide accommodations to make their job easier, such as written instructions. Certain accommodations like changes in daily schedule may be a bigger ask, but things that allow employees to function at their best benefit the company as a whole.

Dopamine Deficiency

At the heart of ADHD is a fundamental difference in the brain's wiring. Dopamine transporters are proteins that move and control the reuptake of dopamine. They are found in higher concentration in those with ADHD. This results in ADHD brains having lower dopamine levels. Dopamine influences learning, motivation and the reward and pleasure functions of the brain.

Lower dopamine levels mean that, unlike most people, those with ADHD don't receive natural satisfaction from task completion. This makes motivation more difficult and may also result in thrill-seeking behaviors.

Individuals struggling with a dopamine deficiency can engage in what's called a "dopamine detox." It involves taking a break from dopamine-heavy activities such as social media, TV, video games, sweets and caffeine. Pleasurable activities cause spikes in dopamine. Constant dopamine spikes can eventually diminish our brain's response to dopamine. However, taking a few days to abstain from these may help restore the brain's baseline dopamine levels.

Co-occurring Conditions

Depression, anxiety and mood disorders have a high correlation with ADHD. Social rejection and messing up at work can cause feelings of inadequacy. It's easy to understand why mental health is an issue to be taken seriously for those afflicted.

Thrill-seeking behavior combined with co-occurring mental health conditions leads many with ADHD to be at higher risk for substance abuse. It's vital to not only manage direct symptoms of ADHD but also take care of mental health.

Getting an ADHD Assessment

Most insurance plans cover ADHD testing and treatment, but some require a referral from a primary care physician. An assessment can cost anywhere from \$750 to \$3,500 on average, according to Mental Health Center of America. Many clinics require follow-up appointments every few months to monitor medication effectiveness.

Seeking an assessment through a primary care provider is the simplest way to get a diagnosis. However, individuals can find private clinics through their own research. They can even go through the assessment process virtually with no need for in-person appointments.

The process can be long and involved, especially when going through public reduced-cost programs. Waitlist time can last anywhere from a few months to two years, so it's best to start the diagnostic journey as soon as possible.

An ADHD diagnosis is not a simple process, but the relief it brings can be immense. Self-awareness is a powerful tool and having answers to one's struggles leads to solutions. As the world's knowledge of ADHD increases, we can become more inclusive and understanding of how different brains operate. □

