



FLM-FS-23-01-R08

Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder: Strategies for Success

Susan Holladay, M.A., M.S.W.

Extension Educator, Family and Consumer Sciences, Clinton County,
Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

“I have always had the feeling of being a little different . . . of being brilliant while nearly flunking out of high school.”

James F. Stoffer

Many adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) were not diagnosed as children. These adults were frequently not aware that *they* had ADHD until *their children* began showing problems in school. The consequences of undiagnosed and untreated ADHD in adults can cause a great deal of pain, frustration, and conflict in their social lives, careers, and family lives. Studies indicate that between 30 and 70 percent of children diagnosed with ADHD may continue to have residual symptoms into adulthood. Many adults with ADHD have learned to compensate for their deficits by developing effective coping strategies and finding jobs that match their needs. For those adults who are not aware that they have ADHD, the knowledge and awareness of their disorder can help them learn to work around their difficulties and enjoy more happy, productive, and satisfying lives.

Characteristics of ADHD

The symptoms that occur in adults vary in type and severity. No two individuals will present with the same characteristics or have characteristics to the same extent. These behaviors can cause problems at work, home, and in daily interactions. The following are some common characteristics of ADHD in adulthood:

- A short attention span, especially for mundane day-to-day activities.
- Enthusiastic beginnings with interest dwindling before completion; poor follow-through.
- Tendency toward impulsive behavior. Tend to make decisions before carefully thinking through the consequences.
- Might change jobs frequently.
- May have trouble managing money. Tend to overspend and disregard a budget.
- Make repeated careless mistakes on the job.
- Communication skills are limited. Have difficulty listening, tend to interrupt conversations, and

speak without considering the possible reaction of others.

- May have difficulty controlling their temper.
- Tend to have a low frustration tolerance.
- Difficulty maintaining a long-term relationship.
- Greater than average tendency toward substance abuse.
- Difficulty concentrating when reading; prefers newspaper and/or magazine articles to books.
- Generally disorganized; frequently running late; rushed and unprepared.
- Tendency to overcommit themselves.
- Problems with time management; have difficulty estimating how long a task might take.
- Have difficulty prioritizing.
- Pattern of achieving less than siblings. Have a history of being told that they are “not living up to their potential.”
- Physical restlessness or hyperactivity.

What to do if you think you or an adult you know has ADHD

Begin by making an appointment with a specialist who understands the disorder. There is often a great sense of relief at finally having an explanation for long-standing difficulties. Although there is no cure for ADHD, learning to cope with the disorder is the first step toward its effective management. The following strategies may be helpful in learning to productively live with the disorder:

Education. Find out as much as you can about the disorder. Through education, adults can make sense out of their situation and begin setting realistic and achievable goals. Finding out that the difficulties the adult with ADHD has experienced is not due to a character defect can be a great boost to self-esteem.

Behavioral strategies. Because many adults with ADHD suffer from disorganization, forgetfulness,

and a lack of productivity, here are some suggested organizational tools that may be helpful:

- Keep a daily “to do” list.
- Keep a planning calendar.
- Put note pads wherever you do your best thinking and jot down your ideas.
- Try a cassette recorder for remembering ideas if that works better than note pads.
- Put schedules, “to do” lists, and appointments where you can see them at home and in the office.
- Learn and practice time management skills.
- Break down large projects into smaller, more manageable ones.
- Use drawer, desk, and closet organizers as well as file cabinets, storage boxes, and file drawers to add needed structure in your life.
- Set up a reward system. When you attain a goal you have set, reward yourself. Don’t overlook the small accomplishments—they add up to big ones.

Psychological therapies. Adults with ADHD frequently have a history of frustration and failure in school, work, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is important to find a supportive environment where they can learn to see their strengths and improve their social skills, stress management strategies, relaxation techniques, and perhaps anger control.

Medication. Many adults benefit from the same medications that are used for children. Proper medication can assist adults with their inattention, distractibility, restlessness, and concentration.

Other strategies that might be helpful for the adult with ADHD include the following:

- Get regular exercise.
- Maintain or develop a sense of humor.
- Eliminate negative self-talk.
- Reduce or eliminate alcohol or other drug use.

- Find healthy ways to be involved in highly stimulating activities. This will reduce the urge to spontaneously create negative excitement if things get too boring.
- Seek out individuals who will provide feedback on your efforts to implement these strategies. These individuals need to be supportive, encouraging, and have a sense of humor.
- Learn and practice effective communication skills.
- Become aware of community resources available for academic and vocational assessment and training.

Adults with ADHD share a common sense that something is wrong, but are puzzled as to exactly what is going on. They feel guilty, demoralized, blame themselves, and want help. For those who have ongoing issues with their behavior, the identification of attention problems alleviates much guilt and contributes to raising self-esteem and leads to the development of skills.

References and Resources

- Goldstein, S., & Goldstein, M. (1990). *Managing Attention Disorders in Children: A Guide for Practitioners*. New York, John Wiley & Sons.
- Kelly, K., & Ramundo, P. (1994). *You Mean I Am Not Lazy, Crazy or Stupid?*
- Murphy, K. R. (1992). Coping Strategies for ADHD Adults. *Chadder*, 6 (6), 10–11.
- Ratey, J. J. (1992). Paying Attention to Attention in Adults. *CHADD Special Edition*, Fall/Winter, 3–4.
- Robin, A. L. (1992). *ADHD in Adulthood: A Clinical Perspective*. Massachusetts, Professional Advancement Seminars.
- Weiss, L. (1992). *ADD in Adults: Practical Help for Sufferers and Their Spouses*.
- Weiss, L. (1993). How Can You Tell Whether You or Someone Else Has ADD? *Challenge*, 7 (6), 1–4.

**For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Science Extension web site at:
<http://fcs.osu.edu/hdfs/>**

The previous version of this fact sheet was published as part of the Family Life Month Packet 2001, Family and Consumer Sciences, Human Development and Family Science, The Ohio State University.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868