Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) in Adults

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Summary: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition where individuals have troubles with inattention (unless in a sufficiently stimulating situation or environment) to the point that it can cause problems with school, work and relationships. Classic strengths associated with ADHD include being high energy, spontaneous and creative. Unfortunately, individuals with undiagnosed ADHD can struggle in school, work or other environments that are not adapted to their unique needs. The good news is that there are many ways to support those with ADHD at school, work and relationships.

Inattentive Ivan...

Ivan is a 40-ish-year-old, who despite being smart and funny, struggles with work and relationships. When younger, despite teachers saying that "Ivan has great potential," he found school painfully boring and was relieved when he finally completed high school. He thought things would get easier once he finished school, but as an adult, he faces other challenges:

- With work, it's hard to focus on the boring parts of his job. He forgets deadlines, has trouble getting tasks done. As a result, he has had troubles staying in the same field and has been through several jobs while he sees his friends around him stay in the same job, become promoted, etc.
- Although things go well at the beginning of relationships, he gets bored quickly when things are interesting and exciting. As a result, he has been through numerous relationships, while he sees his friends around home keep long-term relationships and become occupied with kids and family.

Ivan knows he has great potential but wonders why he is struggling with his work and personal life.

What is ADHD / ADD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) (also known as attention deficit disorder, aka ADD) are brain conditions that make it hard to pay attention. Although everyone has trouble paying attention from time to time, ADHD/ADD is so severe that it causes problems with school, work, and relationships.

The main types of ADHD/ADD are:

- ADHD, combined type, where individuals have troubles with
    - Inattention (so its hard to remember what people are talking about, or it is hard to get tasks done), and
    - Hyperactivity (where a person tends to need to move or fidget a lot). Unlike children and youth, who can be so hyperactive that they can't even sit still in their seat, adults with ADHD can usually sit still, but they may still need to fidget with their hands, feet or mouth (i.e. need to chew things).
    - Impulsivity (where a person tends to act impulsively without first thinking through the consequences of their actions).
- ADHD, primarily inattentive type (also commonly known as simply Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD), where a person has troubles with
    - Inattention, however, is not particularly hyperactive nor impulsive.
- ADHD, primarily hyperactive-impulsive type, where a person has troubles with being
    - Hyperactive (i.e. needing to move constantly) or
    - Impulsive (i.e. acting on things without fully thinking through the consequences)

Other symptoms that may be seen in individuals with ADHD/ADD

- Easily frustrated with mood swings: Many individuals with ADHD report getting frustrated easily and having strong emotions. Strong emotions can make someone passionate and fun to be with, but unpleasant emotions can cause trouble with anger and frustration.
- Easily bored: Individuals with ADHD crave stimulation, which can be a problem when there isn't enough stimulation around because many situations in life (like school work and chores) aren't that exciting. This contributes to other difficulties such as troubles finishing tasks or being organized, both of which aren't terribly exciting things to do...

Terms

Because attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD) are so similar, it will be referred to as ADHD to simplify things for the rest of this article.

Strengths of ADHD

It is important to note that although many of the symptoms of ADHD can cause problems in some situations, in other situations, many features of ADHD can be seen as strengths. Classic strengths of those with ADHD include:

- Function well with excitement: People with ADHD do well in exciting, stimulating jobs, which tend to be jobs where you have to deal with people, as opposed to jobs where you mainly deal with paperwork. This includes the entertainment industry (like actors, comedians, performers such as dancers, musicians); hospitality industry (working in restaurants, hotels, tourism); or "911" professions, such as police, firefighters, paramedics, or working in hospital emergency rooms (such as doctors or nurses)...
- Great ability to move around: People with the hyperactive type of ADHD do well in jobs where they can move around. Examples include outdoor work, trades (such as carpentry, construction, etc..), certain medical fields (e.g. nursing, surgery, etc..) On the other hand, people with ADHD do not do well in clerical jobs where they sit behind a desk all day...!
- Creativity: People with ADHD tend to do well in jobs where they can be creative and use their imagination, as opposed to jobs where they are doing the same boring tasks over and over again. This may explain why so many artists and performers report having ADHD...

Wondering About ADHD?

Are you wondering if you might have ADHD?

- If so, then start by seeing your family physician, who can help make sure that there aren't any medical problems (such as low iron, hormone imbalances, sleep problems) that might be contributing to the troubles with attention. The doctor might suggest more specialized mental health services or professionals such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Are you wondering about a loved one having ADHD, such as a spouse or partner?

- If so, then recommending that they seek help might be a sensitive topic. It is probably not best to start by telling them that you think they have ADHD and should see their doctor. Start first by ensuring that you have a good relationship and connection built up with them. Ensure you are spending 1:1 time with them. Ask general questions to see if they agree or not that they may have a problem, e.g. "I notice that it's been hard for you to keep a stable job/relationship... I wonder if it's because it's tough to focus on things? Do you think that you have problems focusing when things aren't exciting enough?" "I've been worried about you and see that you have all this potential. I was reading something and wonder if this might explain why it's been challenging for you to reach your full potential." And then give them some information about ADHD... If they agree, then offer to accompany them to their doctor's appointment.

Coping with ADHD

Self-Regulation and ADHD

Remember the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears? She tried the bear's porridge, and the porridge was either too hot, too cold, or "just right."

Our nervous systems are the same way - they can be "too hot" (overstimulated), "too cold" (understimulated), or "just right."

We are "too hot" when we are overstimulated. For example, after a loud, noisy day where you've been given too much work to do ...

We are "too cold" when we are understimulated. For example, having a very boring day or job where you had nothing to do, and where you just sat around all day doing nothing.

Neither too hot nor too cold is good. People function best when they are "just right." There needs to be "just enough" stimulation - which includes sensory stimulation (such as movement, touch, sound, smell, visual) and emotional stimulation (such as getting along with others, doing interesting things in life), etc...

Self-regulation is about knowing what to do to make sure that you are getting "just enough" stimulation:

- If you are "too cold" or underwhelmed:
    - **I**ncrease stimulation, or use soothing/calming stimulation. People with ADHD tend to need lots of physical stimulation, which is why they often do better if they have opportunities to move around, take frequent "body breaks," and have things to fidget with (e.g. stress balls to squeeze or chewing gum to chew...)
- If you are "too hot" or overstimulated:
    - Reduce the stimulation, or use soothing/calming stimulation. People with inattention can be easily overstimulated visually, which explains why they often do better if they clean up their work environments and reduce visual clutter. It also explains why people with ADHD shouldn't be doing important work sitting in front of a window because it's too easy to get distracted by stuff outside.
- If you are "just right"
    - Keep doing what you are doing!

Organization

Learn how to organize in a way that works for you. People with ADHD often have trouble organizing, a fact others have pointed that out. But because they have ADHD, they may need different organizational strategies compared to other non-ADHD people. Often, visual strategies that involve writing things down on paper or making diagrams or drawings are helpful. It might include things such as 1) writing a daily schedule, 2) writing a list of tasks to do and crossing things off when they are done; 3) having Post-It notes to write down important things to do; 4) using personal data assistants (PDAs) such as a Blackberry or iPhone to organize things.

Medications

When strategies alone are not enough, then prescription medications may be helpful such as:

- Stimulant medications such as Methylphenidate (Ritalin ® regular, Ritalin SR ®, or Concerta ® and Dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine ®, or Adderall XR ®).
    - Caffeine is a stimulant, which helps explain why many people with ADHD find it helpful to "self-medicate" by drinking several cups of coffee a day.
    - Nicotine and cannabis also have stimulating effects, explaining why many people with ADHD find smoking nicotine or cannabis helpful. Note that in the long run, however, long-term, daily use of nicotine and cannabis can cause other significant problems.
- Non-stimulant medications such as Buproprion (Welbutrin SR ®) and Atomoxetine (Strattera ®)

Medications work by stimulating function in the focus areas of the brain, thus improving the core symptoms of ADHD.

Ivan, Part 2

One day, while out with a friend, his friend wonders out loud if Ivan might have ADHD. After all, he isn't hyperactive -- just inattentive. Ivan dismisses it but, later that night thinks about it more. At the next visit to his family doctor's, he asks his doctor about the possibility of adult ADHD. The doctor gives him a screening questionnaire, which suggests he might have ADHD.

Ivan learns more about ADHD and tries out some different strategies, such as:

- When he has to do paperwork at work, he uses a standing desk to move around, and he tries his best to have 'walking' meetings with his colleagues. It helps, but he is still struggling, so he goes back to his family doctor and is started on ADHD medication. With the help of the medication, he has been able to focus better on tasks that used to be painfully boring, thus helping him stay in the same job.

- At home, with his girlfriend, he explains to her that he has ADHD, which gives her more understanding on why he is often late, forgets important events, etc. Instead of just telling him a list of things for him to remember, she writes down key things on Post-It notes, e.g. important dates, activities, remembering the milk, etc. Their relationship improves.

Ivan takes out his friend who first wondered about ADHD -- "Thanks for being a good friend and wondering about ADHD."

Recommended Websites

- Centre for ADHD/ADD Advocacy, Canada (CADDAC)
  http://www.caddac.ca

- CHADD Canada (Children and Adults with AD/HD, Canada)
  https://chadd.org

- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC). Although ADHD is not a "learning disability" because it affects learning, the LDAC does have excellent information on their website.
  http://www.ldac-taac.ca

About this Document

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