

ADD AT HOME AND IN THE WORKPLACE

Attention deficits (ADD) and hyperactivity (ADHD) can create havoc in the modern home and workplace with tight schedules, easy access to highly stimulating activities, and decreased opportunities for physical exertion. Until proper diagnosis is obtained, problems are often attributed to stupidity, poor motivation, and immorality. Once the disorder is recognized, many options for modifying difficulties become available. The first step is to recognize the part ADD plays in relationship and group situations. Further insights on ADD and families can be found in *Driven to Distraction* by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

A vicious cycle happens when ADD children chronically fail to do chores, complete schoolwork, get up on time, and come home late. As punishments become more severe, children grow increasingly defiant, less cooperative, and more alienated. Over time, the youngster with ADD becomes the “problem child” and other family members feel ignored. When diagnoses or treatment is received after years of struggling, family members may have difficulty overcoming guilt or resentment. Several steps can help:

- The diagnosis of ADD needs to be made and understood. Even when the concept of ADD is accepted, family members may resist looking at it as a neurological condition that cannot be controlled at will.
- Hidden issues need to be addressed. There may be “payoffs” from having a problem child. Focusing all the attention on one person may help parents avoid their conflicts or siblings escape scrutiny.
- Family members need to adopt realistic expectations of anyone with ADD and accept the need for more task monitoring and gentle reminders. It is best to designate one or two people for this job so those with ADD do not feel like they have too many bosses. Often, it is best for people to choose who is to act as the coach or monitor and have other family members work through that person.
- Negotiate and clearly define deadlines for tasks and limits for intrusive behavior. Consequences need to be spelled out and contracts signed if necessary.
- Develop routines to manage especially difficult times: doing homework, getting ready in the morning, dinnertime, bedtime, choosing TV shows, and spending family time together. Brainstorm solutions when the problem is not occurring.
- Make special efforts to mention positive qualities and tiny improvements. If positives cannot be found, tasks are not being broken down into doable parts.
- Set aside specific time for everyone in the family. Non-ADD children need to have one-on-one time with parents and parents need to go on “dates.” Everyone needs to have private time alone and time away from the family.
- Develop outside sources of support in the extended family, with professionals, or with support groups.

COUPLES AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Similar vicious cycles happen when one person in a relationship has ADD. Symptoms of forgetfulness, disorganization, distractibility, and impulsiveness annoy the other person. That person becomes increasingly critical, and the partner with ADD withdraws; criticism mounts, and the added stress increases ADD symptoms. Often, spontaneous, creative ADD people and organized perfectionists are drawn to each other because they seek what they lack in themselves. This greatly compounds problems. However, there are solutions. The above steps can be adapted to couples with a few additional pointers:

- Take time to understand the impact the disorder has on relationships. People with ADD need to realize their partner’s frustrations and partners need to recognize the constant devaluing people with ADD experience.

- Overcome relationship extremes. People with ADD must make a commitment to learn strategies that manage symptoms. Partners need to value positive qualities, develop realistic expectations, focus on one change at a time, notice improvements, and use a sense of humor. Avoid master-slave patterns in which one person does all the work, or parent-child relationships in which one person is overbearing and critical.
- Make specific requests and brainstorm solutions. Use lists, bulletin boards, and note pads. Designate specific places for must-find items and overorganize!
- Delegate tasks according to ability. Structured people can handle jobs that demand organization, and ADD partners can take over those that require creativity and energy.
- Blame the condition, not the person. Recognize ADD tendencies of inattention, preoccupation, busyness, or flash anger. Plan time to spend together for leisure, romance, and communication. Agree on strategies to manage temper and impulsivity.
- Recognize the impact of the disorder on sexuality. People with ADHD may use sex as a form of intense stimulation to help them focus. Due to impulsiveness, infidelity can occur. Understanding the source of the problem, medication that aids self-control, and planning ways to manage temptation can help. People with ADD may have problems with arousal and orgasm due to difficulties focusing on bodily sensations. Discussing the problem and providing additional erotic stimuli (talking, fantasy, or music) can suppress nonsexual preoccupations.

THE WORKPLACE

Due to inexhaustible energy, the need to keep busy, and creativity, people with ADHD can be ideal workers in some jobs. Other people have difficulty keeping jobs due to lack of punctuality, disorganization, and outspokenness. ADD is a disability protected by the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*.¹ Diagnosis and treatment by qualified professionals is a prerequisite to use of the law. Employers may be required to make “reasonable accommodations” (structure, reminders, reduction of distractions, and flexibility on deadlines), but employees need to demonstrate that they are making every effort to cooperate with treatment and learn strategies that manage symptoms.

¹ Contact the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1801 L Street NW, Washington, DC 20507, 202-663-4900, www.eeoc.gov for information about this law.