

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects both children and adults. It is characterized by difficulties with attention, hyperactivity in the mind and/or body, and impulsivity. ADHD can significantly impact various aspects of daily life, including academic performance, relationships, and work productivity.

What is Executive Function, and How Does it Relate to ADHD?

Think of executive function as the administrative part of your brain which includes a few different parts that all work together that help you initiate, focus on, and complete tasks. It is the ability to focus on something you are working on at the moment, shift flexibly from one topic to another as needed, and control or steer your thoughts and inhibitions. Higher levels of executive function include planning ahead for future actions; evaluating future risks, benefits, and consequences of behavior; breaking down complicated concepts into more digestible pieces; and problem solving to help overcome obstacles.

Studies have shown that a person diagnosed with ADHD has structural alterations in the parts of the brain associated with executive function, making it more difficult to complete certain tasks. This can also make it more difficult for a person to regulate and manage their emotions.

The 3 Ways ADHD Presents

You might have heard the term ADD, but according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, all attention disorders are categorized as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder with different subsets as follows:

1. **Inattentive** – difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or at play, frequently making careless mistakes, difficulty organizing tasks, avoiding or disliking tasks that require sustained effort, easily distracted by extraneous stimuli, hyper-focusing on one task.
2. **Hyperactive** – fidgety, tapping hands or feet, inability to remain seated, excessive running or climbing, difficulty with leisure activities, excessive talking. Usually diagnosed in children because it affects others, often in classroom settings. Adults are able to manage these symptoms more effectively.
3. **Combined** – display symptoms of both inattention and hyperactivity.

Where Do You Go to Have it Diagnosed, Assessed, and Treated?

- Talk to your pediatrician or general practitioner to discuss your symptoms and get a referral for an assessment
- You will likely to go a neuropsychologist or child psychologist for assessment and possible diagnosis
- If you are diagnosed, there are many options to help manage symptoms:
 - **A psychiatrist** will help with pharmacological treatment, if you choose. Stimulant medications are most often prescribed, though non-stimulants can also be used.
 - **A professional therapist** who specializes in ADHD or a play therapist (if a child) can provide educational support, including coping strategies, organizational skills, and impulse control techniques for behavior management. They can also be helpful in emotionally processing the diagnosis and its impact on your life.
 - **Lifestyle modifications** including regular exercise, adequate sleep, and a balanced diet can help manage symptoms, and creating a structured environment with clear routines and expectations can be beneficial.
 - **A combination of pharmacology and therapy** prove to be the most effective combination for treating ADHD.

Individuals with ADHD are more at risk for self-medicating and tend to have more addictive qualities, even with “positive” behaviors such as physical activity and exercise. They often seek out substances to regulate the brain such as stimulants like caffeine or nicotine, and depressants like alcohol, and marijuana. They are also more likely to be diagnosed with other conditions, like learning disorders, anxiety, depression, OCD, Tourettes, eating disorders, and suicidal ideations.

People with ADHD are remarkable and have an incredible amount of creativity because their brain processes information at high speeds with lots of ideas. They can be great at problem solving and seeing patterns, often thinking outside the box.

ADHD symptoms are often seen as a character flaw to be solved with discipline. People with ADHD are not lazy or dramatic; their brains just work and think differently than neurotypical brains. With the right understanding of how their brains and bodies work, awareness of how to best manage symptoms, and support and encouragement from loved ones they can thrive in all areas of life.

