

ADHD in Adults

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Adult ADHD and What You Can Do About It



Life can be a balancing act for any adult, but if you find yourself constantly late, disorganized, forgetful, and overwhelmed by your responsibilities, you may have ADHD or ADD. Attention deficit disorder affects many adults, and its wide variety of frustrating symptoms can hinder everything from your relationships to your career. But help is available—and learning about ADHD is the first step. Once you understand the challenges, you can learn to compensate for areas of weakness, take advantage of your strengths, and fulfill your potential.

Understanding ADHD (or ADD) in adults

While scientists aren't sure exactly what causes attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—previously known as ADD—they think it's likely caused by a combination of genes, environment, and slight differences in how the brain is hardwired. If you were diagnosed with childhood ADHD or ADD, chances are you've carried at least some of the symptoms into adulthood. But even if you were never diagnosed with ADHD as a child, that doesn't mean it can't affect you as an adult.

ADHD often goes unrecognized throughout childhood. This was especially common in the past, when very few people were aware of ADHD. Instead of recognizing your symptoms and identifying the real issue, your family, teachers, or others may have labeled you as a dreamer, goof-off, slacker, troublemaker, or just a bad student. Alternately, you may have been able to compensate for the symptoms of ADHD when you were young, only to run into problems as your responsibilities increased. The more balls you're now trying to keep in the air—pursuing a career, raising a family, running a household—the greater the demand on your abilities to organize, focus, and remain calm. This can be challenging for anyone, but if you have ADHD, it can feel downright impossible.

The good news is that no matter how overwhelming it feels, the challenges of attention deficit disorder *are* beatable. With education, support, and a little creativity, you can learn to manage the symptoms of adult ADHD—even turning some of your weaknesses into strengths. It's never too late to turn the difficulties of adult ADHD around and start succeeding on your own terms.

Myths & Facts about Attention Deficit Disorder in Adults

Myth: ADHD is just a lack of willpower. People with ADHD focus well on things that interest them; they could focus on any other tasks if they really wanted to.

Fact: ADHD looks very much like a willpower problem, but it isn't. It's essentially a chemical problem in the management systems of the brain.

Myth: People with ADHD can never pay attention.

Fact: People with ADHD are often able to concentrate on activities they enjoy. But no matter how hard they try, they have trouble maintaining focus when the task at hand is boring or repetitive.

Myth: Everybody has the symptoms of ADHD, and anyone with adequate intelligence can overcome these difficulties.

Fact: ADHD affects people of all levels of intelligence. And although everyone sometimes has symptoms of ADHD, only those with chronic impairments from these symptoms warrant an ADHD diagnosis.

Myth: Someone can't have ADHD and also have depression, anxiety, or other psychiatric problems.

Fact: A person with ADHD is six times more likely to have another psychiatric or learning disorder than most other people. ADHD usually overlaps with other disorders.

Myth: Unless you have been diagnosed with ADHD or ADD as a child, you can't have it as an adult.

Fact: Many adults struggle all their lives with unrecognized ADHD symptoms. They haven't received help because they assumed that their chronic difficulties, like depression or anxiety, were caused by other impairments that did not respond to usual treatment.

Source: *Dr. Thomas E. Brown, Attention Deficit Disorder: The Unfocused Mind in Children and Adults*

Signs and symptoms of ADHD in adults

In adults, attention deficit disorder often looks quite different than it does in children—and its symptoms are unique for each individual. The following categories highlight common symptoms of adult ADHD. Do your best to identify the areas where you experience difficulty. Once you pinpoint your most problematic symptoms, you can start implementing strategies for dealing with them.

Trouble concentrating and staying focused

“Attention deficit” can be a misleading label. Adults with ADHD are able to focus on tasks they find stimulating or engaging, but have difficulty staying focused on and attending to mundane tasks. You may become easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds, bounce from one activity to another, or become bored quickly. Symptoms in this category are sometimes overlooked because they are less outwardly disruptive than the ADHD symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity—but they can be every bit as troublesome:

- Becoming easily distracted by low-priority activities or external events that others tend to ignore.
- Having so many simultaneous thoughts that it’s difficult to follow just one.
- Difficulty paying attention or focusing, such as when reading or listening to others.
- Frequently daydreaming or “zoning out” without realizing it, even in the middle of a conversation.
- Struggling to complete tasks, even ones that seem simple.
- A tendency to overlook details, leading to errors or incomplete work.
- Poor listening skills; for example, having a hard time remembering conversations and following directions.
- Getting quickly bored and seeking out new stimulating experiences.

Hyperfocus: the other side of the coin

While you’re probably aware that people with ADHD have trouble focusing on tasks that aren’t interesting to them, you may not know that there’s another side: a tendency to become absorbed in tasks that are stimulating and rewarding. This paradoxical symptom is called hyperfocus.

Hyperfocus is actually a coping mechanism for distraction—a way of tuning out the chaos. It can be so strong that you become oblivious to everything that’s happening around you. For example, you may be so engrossed in a book, a TV show, or your computer that you completely lose track of time and neglect your responsibilities. Hyperfocus can be an asset when channeled into productive activities, but it can also lead to work and relationship problems if left unchecked.

Disorganization and forgetfulness

When you have adult ADHD, life often seems chaotic and out of control. Staying organized and on top of things can be extremely challenging—as is sorting out what information is relevant for the task at hand, prioritizing your to-do list, keeping track of tasks and responsibilities, and managing your time. Common symptoms of disorganization and

forgetfulness include:

- Poor organizational skills (home, office, desk, or car is extremely messy and cluttered)
- Tendency to procrastinate
- Trouble starting and finishing projects
- Chronic lateness
- Frequently forgetting appointments, commitments, deadlines
- Constantly losing or misplacing things (keys, wallet, phone, documents, bills).
- Underestimating the time it will take to complete tasks.

Impulsivity

If you suffer from symptoms in this category, you may have trouble inhibiting your behaviors, comments, and responses. You might act before thinking, or react without considering consequences. You may find yourself interrupting others, blurting out comments, and rushing through tasks without reading instructions. If you have impulse problems, staying patient is extremely difficult. For better or for worse, you may dive headlong into situations and find yourself in potentially risky circumstances. Symptoms include:

- Frequently interrupting others or talking over them
- Poor self-control, addictive tendencies
- Blurting out thoughts that are rude or inappropriate without thinking
- Acting recklessly or spontaneously without regard for consequences
- Trouble behaving in socially appropriate ways (such as sitting still during a long meeting)

Emotional difficulties

Many adults with ADHD have a hard time managing their feelings, especially when it comes to emotions like anger or frustration. Common emotional symptoms of adult ADHD include:

- Being easily flustered and stressed out
- Irritability or short, often explosive, temper
- Low self-esteem and sense of insecurity or underachievement
- Trouble staying motivated
- Hypersensitivity to criticism

Hyperactivity or restlessness

Hyperactivity in adults with ADHD may appear the same as it does in kids. You may be highly energetic and perpetually “on the go” as if driven by a motor. For many people with ADHD, however, the symptoms of hyperactivity become more subtle and internal as they

grow older. Common symptoms of hyperactivity in adults include:

- Feelings of inner restlessness, agitation, racing thoughts
- Getting bored easily, craving excitement, tendency to take risks
- Talking excessively, doing a million things at once
- Trouble sitting still, constant fidgeting

You don't have to be hyperactive to have ADHD

Adults with ADHD are much less likely to show hyperactivity than their younger counterparts. Only a small slice of adults with ADHD, in fact, suffer from prominent symptoms of hyperactivity. Remember that names can be deceiving and you may very well have ADHD if you have one or more of the symptoms above—even if you lack hyperactivity.

Effects of adult ADHD

If you are just discovering you have adult ADHD, chances are you've suffered over the years due to the unrecognized problem. You may feel like you've been struggling to keep your head above water, overwhelmed by the constant stress caused by procrastination, disorganization, and handling demands at the last minute. People may have labeled you "lazy," "irresponsible," or "stupid" because of your forgetfulness or difficulty completing certain tasks, and you may have begun to think of yourself in these negative terms as well.

ADHD that is undiagnosed and untreated can have wide-reaching effects and cause problems in virtually every area of your life.

Physical and mental health problems. The symptoms of ADHD can contribute to a variety of health problems, including compulsive eating, substance abuse, anxiety, chronic stress and tension, and low self-esteem. You may also run into trouble due to neglecting important check-ups, skipping doctor appointments, ignoring medical instructions, and forgetting to take vital medications.

Work and financial difficulties. Adults with ADHD often experience career difficulties and feel a strong sense of underachievement. You may have trouble keeping a job, following corporate rules, meeting deadlines, and sticking to a 9-to-5 routine. Managing finances may also pose a problem: you may struggle with unpaid bills, lost paperwork, late fees, or debt due to impulsive spending.

Relationship problems. The symptoms of ADHD can [put a strain on](#) your work, love, and family relationships. You may be fed up with constant nagging from loved ones to tidy up, listen more closely, or get organized. Those close to you, on the other hand, may feel hurt

and resentful over your perceived “irresponsibility” or “insensitivity.”

The wide-reaching effects of ADHD can lead to embarrassment, frustration, hopelessness, disappointment, and loss of confidence. You may feel like you’ll never be able to get your life under control or fulfill your potential. That’s why a diagnosis of adult ADHD can be an enormous source of relief and hope. It helps you understand what you’re up against for the first time and realize that you’re not to blame. The difficulties you’ve experienced stem from attention deficit disorder—they are not a result of personal weakness or a character flaw.

Adult ADHD doesn’t have to hold you back

When you have ADHD, it’s easy to end up thinking that there’s something wrong with you. But it’s okay to be different. ADHD isn’t an indicator of intelligence or capability. You may experience more difficulty in certain areas, but that doesn’t mean you can’t find your niche and achieve success. The key is to discover your strengths and capitalize on them.

It can be helpful to think about attention deficit disorder as a collection of traits that are both positive and negative—just like any other set of qualities you might possess. Along with the impulsivity and disorganization of ADHD, for example, often come incredible creativity, passion, energy, out-of-the-box thinking, and a constant flow of original ideas. Figure out your strengths and set up your environment in a way that supports them.

Self-help for adult ADHD

Armed with an understanding of ADHD’s challenges and the help of structured strategies, you can make [real changes in your life](#). Many adults with attention deficit disorder have found meaningful ways to manage their symptoms, take advantage of their gifts, and lead productive and satisfying lives. You don’t necessarily need outside intervention—at least not right away. There is a lot you can do to help yourself and get your symptoms under control.

Exercise and eat healthfully. Exercise vigorously and regularly—it helps work off excess energy and aggression in a positive way while soothing and calming the body. Eat a wide variety of healthy foods and limit sugary foods in order to even out mood swings.

Get plenty of sleep. When you’re tired, it’s even more difficult to focus, manage stress, stay productive, and keep on top of your responsibilities. Support yourself by turning off screens at least one hour before bed and getting between 7-9 hours of sleep every night.

Practice better time management. Set deadlines for everything, even for seemingly small tasks. Use timers and alarms to stay on track. Take breaks at regular intervals. Avoid piles of paperwork or procrastination by dealing with each item as it comes in. Prioritize time-

sensitive tasks and write down every assignment, message, or important thought.

Work on your relationships. Schedule activities with friends and keep your engagements. Stay vigilant in conversation and online communication: listen when others are speaking and try not to speak (or text or email) too quickly yourself. Cultivate relationships with people who are sympathetic and understanding of your struggles with ADHD.

Create a supportive work environment. Make frequent use of lists, color-coding, reminders, notes-to-self, rituals, and files. If possible, choose work that motivates and interests you. Notice how and when you work best and apply these conditions to your working environment as best you can. It can help to team up with less creative, more organized people—a partnership that can be mutually beneficial.

Practice mindfulness. While difficult for some people with ADHD to even contemplate, regular mindfulness meditation can help you calm your busy mind and gain more control over your emotions. Try meditating for a short period and increase the time as you become more comfortable with the process.

Blame the ADHD, not yourself. Adults diagnosed with ADHD often blame themselves for their problems or view themselves in a negative light. This can lead to self-esteem issues, anxiety, or depression. But it's not your fault that you have ADHD and while you can't control how you're wired, you can take steps to compensate for your weaknesses and learn to flourish in all areas of your life.

When to seek outside help for adult ADHD

If the symptoms of ADHD are still getting in the way of your life, despite self-help efforts to manage them, it may be time to seek outside support. Adults with ADHD can benefit from [a number of treatments](#), including behavioral coaching, individual therapy, self-help groups, vocational counseling, educational assistance, and medication.

Treatment for adults with attention deficit disorder, like treatment for kids, should involve a team of professionals, along with the person's family members and spouse.

Professionals trained in ADHD can help you control impulsive behaviors, manage your time and money, get and stay organized, boost productivity at home and work, manage stress and anger, and communicate more clearly.

Recommended reading

[Fast Minds](#) - How to Thrive If You Have ADHD (Or Think You Might) - Harvard Health

HelpGuide

Books

[Could I Have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)?](#) - Diagnosing and treating ADHD in adults. (National Institute of Mental Health)

[Diagnosis of ADD/ADHD in Adults](#) (National Resource Center on ADHD)

[Treatment](#) - Articles to help adults cope with ADHD. (National Resource Center on ADHD)

[Do I Have ADD? An ADHD Test for Adults](#) (ADDitude)

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