What ADHD Feels Like, From Someone Who Has It

by CHARLIE KAPLAN

What Is ADHD Like?

What is it like to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)?

There are no simple answers, no clear explanations. Often, I find my efforts to explain ADHD and my experiences with it become muddled and confusing.

I have lived with ADHD for most of my life, but only discovered its presence this year, when my symptoms were given a name. Those ADHD symptoms were affecting my life on a daily basis in profound ways, and I finally found the courage to reach out for help.

But ADHD is a complex disorder that is still poorly understood by a number of people — with some even rejecting the idea of its very existence.

What Is ADHD?

I can tell you what it isn't: lousy parenting doesn't cause it, and it isn't bad behavior or laziness. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that usually begins in childhood and persists into adulthood.

There are different types of ADHD: those that are primarily inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, or combined.

I have combined type. Women are often diagnosed with primarily inattentive type — in fact, I was initially diagnosed with this subtype, but it was later changed to combined.

How Does ADHD Feel?

When I think of ADHD, I think of taking a deep breath, submerging in water and floating just below the surface, and watching and listening to the world going on around me through the lens of the thin layer of water. The sounds are muffled and vision, blurred, and it is harder to do things because you are weighed down by the water.

When you have ADHD, your vision is not literally blurred, and hearing is typically normal, but your ability to pay attention to your surroundings is a very real problem. It takes extra effort to do certain tasks others perform naturally.

ADHD is there, always, when I sit down and try to write an email, carry on a conversation, read a book, write a paper, and watch a movie. It is there when I try to remember to do those things (forgetfulness being a common symptom).

All of these seem like ordinary tasks, but they can be incredibly difficult for someone with ADHD. This can lead to feelings of failure or low self-esteem.

As someone with ADHD, when I see the world, I don't just see one thing, be it a conversation or assignment: I see *everything* all at once. This creates a pulling in different directions, my thoughts being led down different trails.

Thoughts may be rich with inspiration or passion, or they may be daydreams, but they work one of two ways: they are either too fleeting with my focus too short-lived, or I become caught up in the idea (whichever one I happen to latch onto in the moment) and zoom too far, losing track of time and becoming obsessed.

I believe the issue with ADHD is not (just) a lack of attention: it is an inability to regulate your attention. This explains why we cannot focus in some situations and focus too much in others.

As someone with the hyperactive-impulsive component, I often deal with restlessness, and the refusal to act on hyperactive impulses causes an inner turmoil that is difficult to resist.

I have physical sensations in my chest and stomach, feeling as though I will explode if I do not act, and if this is how others with ADHD feel when dealing with similar situations, then I completely understand why kids often act out, or adults find ways of coping.

That is not to say that acting out is a good thing, only that it is a result of what the child is feeling, and it needs to be addressed.

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What Does ADHD Look Like?

When some people think of ADHD, they only see the attention issues or hyperactivity, but those of us who live with ADHD on a daily basis struggle in numerous ways. Yes, we have trouble with focus, and some of us have the hyperactive component, but there are other symptoms like ADHD impulsivity that can damage lives.

Impulsivity can present itself in countless ways, depending on the person. For me, it is excessive, impulsive spending, but for others, it may be gambling, making rash decisions like starting new businesses, or excessive talking to the point that it intrudes on others.

Additionally, when you have ADHD, you tend to be impatient and prone to restlessness or irritability, especially if you have the hyperactive-impulsive type. You may be short with or snap at others, or struggle with anger.

Memory issues are common in ADHD, and often it might seem like we are neglecting our responsibilities or need to "get it together," when in reality, our memory fails us, and we forget to do things we've committed to.

Life With ADHD

I was recently asked to describe what life with ADHD is like by a reader of my blog. In reality, there are no right answers, because everyone experiences it differently.

This is what it's like for me:

- **It's like reading**, only my eyes skim the page, and the words don't reach my mind, causing me to reread again and again to gain comprehension. That's if I don't give up.
- **It is like listening**; only hands are pressing against my ears, making it harder to hear accurately and easier to get distracted by a thought or my surroundings. People are talking at me, but I do not process their words.
- **It's like living with this pot of boiling energy inside** that threatens to spill over and flood. The higher it gets, the more restless and irritable I become.

- **It’s like becoming so restless I start to fidget** or shift in my seat. I may snap at a co-worker or loved one out of agitation.
- **It’s like performing an act only to forget** what I was doing.
- **It’s like starting again and again** but never making it to the finish line.
- **It’s like discovering some new thing**: a book and the world within it, a band, a film and its cast, a new topic of any variety, and finding myself so deep in it I could answer virtually any question about it because I’ve become a self-taught expert. I have the gift/curse of hyperfocus, which can be damaging if it goes uncontrolled.

These things are all destructive or negative, but I do not live a life without hope. So it may be all of those things.

But it is a force in that I see what is unique to me — for surely we are all individuals, but with ADHD even more so. We like to color outside the lines.

It is creation in that if I can harness my hyperfocus I can write a book-length manuscript, or create new words in my head. If only I could finish something. Anything.

So it isn’t all bad. But, it is a reality.

ADHD is accepting the good along with the bad and continuing on into the great unknown of life.