Why Is This Question About ADHD So Controversial?

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Is ADHD Real?

When Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) comes up, people mainly seem to fall into two camps.

There are those who believe it is a scientifically proven disorder that many adults and children around the world have it or they believe that it is a non-existent made-up disorder.

So made-up that it's an excuse for parents who don't want to discipline their children, a group of symptoms that point to poor diet or food allergies, or a grand scheme created by pharmaceutical companies to sell pills.

Everywhere you look, you can find those with an opinion on ADHD, whether or not they have ever been touched personally by a diagnosis.

It's Important to Know What ADHD Is and What It Is Not

The fact is there are many variables in diagnosing ADHD. There are many unknowns, and yes, sometimes people are even misdiagnosed. But does that mean it isn't real?

Even with definitions of ADHD in place, it can still be confusing. Brain disorders are often a list of symptoms instead of something that can be immediately seen and isolated by a medical examination.

If the topic is being explored amid a sea of believers such as in forums devoted to the disorder, or magazines, articles, or websites on ADHD, it can appear a bit unnecessary to debate whether it is, in fact real, right?

Wrong.

Those of us who live with ADHD are the people best suited to help others understand. We can assist those who are:

- Struggling with their diagnosis or a loved one's diagnosis.
- Looking for information that will help a spouse or partner to understand.
- Curious about what ADHD is.

There is an awful lot of hype surrounding mental and mood disorders. We want them to have accurate information that does not get clouded over by the piles of misinformation out there, especially on the internet.

Discussing ADHD is important.

- What is it?
- Is it real?

- What are the current arguments all about?
- Where can I find out more?

What Is ADHD?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, ADHD is a brain disorder marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and or hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

What Does This Mean?

- **Inattention means a person is disorganized, has trouble staying on task, is easily distracted, often doesn't follow through, and is inconsistent.** These traits are not due to poor comprehension or a refusal to do what is expected.
- **Hyperactivity means a person moves about constantly, even when it is inappropriate to do so.** It can also be reflected in extreme restlessness, constant fidgeting, talking, or tapping behaviors. A hyperactive person can drain others with their constant activity.
- **Impulsivity means a person makes rash decisions or jumps into actions without thinking them through and weighing the consequences.** These actions may sometimes be potentially harmful, or there is a desire for immediate reward or the inability to delay gratification. An impulsive person may intrude on others and/or excessively interrupt.

Research suggests it can be difficult to pinpoint how many people worldwide have ADHD because there are so many factors affecting diagnosis.

There are many different methods of recording medical data in the various countries, and there is also the fact that many, adults and children alike, may go undiagnosed as well as many that are wrongly diagnosed.

Studies vary considerably in what traits are considered, the age of the subjects, and in methods of reporting.

For many years, the United States conducted the majority of the research on the subject causing a full belief that it was a disorder that mainly affected those in the U.S. with little prevalence in other countries. This is proving to be untrue as more research is being done.

What Are the Statistics?

Based on data from 175 studies conducted over four decades, a 2015 study indicated seven percent of children worldwide have ADHD.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports 11 percent of school age children have been diagnosed.

Based on the DSM-IV screening of 11,422 adults in ten countries, it is estimated that the worldwide average for adult ADHD is 3.4 percent.

The American Psychiatric Association states that ADHD is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children and also affects adults. They estimate five percent of children and 2.5 percent of adults have ADHD.

Next page: What do studies report about the controversial question "Is ADHD real?"

What Do the Studies Tell Us? Is ADHD Real?

While it was once believed, and some still hold this idea to be true, that ADHD is a disorder dependent on race, culture, or social class, research shows this is untrue.

This is not to say that environmental factors do not come into play.

ADHD is hereditary, but there is also a link associating ADHD with drug or alcohol abuse during pregnancy, exposure to environmental toxins, or poor diet.

Most often, the discussions of ADHD revolve around arguments over medications, such as their effectiveness or their potential for harm. Scientific evidence about the disorder, in general, is usually ignored.

Studies show measurable differences in brain development and function in those with ADHD as compared to others of the same age.

There are areas of the brain where development is delayed as well as areas where the fibers that provide a connection from one area to another is problematic.

It Is More Than Just a Chemical Imbalance

“Chemical imbalance” is a term often used to describe ADHD, but that is not the whole explanation.

Impairments aren’t due to an excess or a lack of any particular chemical. The primary problem is related to chemicals manufactured, released and reloaded at the level of brain synapses.

For those with ADHD, chemicals are not adequately released, or they are released too quickly to carry messages across neurons. Only when the task is exceedingly exciting or frightening will the message be delivered.

In 2010, a study was released by scientists from Cardiff University revealing that children with ADHD were more likely to have small segments of their DNA either duplicated or missing.

This was the first scientific evidence that ADHD was genetic. ADHD was proved to be a neurodevelopmental disorder. The brains of children having the disorder were different from the brains of children without.

If There Is Scientific Proof of ADHD, Why the Arguments Over Its Existence?

It’s hard to refute science, so why do so many people dismiss ADHD as fake? Why do even some doctors say it doesn’t exist?

One reason could be the name itself. ADHD is not a deficit of attention, but rather an inability to control attention. This creates confusion among those who don’t realize that name is misleading.

Douglas Cootey, the author of A Splintered Mind, gave an excellent answer as to why there were so many nonbelievers. Cootey states that because ADHD shows itself in a million small things, everyone can relate to, that ADHD is seen as nothing special. Its symptoms are in fact behaviors common to everyone.

This causes people who do not understand the disorder to assume that people with ADHD are just making excuses for their actions.

What people do not realize is that it is the quantity of these “small” incidences and the severity of them that are the hallmark of ADHD.

Furthermore, those who do not have it cannot understand why someone with ADHD can’t do simple tasks the way other “normal” people do them.

The Stigma Around ADHD

In my own experience with family members, I remember a time fifteen or twenty years ago when it seemed like ADHD became an “easy” diagnosis.

Suddenly most of the kids we knew were deemed hyperactive and taken to a doctor who diagnosed them with the disorder and put them on medication.

I'm sure a lot of these children had ADHD, but I also feel that a lot of them did not. There wasn't as much known about the disorder at the time, and treatment was limited.

I believe stigma was born from this. We had no idea what exactly ADHD was, but it appeared to be the answer everyone with a hard to handle child was seeking.

At least that is what I think people saw. I see it today when people make comments about how all a child needs is a good spanking, and they'd straighten up.

Those misconceptions still exist.

We run into them daily on the internet where people can post blog articles or videos ranting over our undisciplined children and our fake diagnosis. They say as adults we just enjoy taking the medications that a diagnosis of ADHD gives us.

We've heard that it's allergies, diet, food dyes, location, and a million other things but most definitely not a brain disorder. And sometimes it is one of those things.

That is why careful diagnosis and follow up are essential. Sometimes symptoms can indeed be controlled or made better by a change of diet and lifestyle.

However, it is up to the patient and their health care professionals to discern whether allergies or environment caused the symptoms, or if ADHD is the cause.

Next page: Learn how to find accurate sources to dispell misleading information surrounding the question "Is ADHD real?"

Isn't ADHD the Creation of Pharmaceutical Companies? What About Doctors Who Say It Isn't Real?

There are many misleading headlines making claims such as a famous psychiatrist reveals there is no such thing as ADHD.

The headline is real, but either the words of the doctor are highly manipulated, or further investigation of the article will show us that the doctor doesn't think ADHD is a fake disorder, but that he feels the current definition and the name of the disorder itself are erroneous.

Claims also abound that pharmaceutical companies invented the disorder to sell pills. The media perpetuates this myth and keeps the argument of whether or not ADHD is real.

The truth is that ADHD was identified in medical books long before the advent of ADHD medications.

The bottom line is that if someone is a non-believer, you can point them toward the science, but that doesn't mean you can convert them.

It Is Important to Have Accurate Information

In a sea of misinformation, it's important to look for yourself and make informed decisions about what you do or do not believe in.

Too many factors are involved in ADHD for there to be a one size fits all diagnosis or treatment plan.

Even brain scans can be ineffective for diagnostic purposes. There are noticeable differences, but scientists are unsure of what areas of the brain to study for those differences.

Results of brain imaging also vary based on clinicians, culture, and country. Looking at brain waves and patterns is a more objective way of evaluating, but they are just one tool in diagnosis, and as of yet mostly unapproved.

If you are interested in learning more about ADHD, there are several places you can start.

Find Out More

- **Your doctor.** It may sound simplistic, but your doctor is an excellent source of information. Don't be afraid to ask questions or to ask for book or website recommendations.
- **National Institute for Mental Health.** Their website covers a broad range of mental health topics as well as information and articles on ADHD.
- Websites like **Science Daily** or **Psychology Today** have articles and blog posts on ADHD.
- **American Psychiatric Association.**
- **Psychiatry Advisor.** This site is another source for ADHD information.
- **Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)** is an excellent resource for all things about ADHD.

The list of resources for information on ADHD could go on and on. The above resources can be a great jumping off point and lead you to other sources of information as well.

You can find a great many blogs dedicated to ADHD and other mental and mood disorders as well as websites, articles, books, and magazines.

Just remember to dig deeper into any article with sensationalistic headlines to discover the truth for yourself. Anyone can create a blog or a video and post it online.

Consider the source of what you come across and ask yourself:

- Is this person a credible source of information?
- What training or experience do they have with ADHD?
- Are they stating a fact or perpetuating stigma?

Ultimately, no one can decide for you whether or not you believe ADHD is real, but if like me, you live with it, you certainly don't need convincing.

I just hope this answers your question about "Is ADHD real?"

Resources

Healthline (Can a Brain With ADHD Look Different?)

Mayo Clinic (What is ADHD?)

American Psychiatric Association (What is ADHD?)

National Institute of Mental Health (ADHD)

Psychology Today (The Truth About ADHD. Do you Know the Current Scientific Fact About ADHD?)

Center for Disease Control (ADHD)

Psychiatry Advisor (Estimates of ADHD Prevalence Worldwide Differ Significantly)

AAP News and Journals Pediatrics (Prevalence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – A Systematic Review and Meta Analysis)

Science Daily (First Direct Evidence that ADHD is a Genetic Disorder)

World Psychiatry (The Worldwide Prevalence of ADHD: is it an American Condition?)

Psych Central (Why ADHD is Misunderstood)

CHADD (General Prevalence)