What Do ADHD Symptoms Look Like in Children and Adults?

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Understanding ADHD Symptoms in Children and Adults

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

While the symptoms of ADHD are things that everyone will experience from time to time, it is important to distinguish that in those with ADHD these symptoms are frequent and interfere with a person's ability to function at home, school, social settings or work.

It's important to know that the symptoms of ADHD are not the result of not understanding directions or of defiance.

How Is ADHD Diagnosed?

Being diagnosed with ADHD is an involved process. Reaching a proper diagnosis includes much paperwork and detailed behavioral checklists. Much care has to be taken to get a correct diagnosis. Other mental or mood disorders share symptoms, and it takes time to ensure a person is diagnosed correctly.

For example, school-aged children will have to have paperwork about their behaviors filled out by parents, multiple teachers, and sometimes physicians. Also, hearing and vision screenings will also have to be done.

Also, gender may be taken into consideration when making an ADHD diagnosis. For example, both genders may experience completely different symptoms. For example, females with ADHD may appear less hyperactive and less impulsive, while males with ADHD may act more hyperactive and impulsive.

There are two lists of behaviors: hyperactive/impulsive behaviors and inattentive behaviors. These two lists of behaviors are used to identify ADHD and the ADHD type present, such as inattentive, hyperactive, or combined.

According to the guidelines outlined in the American Psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fifth edition (DSM V), a child must have at least six symptoms of ADHD from either set, or a significant number from both sets, and a person over the age of seventeen must have at least five.

In addition to the criteria in the DSM V, a person must also:

- Have had several inattentive or hyperactive-impulsive symptoms present before the age of twelve.
- Several ADHD symptoms that are present in two or more situations, such as home and school.
- There must be clear evidence that ADHD symptoms interfere with functioning.
- A different mental disorder cannot better explain symptoms.

What Are the Symptoms of ADHD?

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) lists the following as symptoms of ADHD:

Inattentive symptoms may include:

- Does not pay attention to details and makes careless mistakes.
- Problems staying focused on tasks or activities that require sustained mental alertness.
- Does not appear to listen when spoken to.
- Does not follow through on instructions and doesn't completely work.
- Problems organizing tasks and work. For example, may not manage time well; has messy, disorganized work or misses deadlines.
- Avoids and dislikes tasks that require sustained mental effort.
- Often loses things necessary to complete tasks in daily life. For example, school papers or homework or school supplies, books, keys, wallet, glasses, handbags or briefcases.
- Is easily distracted.
- Forgets daily tasks such as doing chores or running errands. Adults may forget to return phone calls, keep appointments or pay bills.

The hyperactive/impulsive symptoms may include:

- Fidgets with or taps hands or feet or squirms in seat.
- Not able to remain seated.
- Runs or climbs when not appropriate.
- Unable to play or do leisure activities quietly.
- Restlessness and always on the go.
- Talks too much.
- Blurts out answers to questions before the question is finished or interrupts or finishes other's sentences.
- Difficulty in waiting for their turn or waiting in line.
- Interrupts or intrudes on others, such as cutting into conversations, games or activities, starts using other's things without permission. Adults may take over what other people are doing.

Next Page: Why it's important to recognize ADHD symptoms, and what ADHD looks like in children and adults.

It Is Important to Understand ADHD Symptoms

Sometimes the inattentive ADHD symptoms can look like carelessness, laziness, or lack of caring. This is far from the truth.

When a person isn't paying attention to details, mistakes can be made in school work, on tests, and on the job. Too many mistakes affect grades, self-esteem, and possible future employment.

It's important to know that ADHD is not a lack of attention as the name implies.

It is difficult to sustain attention, especially during an activity that is not enjoyable. It can be nearly impossible to pay attention during lectures, meetings, or long readings. Also, it can also be impossible to pay attention as Aunt Sally recounts her recent adventures with digestive troubles, even though you know she is probably going to give you a pop quiz later on it.

I learned long ago that if I didn't have my daughter respond in some way when I said something to her, I would have no idea if she heard me at all. While other times, teachers were convinced she was not listening to them at all, only to ask her a question about what was going on in class and find that she could answer. With ADHD, looking at someone is not an indication that you have heard them, and looking distracted is not an indication that you are not listening.

A person with ADHD may start tasks, only to get bored or distracted and move on to something else without finishing. Sometimes we start in the middle instead of the beginning and quit because we don't know how to proceed.

I can't count the number of hobbies and new ideas I have been so excited about, only to have that excitement fizzle out shortly leaving me with hobby supplies I will never use, or half-baked ideas on everything from planting a vegetable garden to starting a company.

Sometimes what others see as the logical order to complete a task makes no sense to us. We often have to find our own way. Often a task seems too large, and we get overwhelmed thinking about it because we don't know how to start or how to prioritize the steps we need to take.

Because we notice everything and can't always filter out things of lesser importance, it is very easy for someone with ADHD to get distracted. We don't mean to zone out, tune out, or lose interest. It can be easy to offend others when they think we aren't paying attention to them. And let's face it, sometimes we aren't. We meant to, and we really did, until another interesting thought took our brain hostage.

Forgetting things, misplacing things, and not keeping appointments or dates can be detrimental to a person's school, work, or personal life. Forgetting everything can seem like a curse of ADHD. Symptoms like this make it difficult to remember that there are things to appreciate about ADHD.

Procrastination is another thing common among those of us with ADHD. It can wreak havoc on our relationships, on our ability to manage our households, and on our jobs. Our brains don't always get the signal that we have to do something until last minute panic settles in. I wouldn't know what to do if I wasn't always in rush mode!

ADHD Symptoms May Appear Differently in Adults and Children

A child with ADHD has symptoms that are more than what is normal for a child their age, often impairing their peer relationships and progress at school. ADHD is far more than being an active child.

It is important to remember that all children will or may exhibit these behaviors as part of a normal childhood. When these behaviors are persistent, hinder development, learning, and/or relationships, and are excessive that they may be an indicator of ADHD.

Despite the memes you see on social media or on the internet, it's important to know that ADHD is not a result of bad parenting, and while a proper diet may help with ADHD symptoms, it's important to know that diet is also not a cause of ADHD.

A child with ADHD might:

- Daydream a lot.
- Forget or lose things.
- Squirm or fidget with objects or hands.
- Talk too much.
- Have trouble taking turns.
- Make careless mistakes or take unnecessary risks.
- Have a hard time resisting temptation.
- Have difficulty getting along with others or socializing.

ADHD symptoms can look a bit differently in an adult.

An adult with ADHD might:

- Lack focus.
- Hyperfocus.

- Be disorganized.
- Have problems with time management.
- Be forgetful.
- Be impulsive.
- Have or experience emotional problems.
- Have poor self-image and/or self-esteem about themselves.
- A lack motivation.
- Be restless and have anxiety or feelings of anxiousness.
- Experience fatigue often.
- Have health problems. For example, mental health (i.e., depression).
- Abuse substances.
- Have relationship issues.
- A difficulty with communication. For example, expressing feelings.

Next page: What do ADHD symptoms look like in adults? And more.

What Do Adult ADHD Symptoms Look Like?

Lack of focus is something many of us can relate to. We can have short-term lack of focus on our daily activities, or it can encompass something larger. As adults with ADHD, we may go from job to job or relationship to relationship, never really having a clear picture of the life we want. This is one of the areas that treatment can help.

On the other end of the spectrum is hyperfocus. When we love something, and it really stimulates us, we can focus on that alone to the point of not caring about anything else, including our relationships or personal hygiene. Being in hyperfocus mode can feel amazing, but coming out of it can leave us drained and exhausted. Balance is important.

While we can crave organization and routine, it is easy to become disorganized. Calendars, reminder apps, planners, and alarms can help us stay on top of things - if we can only remember where our things are.

Anyone else constantly loses track of time causing you to be consistently late? You aren't alone. Forgetting important events like birthdays, forgetting doctor's appointments, or forgetting what you went into a room to do, is common. My long-term memory is great, but sometimes I don't think I even have a short-term memory. I couldn't repeat a phone number back to someone if they threatened to set me on fire. This is why I write everything down, even if I don't think I will need to.

Impulsiveness is something else those of us with ADHD can struggle with. Impulsive spending is an all too common problem, but acting without thinking of the consequences can be a trouble spot for many.

Emotional problems can also be a symptom of ADHD. Anxiety and depression can go with ADHD, but we can also have problems resulting from a lifetime of feeling inferior. I think we can also experience difficulties from the pressure we put on ourselves to be more like everyone else.

For those of us diagnosed as an adult with ADHD, we spent our childhoods wondering what was wrong with us and building our walls, as well as our habits. To be honest, sometimes changing our mindset can be hard or a challenge.

A poor self-image (and self-esteem) can come from years of not feeling like we can measure up. Years of judging ourselves harshly for symptoms we didn't have the tools or know how to control takes time to undo. This can be especially true for those who grew up in households where they were punished for their ADHD behaviors.

Since I was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, it is easy for me to see that my poor self-image and even lack of motivation were due to a lifetime of feeling inadequate and feeling like I failed at everything I have ever tried. This

lack of motivation came from fear of failure of not knowing where to start, being overwhelmed, or not feeling good enough to try things.

Restlessness and anxiety can appear as the adult who never seems to be able to sit still. Constantly moving, they can make others tired just watching them. They don't know how to turn their brains off and relax.

Anxiety often goes hand-in-hand with ADHD and can include fearing things that have not happened yet, or fearing what will happen. It can be anxiety over being in public, or of failing. I have social anxiety and most of my life I have found that to be the bigger hurdle for me. I freeze up when I'm in a social situation, especially with people I don't know or don't know well. No matter what my brain is screaming, my body will not cooperate with me.

Fatigue and health problems can be common for those with ADHD. We often don't sleep very well, and we also often don't take very good care of ourselves because it's not a priority.

Having ADHD can almost guarantee that at some point you will experience problems in your relationship. We are a wonderfully creative, intelligent bunch, but sometimes our ADHD symptoms can cause us to act in less than desirable ways. It takes work not just on our part, but on the part of our loved ones too, to reduce misunderstanding, fix communication problems, and the friction that ADHD can bring to any relationship.

Unfortunately, substance abuse is all too common among those with ADHD. Some professionals say that the impulsive nature of ADHD could be one cause for substance abuse.

Taking Care of Yourself

If you believe you have ADHD, it's best to consult your healthcare provider as they can assist you with getting a proper diagnosis and offer more information on testing and next steps.

If you have ADHD, taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is vital. When you take care of your mind and body, ADHD symptoms are much easier to control. Eating properly, exercising, using coping strategies, and getting enough rest is an excellent place to start.

While there are many ADHD treatment options available to you, including medication, therapy, and natural or alternative remedies, it's important to know that there is no right or wrong type of ADHD treatment. We all find what works best for us, and often it is a combination of many things.

Having ADHD can be a positive experience. Some things may be a little more difficult to us, but our out of the box thinking can also serve us well. By understanding how our brain works, we can set ourselves up for success. It also helps to be able to laugh at ourselves from time to time too.

While it isn't always easy to live with ADHD or to love someone with ADHD, no life is ever without its struggles.

Even if you just start at becoming knowledgeable about your condition and it's symptoms, understanding your ADHD triggers, what type of treatment options you have, and put self-care at the top of your priority list, because with a little self-care and understanding in your life, living with ADHD can become a little easier.

Just do the best that you can!