What Does ADHD Look Like in Adults?

by KRISTI LAZZARI

What Is ADHD in Adults?

According to the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is “a highly genetic syndrome that has to do with the regulation of a particular set of brain functions and related behaviors.”

The compromised brain function has to do with executive function skills which control things like concentration, memory, attention, motivation, organization and hyperactivity.

Around 10 million adults have ADHD. Symptoms begin in childhood and continue into adulthood.

An adult with ADHD may show inconsistent performance at work, and struggle with daily responsibilities. They can harbor feelings of frustration, guilt, or shame.

I felt a deep and personal shame for behaviors that I did not understand and seemed to have no control over. My lack of organization, forgetfulness, procrastination and inability to prioritize left me feeling that I could not do what every other “normal” person on the planet could do. I was ashamed of my shortcomings because I did not understand them and had built no coping skills to manage them.

I zoned out when people were talking (I did not mean to) and I lacked basic organizational skills. Also, I knew how to do things, but could not make myself do them. Things that came quickly to others were tasks I could only manage with great difficulty.

Something as simple as cleaning house could be incredibly frustrating, as I had a difficult time with finding a natural order to do things. I often started tasks in the middle or went from one thing to another without ever finishing anything. I would start in one room and then realize I was doing something entirely different, or that I would move to another room altogether.

By the time I reached adulthood, I was convinced I was stupid, lazy and unworthy. It would be a few more years before I would put the pieces together and start seeing these things as symptoms of something greater.

Statistics on ADHD in Adults

Adults with untreated ADHD are more likely to struggle with addiction.

When children who were not treated reach adulthood, 79% experience symptoms of anxiety, depression and physical ailments, compared to 51% of adults without ADHD.

Given that only 10% to 25% of adults with ADHD are actually diagnosed and adequately treated, while more than 40% of patients who met the criteria for adult ADHD had not been diagnosed, only about 10% of adult ADHD patients have received any kind of treatment.

Many years of undiagnosed or untreated symptoms have profound consequences on personal and professional lives, including higher rates of academic underachievement, divorce, marital separation, substance abuse, cigarette smoking and motor vehicle accidents.

Left untreated, ADHD can cause debilitating symptoms that often leave adults confused and angry.

In the ADHD community, I see many people teaching children to embrace their ADHD diagnosis as a "superpower." I think it is important to teach children the coping skills they need to succeed while changing the way we parent in order to help them reach their full potential.

Unfortunately, for many adults not diagnosed as a child, or with unsupportive families or inadequate treatment, ADHD can feel more like a burden and a personal shortcoming than anything that empowers us.

What Are the Symptoms of Adult ADHD?

In some cases of ADHD, symptoms may begin in childhood and continue into adulthood. Some of the symptoms of adult ADHD may include:

- Disorganization.
- Impulsiveness.
- Not being able to manage one's time.
- Difficulty with multitasking.
- Problems with focus.
- Restlessness.
- Poor planning skills.
- Mood swings.
- A difficulty with follow through and completion of tasks.
- Volatile temper; anger.
- Low tolerance for frustration.
- A difficulty coping with "normal" stress.

ADHD is diagnosed when these symptoms are beyond what is in the normal range. Everyone experiences these symptoms at times, but if ADHD symptoms are severe, ever-present and interfere with daily life, it could point to ADHD.

Who Can Diagnose ADHD in Adults?

To receive the most careful, insightful diagnosis of ADHD while ruling out other illnesses and disorders, it is best to seek a diagnosis from a psychiatrist, psychologist, or neurologist.

Only psychiatrists, neurologists, or family physicians can prescribe ADHD medications, although in recent years I have seen, in the U.S., a decrease in the number of general practitioners who treat or prescribe medication for ADHD.

Receiving a Misdiagnosis is Common

While there are disorders that are often co-morbid with ADHD, there are times when adults are diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder and given medications and or therapies that do not work.

While it is not included in the diagnostic criteria, people with ADHD often have mood swings and difficulty regulating moods. We can have difficulty shaking things off when we are sad or angry, as well as becoming overly excited.

While bipolar disorder and ADHD do have a high rate of occurring together, often the mood swings people describe to their doctors are not manic swings, but the mood swings associated with ADHD. With overlapping and

similar symptoms, it can take time and a great deal of patience to achieve a correct diagnosis.

I have a friend who was diagnosed with depression and bipolar disorder and took medication for years that seemed to have no effect. He was irritable and angry and had lost faith in doctors and their ability to help him.

When he could not get real answers from the doctor he had been seeing and sought help elsewhere, he went through two more doctors before he found one that diagnosed him with ADHD. When he began receiving the proper treatment, he began thriving.

Discovering You Have Adult ADHD

Every adult's road to diagnosis is slightly different. For those that do not get a diagnosis in childhood, the journey can be a painful one, marked with inappropriate coping mechanisms and a feeling that something has never been right, but have no idea what is wrong.

Many adults receive their first clue that they might have ADHD through the lens of watching their child struggle with symptoms that are all too familiar. It is not uncommon for an adult to seek professional help after having a child diagnosed.

When my daughter was a toddler, she was a hyperactive ball of energy. But what toddlers are not? It was not anything that I saw as excessive. While she walked and talked early, as she grew she had trouble with things, like learning to tie her shoes.

As a few more years passed, I noticed more and more similarities between her behaviors and the constant chaos that had been in my own head for as long as I could remember. When she was tested for ADHD, I studied the subject to learn all I could, and as I filled out all her paperwork, I could not help but apply all those same questions to myself. It was my "a-hah!" moment.

When I sought a diagnosis in my 30s, it was like a weight had been lifted. All the "problems" and "quirks" I had always exhibited and felt, all the feelings of doing everything wrong, were suddenly given a name. I was grateful.

My diagnosis was relatively easy, but that is not always the case. Other mental and mood disorders share the symptoms of ADHD, and depression and anxiety are also commonly associated with the disorder. It is important to find a doctor who does not rush a diagnosis.

When Adult ADHD Goes Untreated

If ADHD goes undiagnosed in childhood, academic, social and emotional problems can follow a person from childhood into adulthood. Untreated, ADHD can impact job performance, marital and family relationships, mental health and even automobile safety.

Low self-esteem and lack of motivation cause many to live below their potential.

It is also challenging for a person with ADHD to visualize the future and have the ability to put the necessary pieces together to get there. We often are underemployed and have a hard time if faced with losing our jobs because we cannot clearly see how to manage the future.

We come to a full stop when something happens, rather than merely slowing down. Once forward momentum is halted, everything screeches to a halt, and we can become stagnant from fear and indecision. Depression can often set in.

We thrive with structure, but if that structure disappears, we can have a hard time building it for ourselves.

When I lost the job I had held for many years I was completely lost. With my future uncertain and myself and my child to take care of, instead of rising out of the situation and moving forward, it felt like I was stuck in quicksand.

The more I tried, the more it sucked me in.

I made a list of things I needed to do around the house while I was looking for work. Each day would pass with very little getting done, and me having no idea where the hours had gone. I had no idea how to build the momentum I needed or how to find my way into the workforce.

There were extenuating circumstances as far as my daughter's health that made a difference at that time too, but what happened was I ended up in a deep depression and could not figure out where to begin to make things right.

This inability to build a structure from nothing or to set long-term goals is the reason why therapy or an ADHD coach can be so important.

Treatment for ADHD in Adults

If a person thinks they might have ADHD, it is important to seek help from a medical professional who is familiar with the disorder. No definitive test can prove ADHD is present, but diagnosis can be made from carefully reviewing all symptoms and medical history, as well as ruling out other mental or mood disorders.

Treatment options are similar for both children and adults with ADHD. A combination of medication, psychotherapy and treatment for any co-existing mental or mood disorders is recommended.

Medication is only one step to treatment, however, learning to change habits and undo years of negative thinking and feelings is critical.

Counseling is an important key to treatment, and it is best to choose a psychologist or master level therapist well versed in ADHD. Before choosing any doctor or therapist, find out how many ADHD patients they see. Get to know what kind of training they have in ADHD and if they are up to date in the latest treatments and therapies.

There can be controversy over the treatment of ADHD, especially around the use of medications. Ultimately, each adult has to do what is right for them. We must take the information we learn and decide what is best for ourselves.

I do not take ADHD medication, but my daughter does. I would absolutely use medication in the future, if necessary. Sometimes I struggle with symptoms and it is hard to deal with the daily demands of life, but I work to learn and apply the strategies that make things as easy as they can be.

ADHD in Adults: Curse or Gift?

We've all heard it said that ADHD is not a curse, but a gift. I can see it both ways sometimes. The struggle with daily activities is a real one, but at the same time, I am blessed with curiosity and love of trying new things, as well as creativity.

My love for trying new things can be seen as a blessing and a curse. I try new things, but I also get tired of them quickly and move on. I can hyper-focus on writing my novel, but I can just as easily hyper-focus on playing solitaire.

Sometimes I feel my biggest superpower is not a thirst for knowledge or boundless energy, but just making it through the day.

While I do not enjoy last minute changes of plans or not being in control, I also tend to not worry about the little things. Life is messy, and I do not mind if the kids make a few more.

I am impulsive, my daughter can easily get me distracted from work and talk me into doing something fun, I procrastinate even when I say I am going to change my ways and my list of shortcoming would be too many to actually list.

Yet once I embraced who I was, understood how my mind worked and why I was different, I became okay with the person I see in the mirror. It isn't always easy. Some days are a struggle and those days I hate having ADHD, but then I try to bring myself back to the "superpower" mentality and remember that there is much to me that would not exist without the ADHD, and for that, I'm pretty grateful.

With proper treatment and perhaps a good sense of humor, ADHD in adults is definitely manageable.