Helping Others Understand the Effects of ADHD

by CHRISTINE LEE

"Is ADHD Real?" Dealing With ADHD Disbelief

Christine Lee and Counselor Eric Patterson discuss how to deal with people when they ask "Is ADHD real?"

Eric's Advice for Coping With Doubt

You can't see it. You can't taste it, smell it, or touch it. There is no definitive test or measure to prove its existence. Because of this complete lack of evidence, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), must be fake, right?

This is the thought process that many have regarding the condition that affects about five percent of kids and nearly three percent of adults. Despite the long track record of observable symptoms, accurate diagnosis, and effective treatment, many people consider ADHD to be nothing more than a myth.

Rather than accept that ADHD is real, people think:

- ADHD is a tool used by medication companies to sell their products to a naïve public.
- ADHD is a result of modern life, diets, and technology — it never existed in the past.
- ADHD is a way for psychologists to create a disorder out of normal childhood behavior.

Each of these beliefs is flawed and can be easily disproven based on current and historical facts.

For example, symptoms that refer to ADHD have been discussed in medical literature since the 1800s. The use of medication as a treatment has been tested and retested to be effective in reducing symptoms, especially when combined with therapy.

What Is ADHD?

Before ADHD is defended any further, it is important to note the current concept of ADHD.

Mental health disorders are compiled in a text called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Now in its fifth addition, the DSM-5 is a work constructed by the American Psychiatric Association to create a standard for all mental health practitioners regarding diagnosis of various conditions.

When it comes to ADHD, the material is quite lengthy and involved. There are nine symptoms of inattention you could have; by having six or more, you meet the criteria of inattentive. Examples include:

- Failing to give attention to small details
- Struggling to listen when spoken to
- Difficulty staying organized

- Losing important items
- Being distracted easily

Beyond the nine inattentive symptoms, there are nine symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity. Again, by having six or more, you meet the criteria. Examples include:

- Fidgeting or squirming
- Running or climbing during inappropriate times
- Talking excessively and interrupting others
- Difficulty waiting or taking turns

The symptoms are categorized this way because there are actually several versions of ADHD. There is:

- **Predominantly inattentive**, where you meet the requirements for inattention but not hyperactivity/impulsivity.
- **Predominantly hyperactive/impulsive**, where you meet the requirements for hyperactivity/impulsivity but not inattention.
- **Combined**, where you meet requirements for both.

Males are more likely to have ADHD overall, but females are more likely to have ADHD that is predominantly inattentive.

Doubting ADHD

By looking at the symptoms of ADHD, it is easy to see where doubt begins. These symptoms look very similar to behaviors typical during childhood.

What child does not get restless easily or has trouble listening? What child loves waiting patiently or is always organized? Looking at this information, it would be easy for anyone to assume that ADHD is only labeling normal behavior as abnormal.

Before you reach that conclusion, consider another mental health disorder like depression, which is widely accepted and understood by the majority of people. Consider symptoms of depression, like periods of low mood or irritability, changes in sleep and appetite, and low motivation to engage in pleasurable activities.

If you look at these symptoms, it is easy to reach the same conclusion as with ADHD. Everyone feels depressed sometimes, right?

Everyone experiences changes in their sleep, appetite, and motivation, right? So, this means depression is nothing more than making typical life atypical.

People don’t usually make this argument, though, because they have seen firsthand how depression differs from normal feelings. Symptoms of a mental health condition are based on intensity, frequency, and duration of symptoms.

Depression is real and much more than someone being “sad.” ADHD is real and much more than someone being “lazy and irresponsible.”

The Risks of Doubting the Diagnosis

People who think ADHD is fake, exaggerated, or a temporary condition to be grown out of put themselves and the people exhibiting the symptoms at risk.

ADHD can be treated well when symptoms are taken seriously. Symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity can significantly change the life of someone living with ADHD; they tend to do worse in school, have poorer

relationships, and struggle in the workplace.

Untreated ADHD can lead to a number of proven risks, like:

- Higher chance of developing other mental health disorders like conduct disorder and antisocial personality disorder.
- Higher chance of using substances like drugs and alcohol.
- Higher chance of becoming incarcerated.
- More frequent traffic accidents and violations.
- Higher chance of being injured.

Based on this, the risk of doubting the diagnosis is too great.

Trusting the Experts

You cannot see ADHD, but experts can. With years of education and practical experience, a mental health professional can see the symptoms of ADHD in a child or adult based on their presentation, how they answer questions, and the content of their responses.

There is no test to prove someone has this mental health condition, but clinicians can use their skills to remove most of the doubt regarding the prognosis.

The verdict is in: ADHD is real. For the people who see it every day, they can see it in children and adults.

You do not have to believe ADHD is real, but you could be doing a huge disservice to someone with ADHD. Without treatment, more problems emerge. Choose to be a help, not a hindrance.

Next page: Christine shares her experience with helping others understand ADHD.

Christine's Experience With Dealing With Disbelief

A diagnosis of adult ADHD is something of a mixed blessing. You experience euphoria and relief at finally knowing there is a reason why you are the way you are, but it does not magically make the past better. And adding a gaggle of vocal disbelievers makes everything much more challenging.

I should know. I live with a slowly converting skeptic.

‘You can't have ADHD, you aren't a kid’

Happy to share the good news, I told everyone. I stood back, feeling as though I'd conquered the world (or at least answered the burning question of why I was so different) and waited for the congratulations to pour in.

I was shocked and hurt by the less-than-supportive responses.

My mistake was in assuming that everyone just understood that adults could have ADHD, too. That my diagnosis might be questioned, or even outright rejected, never occurred to me.

So how do you cope with the people who don’t believe you when the initial euphoria over knowing you aren't just crazy, lazy or forgetful is over?

Learn About Your Condition

It’s time to read. Yes, you. You may think you already know everything out there about adult ADHD, but you are mistaken.

Take the time to invest in yourself and really delve into the subject. There are numerous places to do so; you're already at a great spot to start. CHADD, ADDittude, NIMH, even Wikipedia are other great resources full of the latest information — information that will help you when having to deal with the skeptical comments your diagnosis may bring.

Know Your Worth

What are your talents? What are your best qualities? Think of all you have to bring to the table and write those things down.

Having ADHD does not render these things null and void any more than being a diabetic or surviving a heart attack would. Knowing your worth as an individual can give you the confidence you'll need to face down your critics.

Be a Lover, Not a Fighter

People will say what they will, you cannot stop them. We all know this. That's life.

However, you do not have to let it affect you or change your perception of who and what you are. They cannot take away what you are not willing to give.

Nor does it mean that you can't say anything in your defense. Remember the sticks and stones adage? When someone makes a disparaging remark about ADHD — and someone eventually will — take a breath. Then take another.

Try not to react out of anger. They may know very little about ADHD and are only sharing misinformation they have heard.

No matter how long you have lived with your diagnosis, you are almost certain to feel a pang when someone spouts something ignorant. Nevertheless, reacting with defensiveness and anger makes a situation that could have been diffused with a few words into something horrendous and embarrassing for all parties.

'ADHD Isn't Real'

So what do you say when someone tells you the condition you live with every day isn't real? It depends.

If the comment comes from a close friend or family member, you can let them know that neuroscience has proved it exists. Use their facial expression to judge whether you take it further or let it drop.

Perhaps they aren't yet ready for you to launch into a full-blown discussion of how a 'normal' brain functions vs. how an ADHD brain functions. And that's okay. Sometimes, especially with those who have known you for most of your life, they need time to digest what you have told them. Be patient with them. No one likes being force-fed.

Find the Humor

Nothing can ease a situation better than humor. If the squirrel remark is tossed out, you can laugh and reply that (sigh) "Squirrels are lucky aren't they? Never having to hear the same old jokes repeatedly. They might be onto something, huh?"

Humor can work magic. You successfully made your point, but in a way that elicits a grin instead of another insult or an escalation into something befitting *The Jerry Springer Show*. It's my own best defense against rude and nasty comments and I use it often.

'ADHD is Just an Excuse for Being a Screw Up'

But what if the person in question *really* believes ADHD is just an excuse for being lazy or flighty or unreliable?

I mentioned earlier that I live with a slow to convert skeptic. I can tell you from six years of hard lessons learned in the what *not* to do category, that talking and showing proof will not matter. Not when you're talking to a man firmly anchored in the 'actions speak louder than words' camp.

What worked best in those early turbulent years, and still does, was taking many a deep breath and not giving in to my impulses to yell mean things at him out of anger and hurt feelings. I began working on and maintaining a daily routine, doing my best to be consistent and accountable for the things I said I'd do, and apologizing promptly when a mistake was made. It goes a long way.

I found out that it was his lack of trust that he could count on me to do what I said I would that bothered him most of all. He only admitted to this last year. Did I mention he is the strong, silent type?

For the one I love most to be my biggest critic was my worst nightmare and is becoming my biggest victory. I've not yet managed to completely convince him that ADHD isn't a crutch, or an excuse to be trotted out over every little oopsie, but my not reacting so quickly and maintaining that day to day routine is winning him over to the dark side, slowly but surely.