



ATTENTION AND CONCENTRATION PROBLEMS

Could I have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?

There are many factors that can affect a person's ability to maintain adequate attention and concentration in their day to day lives, such as stress, diet, sleep, mood, motivation, etc. For some individuals, attention problems can be chronic and severe enough to be considered ADHD.

ADHD is a neurologically based condition often diagnosed in childhood, though some children with ADHD continue to have it as adults. Adults may feel that it is impossible to get organized, stick to a job, or remember and keep appointments. Daily tasks such as getting up in the morning, preparing to leave the house, arriving places on time, and being productive at school or work can be especially challenging for adults with ADHD. These adults may have a history of failure at school, problems at work, or difficulty in relationships. Many have had multiple traffic accidents. Like teens, adults with ADHD may seem restless and may try to do several things at once, most of them unsuccessfully. They also tend to prefer "quick fixes," rather than taking the steps needed to achieve greater rewards. Others may be seen as slow and daydreamy, as they are distracted as much by their own random thoughts as by outside stimuli. This distinction distinguishes between different types of ADHD including predominance of hyperactivity, inattention, or a combination of both. Because of repeated failures, many people with ADHD can develop low self-esteem or other mood related problems.

It is also important to note that the individuals with ADHD often have inherent strengths such as being energetic, creative, innovative thinkers who are able to synthesize information, make unusual cross-disciplinary connections, and multitask.

How is ADHD Diagnosed?

If you suspect you have ADHD, you should be evaluated by a licensed mental health professional and/or medical doctor. These professionals assess for a wide range of symptoms and experiences from childhood through adulthood. The mental health professional may also interview partners, parents, close friends, and other associates. Certain rating scales are often used to determine if an adult meets the diagnostic criteria for ADHD. The person will also undergo a physical exam and various psychological tests.

How is ADHD Treated?

ADHD is typically treated with medication, counseling, or a combination of treatments. Medications typically include stimulant medications such as Ritalin or Adderall. Antidepressants are also sometimes used in ADHD treatment. These medications are typically targeted at affecting the regulation of two neurotransmitters associated with focused attention, norepinephrine and dopamine. A professional counselor or therapist can also help someone with ADHD make lifestyle changes and to learn new ways to organize his or her life in ways that are more functional. Cognitive behavioral therapy can also help change one's poor self-image by examining the experiences that produced it.

Tips to Maximize Attention and Concentration in College

Daily Organization

- Learn to use a daily planner
 - Put all due dates and exams in the planner
 - Break assignments into small pieces, and schedule daily time to do these.
 - Include all of your social, work, and recreational activities in your planner
 - Always have your planner with you
 - If you use an electronic planner, use alarms to alert you scheduled events
 - Spend 10 minutes at morning or night to plan your day
 - Make a "To Do List" and keep it in your planner
- Have a special place to ALWAYS put important things like keys, wallet, phone, bills, etc.
- Incorporate exercise into your daily routine
- Eliminate things that negatively impact attention (e.g. poor nutrition, tiredness, and stress)

Scheduling Classes

- Try to schedule classes at times when you feel you are most alert
- Try not to schedule classes back to back
- Consider a reduced course load

During Class

- Do not sit by the window in class or when studying
- Try sitting in the front middle of class where you will be less likely to get distracted by peers
- Tape record class lectures and/or use your professors notes
- Participate in class discussion as much as possible to enhance your concentration
- If fidgety, have something to occupy your hands (e.g. binder clips, ball, rubberband, etc.)

Studying and Homework

- Give yourself extra time to complete assignments
- Study in a distraction free environment (this may not be your room☺)
- Try studying in shorter blocks of time, such as one-hour blocks
- Give yourself TIMED breaks
- Give yourself an incentive to work toward by promising yourself that you'll treat yourself when you complete the task
- Study with others to engage in conversation about the material
- Use multiple sensory inputs when learning new material (e.g. listen to a lecture recording while reading over class notes, or read out loud)
- Always over-learn material with practice and rehearsal
- Use white noise to reduce distractions
- Use available academic support services such as tutorial services

Books (Available for browsing in the UI Counseling and Testing Center Self-Help Room)

Answers to Distraction. Edward M. Hallowell, MD & John J. Ratey, MD, 1994.

Survival Guide for College Students with ADHD or LD. Kathleen G. Nadeau, Ph.D, 2006.

ADD and the College Student. Patricia O. Quinn, MD, 1994.

Living with ADD. M. Susan Roberts, Ph.D & Gerard J. Jansen, Ph.D, 1997.

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Adults. Paul H. Wender, MD, 1995.

Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling and Testing Center offers free confidential counseling for full time UI students. For more information call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 885-6716. Website: www.uidaho.edu/ctc. All appointments are confidential.