

ADHD, Anxiety, and Self-Esteem

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is the most common learning disorder in childhood and one of the most highly heritable problems in all of medicine. It's no one's fault unless you choose to blame your great great-great-grandparents (or if your birth was months premature), but it becomes a major disability left unrecognized, not well managed, or simply not treated.

Diagnostically ADHD is defined by distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. ADD is defined by distractibility. DSM-5 criteria catalog the symptoms that cluster together to create the challenges and sometimes disability these symptoms create. In the United States, which is largely an immigrant culture, ADD/ADHD may be more common than in older cultures in other parts of the world. However it is known throughout the world in every population ever studied.

As a Child Psychiatrist I see children and their families with ADD or ADHD routinely and often. The range of disability depends on many factors that include family emotional stability and comorbid difficulties with moods, anxiety, low self-esteem, and family trauma.

Children with untreated ADD or ADHD are overrepresented in cohorts of children who struggle in school, under-perform in school and social settings, drop out of school, get into trouble with drugs or alcohol, get into trouble with the law, or as adults end up underemployed or on public assistance. They often become anxious and develop poor self-esteem after repeated failures due to these symptoms.

The difficulties created by ADD or ADHD become manifest when coping strategies get overwhelmed by the pace and volume of schoolwork or tasks requiring focus and concentration. I tend to see new patients who are attempting transitions to more difficult school settings or other new life circumstances.

Coping strategies focus on controlling outside noise and other distractions. One-to-one conversations and small group teaching situations make it easier to focus. Structured study routines help to assure completion of assignments. Written assignments and written schedules reduce the likelihood that work gets forgotten. Rigid routines and schedules for doing required work help with remembering assignments, completing them, and turning them in. Without regular routines forgetfulness and distractions too frequently lead to work not finished or turned in.

Medication can improve the brain's ability to focus and sustain concentration, but available medications have a number of difficult side effects which one must learn to manage. Chief among them are appetite suppression and interruption of sleep. Stimulant medications, which tend to be the most helpful, are highly abusable. These prescriptions are closely monitored and restricted. Every straight stimulant prescription must be hand signed and these prescriptions are limited to 3 months at a time.

In summary, ADD/ADHD is the most common childhood disability creating problems in school, behavioral problems for those with hyperactivity and impulsivity, and family challenges for parents who often themselves struggle with ADD or ADHD. Failure to understand and manage these persistent symptoms often predisposes to significant undermining of performance in tasks, play, or social situations that benefit from sustained attention. It's a good idea to seek professional help as early as the complications from ADD or ADHD surface in school, at home, or in other settings.

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