

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

144 RAILROAD AVE #202

EDMONDS, WA 98020

PHONE: 425.686.8413

FAX: 888.976.5817

What is ADHD, How is it identified, and What can be done about it?

What is ADHD?

ADHD is a disorder that involves problems with attention, organization, impulsivity, and self-control; and these problems cause significant functional impairment. We all get distracted and procrastinate at times, but kids and adults with ADHD have more severe and more frequent problems in these areas. ADHD is most likely a brain-based disorder and the best evidence indicates that it starts in early childhood. In fact, part of the definition is that the symptoms are present in childhood.

Imagine that your talents and intelligence represent the horse power of a car - the raw ability to go fast. But a car needs more than just a strong engine; it needs breaks, good steering, and a GPS system to help us navigate where we are going. Now imagine that resisting impulses and distractions are the breaks, planning and organizing represent the combination between the steering and navigation system. For people with ADHD, these are the areas that are most affected.

What is included in a good evaluation for ADHD?

Problems with attention can result from just about any cause. That's why a thorough evaluation is necessary to determine whether the attention problems are related to ADHD or something else. In general, these are the following things that are considered:

1. Current symptoms meet specified criteria for ADHD
2. The symptoms are causing impairment in multiple areas of a person's life
3. The symptoms are not better explained by another condition (such as medical problems, specific learning disabilities, or other mental health problems)
4. There is sufficient evidence of a developmental progression of the disorder

Is ADHD a Learning Disability ?

Not exactly. ADHD affects a person's ability to sustain attention, focus on details, organize themselves, resist impulses, and to block out the noise of a situation in order to focus on the task at hand. Often there is also a tendency to become overly focused on really pleasurable activities (e.g., video games, tv shows, etc.). ADHD can certainly affect school performance in a similar way that Learning Disabilities do. However, the treatment approaches for these different but related conditions vary quite significantly. For example, medications are often found helpful in the treatment of ADHD but there are no medications for Learning Disabilities.

Given the very different treatment approaches for ADHD and Learning Disabilities, an evaluation can be especially helpful in deciding the best course of action.

Can adults have ADHD?

Yes! The estimates vary but somewhere around 2/3 of children diagnosed with ADHD continue to have it as adults. For some kids, it is likely that they just developed more slowly than their peers in terms of self-control, attention, and organization, but eventually caught up. In these cases, it's probably most accurate to say that they never truly had ADHD but just presented as such. For a lot of adults with ADHD, they are able to find environments where their difficulties are not emphasized. However, for many adults the problems with impulsivity, time management, and inattention continue to interfere with work and relationships.

What other problems are associated with ADHD?

Research generally shows that about 50% of all people with ADHD also have another diagnosis. Some of the most common include learning disabilities; anxiety or depression; other serious behavioral disorders that result in defiant and oppositional attitudes; and/or substance abuse. Every individual situation is different, but for many people the problems that the ADHD causes in their lives results in stress, unhappiness, and/or frustration.

What can I do about ADHD?

The first thing is to be sure that the problems being experienced are, in fact, due to ADHD. An evaluation with a primary care physician is probably a good first step. ADHD treatment usually includes medications and certain behavioral changes, but the treatments for other conditions that might mimic ADHD are very different.

If a thorough evaluation does identify ADHD, there are certain steps to take. As controversial as medications can be, the truth is that these medications have been studied more thoroughly than any psychiatric medication and are found to be quite effective. Research indicates that adults are likely to experience less side effects than children. The primary side effect in kids is a reduced appetite and in large group studies there is evidence of reduced growth.

Here are some common behavioral strategies that I recommend for adults:

- Write down anything that you have to remember. Use calendars and one To-Do list for everything.
- Use calendars, timers, or other strategies to cue you of tasks to complete
- Repeat back things people tell you to do to make sure you heard them

Here are some common behavioral strategies that I recommend for parents:

- Provide frequent opportunities for rewards of positive behaviors
- Talk less, do more...meaning keep verbal directions to a minimum and act with consequences
- Manage expectations - your child can probably do many things typically but organizing themselves and controlling their behavior are genuine limitations

Individual counseling can be effective for managing distress, anxiety, or other stressors related to ADHD.

Where to find resources?

- National Center for Learning Disabilities: www.nclld.org
- Learning Disabilities Association of Washington: www.ldawa.org

Find me online at
www.JaredHellings.com