



COULD IT BE ADULT ADHD?

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Not again. You missed an important meeting – the second time this month you’ve forgotten one – and the boss wants to see you in his office. Immediately. Or maybe you’re so buried in Post-It notes that you don’t know which way is up. Or you’ve got a stack of papers to get through on your desk, but you can’t even get past the first sheet of paper.

Do you have chronic trouble with forgetfulness, disorganization, listening to others, inability to start or complete tasks or being late to work or other important events? If so, you may have attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). If you think that ADHD is just a kid’s diagnosis, you’re mistaken, said Stacey Spencer, EdD, a clinical neuropsychologist practicing in New Jersey. “Four and a half percent of adults have ADHD,” she explained. “The focus in the media is on children with this disorder; we tend to overlook the symptoms adults have that may also indicate ADHD.”

The disorder may be under-recognized for several reasons, according to Stephanie Sarkis, PhD, a Florida psychotherapist and author of four books on adult attention deficit disorder. While mental health experts know today that adult ADHD is merely a continuation of childhood ADHD, some adults were never diagnosed as children, so are unaware they have the condition. “When you have a lot of structure in your day to day life and your parents are in control of things, the symptoms aren’t always obvious,” said Dr. Sarkis. “But once you start college or a job and you’re left to your own devices, they start to cause problems.”

Another problem, added Sarkis, is that even if you’re aware you had ADHD as a child, the symptoms change in character from childhood to adulthood, being somewhat more subtle and making the diagnosis more difficult. “Some of the hyperactivity turns into an inner restlessness,” she said. “You can’t just relax and watch television, for example. You’re itching to do something else, so you have to talk on the phone while watching.”

ADHD can wreak havoc in an adult’s life, contributing to job failure, money management difficulties, traffic accidents and marriage problems, among other issues, according to Dr. Sarkis. “Basically, there’s a big gap between ability and performance,” she explained.

David Sack, MD, psychiatrist and CEO of Elements Behavioral Health in California agrees. “People with adult ADHD are less successful than their intelligence would predict,” he said. “They have ongoing problems with not getting work done on time, missing deadlines, forgetfulness at a job or at school – usually because they didn’t pay attention to instructions in the first place. At home, in a relationship, they may even forget to pick up the kids from school or child care.”

The good news, said Dr. Spencer, is that adult ADHD can be diagnosed and treated, both with medication and with behavioral therapy. Beware, though, of self-diagnosis. “There are lots of online tests you can take to see if you have ADHD,” she said. “But it’s important to talk to a mental health professional, a human being, to have a dialogue about your symptoms, so that you can be treated appropriately.”

MAKING THE DIAGNOSIS

These days, we’ve become accustomed to high tech tests, such as imaging, to help doctors make a diagnosis. But while some research suggests that ADHD is caused by a deficiency of dopamine (one of the building blocks of norepinephrine), and other theories purport that those with ADHD have a different theta/beta brain wave ratio than those without the disorder – there is no biological test at this point that can conclusively diagnose the disorder, said Spencer. According to Dr. Spencer, the best way for a mental health professional to diagnose adult ADHD is by conducting an interview with the patient and his or her family members, using criteria from the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,” (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association, a listing of certain symptoms that may be present in those with ADHD.

Because adult ADHD is believed to be a condition that has been present since childhood, the diagnosis is fairly easy for those who have been diagnosed previously. But In adults who weren’t diagnosed with the disorder during childhood, it can be a little trickier, said Dr. Spencer. “We need to look back to middle childhood to identify symptoms that may give us clues of ADHD.”

This, she explained, may be done by examining school records to identify grades that were lower than might have been expected, or behavioral problems. “We also talk to a significant other, maybe a spouse or a parent, who can help to identify both past and current symptoms that the person may not recognize.”

Sometimes, a diagnosis of adult ADHD may come as a surprise, added Dr. Spencer. “Many times, people with adult ADHD seek help for other problems that go hand in hand with the disorder, such as anxiety or depression,” she explained.

The best advice? If you have any symptoms that are interfering with your job or relationships for more than a brief time, see a mental health provider, said Dr. Spencer.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH ADULT ADHD

Many of the challenges we all face both in the workplace and at home are even more difficult for those with adult ADHD. Here are some tips from the experts for coping:

Choose your career wisely, advised David Sack, MD, psychiatrist and CEO of Elements Behavioral Health in California. “People with ADHD have trouble with management jobs due to lack of organization and inability to sit still and focus. Yet they may be much more successful at a job in sales or contracting, where they can move around and be in the moment.”

Take advantage of technology, suggested Stephanie Sarkis, PhD, a Florida psychotherapist and author of four books on adult attention deficit disorder. “Go as paperless as possible to reduce the clutter and help remind you of things,” she said. “Use your phone calendar and to do list, use apps for travel packing and shopping, use money management software, direct deposit and automatic bill payment.”

Enlist help, even if you have to hire someone to help with organization, light cleaning and necessary paperwork, said Dr. Sarkis. Friends can also help you manage impulsive behaviors by providing feedback about what they see and help you to practice more positive behaviors.

See a therapist, in addition to taking prescribed medications, said Dr. Sack. "Behavioral therapy is a cornerstone of ADHD management. It can help with the frustration of living with the disorder, and with social skills training."

Break tasks down into small pieces. "Study or work on a difficult task for a half hour, then go outdoors and take a walk," recommended Dr. Sarkis. "Exercise helps you to raise the brain chemicals you need to help you focus." MS&F