

Mental Health Matters

Plain Talk about Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder



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Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, commonly referred to as ADHD, affects approximately 5% of American children according to CH.A.D.D. (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Disorders).

ADHD has been recognized and treated in children for many years. Initially, it was thought that children or adolescents with ADHD would “outgrow” the symptoms. However, we now know that a significant number of individuals who were diagnosed in childhood – perhaps as many as 50% to 70% – continue to have symptoms after they reach adulthood, and it is estimated that 1% to 3% of the adult population may also have ADHD.

The behavioral symptoms most commonly described in connection with ADHD are: inattention (distractibility), hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Inattention (distractibility) is defined as the inability to regulate attention or concentration during the performance of a task. A person with ADHD who demonstrates inattention may be easily distracted by sights, sounds, or internal thoughts that intrude on the task at hand. Hyperactivity, among ADHD sufferers, is described as being unable to relax or sit still. The individual may be fidgety and restless. Persons with ADHD who demonstrate impulsivity may not stop to consider consequences before acting, tend to interrupt others, or may blurt out answers before questions are completely stated. In some individuals, impulsivity has led to serious problems with impulse buying, hastily undertaken marriages, or relationships that end abruptly.

An individual does not have to demonstrate all three symptoms to be diagnosed as ADHD. The widely

accepted criteria for establishing a diagnosis of ADHD require that a person demonstrate a significant number of symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and/or impulsivity with the onset of the symptoms occurring in childhood, usually by age seven. The symptoms must be present to such a degree that they disrupt functioning at work, home, or school. They must also occur in at least two situations (eg., home and school).

It is important to understand that ADHD is not due to a weakness in character, bad parenting, moral failing, or low intelligence. The exact causes of ADHD are not known. However, there is a neurobiological basis for the disorder. ADHD is believed to be the result of an imbalance or deficiency in chemicals or neurotransmitters in the brain. Heredity has also played a role, but the exact patterns of genetic transmission have not yet been identified.

Although there is no cure for ADHD, there are treatments that can be useful in managing the symptoms of the disorder. Psychostimulants have reduced the symptoms of distractibility, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, while increasing attention and decreasing aggression among ADHD patients. It is important to recognize that such medications can be effective in treating ADHD – provided you know the facts about them and use them wisely. The prudent use of medications can only be determined following an accurate and comprehensive assessment for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

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