



# Dyslexia Assessment and Consultancy

Email: [info@workingwithdyslexia.com](mailto:info@workingwithdyslexia.com) Telephone: 020 7582 6117

## **ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITYDISORDER IN ADULTS:**

### **What is ADHD? Can adults really be ADHD?**

#### **If so, does it matter?**

Dr Michael Woods

In this article, the designation ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) refers also to ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). Though not strictly correct, these terms are often regarded as being synonymous.

Everyone is likely as some stage to be inattentive, distractible and impulsive, as well as to have problems with restlessness and memory. However those with ADHD tend to display these characteristics more frequently, more intensely, and in more settings than those not affected. The degree of impairment can be severe. In the past it has generally been thought that children and adolescents 'grow out of ADHD', but it is now realised that this is not necessarily the case. It has been established that between 60% to 70% of ADHD children in the USA eventually become adults with ADHD, though with adulthood, symptoms tend to become modified. For example, the physical hyperactivity displayed by some ADHD children generally tends to mutate into feelings of restlessness.

The symptoms displayed by adults may start to become evident only during their transition from adolescence and adulthood, at which time demands for independent thought, planning and organisation becomes increasingly important in a variety of situations: the support available in the past and reliance on established routines, is either no longer adequate or is inappropriate. With the expectations of independent action, the

consequences of having ADHD can be serious. Problems with inattentiveness could lead to costly errors, impulsiveness could lead to action without thought of consequences, and feelings of restlessness could result in inconsistent quality of work being performed.

ADHD is a complex, neurologically-based condition, recognized by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) as such. The presence of ADHD affects self esteem, academic and work performance, and the quality and duration of relationships. This is particularly the case as it is frequently associated with the presence of other conditions including mood disorders (especially depression), anxiety disorders, and learning disorders such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. Added to this is the fact that ADHD is highly heritable: it has a strong genetic basis. Those affected are more likely to have children affected by ADHD, this placing even greater strain on family and other relationships.

Those affected tend continually to experience frustration as they are aware that they are not realizing their potential ability, and it appears that nothing can resolve or alleviate the effects of this disorder.

Research has shown that adults with ADHD tend to have problems in any combination of the following 'executive tasks' or 'executive functions' according to Thomas Brown, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Yale:

- getting organised and setting priorities
- avoiding procrastination
- sustaining attention, yet shifting attention when needed
- sustaining effort and remaining alert
- coping with the impact of emotions
- inefficient working memory

The degree of impairment associated with ADHD depends on a number of factors, and varies in impact from mild to severe. Of particular concern is the fact that research in the USA has also revealed the fact that ADHD adults were six times more likely than those

not affected to manifest at least one other psychiatric disorder at some stage during their lives. They are also far more likely to become involved in motor accidents, and (unless medicated), are at greater risk of substance abuse (this being a form of self-medication).

NICE has published national guidelines relating to the identification and treatment of ADHD. The formal diagnosis needs to be made by a mental health specialist trained and experienced in the area of ADHD, particularly as medication is often an important recommended aspect of treatment. However because of the complex nature of ADHD and its impact on academic and vocational aspects of life, the prior involvement of suitably trained psychologists is also welcomed and advisable, as the effects of ADHD span medical and non-medical factors. Medical practitioners do not claim to have knowledge and experience related to the impact of ADHD and the associated problems in respect of, for example, specific learning difficulties. The findings of psychologists can effectively contribute to the process of accurate diagnosis by medical specialists. Psychologists would be in a position to comment on the type and levels of support which could be provided for the person concerned, and recommend action which could be taken by the client.

Quite clearly therefore adults can and do present with ADHD, and it can affect them and their families and associates to a significant degree. So what's the good news about having ADHD? Those affected often display qualities of resourcefulness, tenacity and loyalty. They tend to be able to see the broad picture, rather than to think in compartments, and they can therefore develop creative solutions to problems. In addition they tend to display entrepreneurial skills, as they may be 'risk - takers' by nature. On a personal level they are often trusting, sensitive and warm hearted. Just as important is the fact that once those with ADHD have been assessed and the underlying reason for their difficulties identified, they can move constructively towards becoming more aware of the true nature of their condition, and how it affects virtually everything they do, and their relationships with others. They can be guided to a greater recognition of their strengths and empowered to take constructive action accordingly. Self-education is an essential component to the effective self-management of the condition; and there is an astonishingly wide range of resources available.

### **Further Reading**

'Answers to Distraction' by Hallowell and Ratey (1994) Bantam Books

This is an excellent and easy to read book suitable for those with ADHD and for those who would like to gain a broad perspective of the condition. Available from ADDISS (the Attention Deficit Information Support Service) a national charity based in London, at [www.addiss.org.uk](http://www.addiss.org.uk)

Michael Woods  
Educational Psychologist

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