

COPING WITH ATTENTION-DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) IN THE WORKPLACE

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Coping with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the Workplace

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Most of us get up, go to work, and do our jobs without a substantial struggle. For individuals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), however, the workday can be filled with unique challenges. If these challenges are not recognized and coping strategies not developed, people with ADHD may find themselves jumping from job to job, being terminated, and find themselves becoming increasingly frustrated and unhappy.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder includes symptoms such as restlessness, impulsivity, distractibility, trouble concentrating, and difficulty with organization. Obviously, such difficulties present obstacles to the accuracy and efficiency usually demanded at work. This likely contributes to the finding that ADHD individuals studied into adulthood were found to have more frequent job changes.

The Challenge of ADHD at Work

Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D., known nationally for her work with ADHD, has found that individuals with ADHD can succeed in almost any type of career. But, they must realistically consider variables such as interests, personality type, areas of strength and weakness, and level of training. Assessment of these variables can be a process in and of itself, which may include looking back at past jobs, hobbies, likes, and dislikes. Sometimes formal assessment by a psychologist may be helpful, including intellectual and/or aptitude tests, interest inventories, and personality measures.

Even when apparently well-trained and well-matched to a particular job or career, ADHD adults may encounter “ADHD traps” in the work place. Dr. Nadeau identifies the ADHD traps as the following: distractibility; impulsivity;

hyperactivity; memory problems; boredom; time management problems; procrastination; difficulty with long-term projects; paperwork; and interpersonal difficulties. Dale Brown, also known for her ADHD studies, has identified many of the same areas of concern and adds trouble getting ready and organized, and problems learning new information quickly as additional problems for ADHD adults in the workforce.

Dr. Ellis has noted that individuals with ADHD may encounter increased stress on the job associated with things such as long hours, unrealistic demands, changes in management, lack of structure, long commutes, or frequent deadlines. However, before changing jobs (and certainly before changing careers), it is strongly recommended to look for ways to improve the current situation.

As noted above, individuals with ADHD may face numerous challenges in the workplace. Do not despair! Researchers have found personality traits as well as work environments can contribute to job success despite ADHD. External circumstances that were noted to increase chances of success on the job included a mentor for guidance/support; positive, supportive co-workers; new work experiences to enhance skills; a work environment in which help was available when needed; and a good fit between the individual's skills and the job's requirements.

Dr. Ellis cites Paul Gerber's research, which suggests that individuals who achieved high levels of success on the job despite ADHD/learning disability had the following traits: a strong desire to be successful; a high level of determination; strong need to control their own destiny; an ability to reframe disability in a more positive, productive manner; a planned and goal-oriented approach; and an ability to seek assistance when needed without becoming dependent.

Often, using some of the strategies noted below, an individual with ADHD can vastly improve productivity and satisfaction at work.

Strategies for dealing with ADHD in the Workplace:

ADHD individuals may differ on which strategies are most useful, and many may not be practical in all work environments. Furthermore, judgment is essential in deciding which strategies to employ, since a few strategies done well are likely to be more successful and more likely to be acceptable to an employer.

With the above cautions, for minimizing distractibility, several strategies are worth trying. These include having a private office or using unused space whenever possible; using Do Not Disturb signs; arranging blocks of uninterrupted time; letting voice mail answer whenever possible and returning calls at a set time each day; using a notebook to jot down ideas as they come; using headphones with white noise or music; trying to arrange flex-time so you are at the office when others are

not there; facing your chair away from a door or window; and keeping your desk as clear as possible to minimize visual distractions.

In meetings, place yourself in clear view of the speaker and try to maintain eye contact, preferably in front so there is less visual distraction. You can also try jotting down a quick note to yourself if you are interrupted in a meeting, and you can learn to be assertive with people regarding whether it is a good time for an interruption.

Some individuals may find that they can work better at home for some parts of their work. This of course assumes the nature of the job will allow this. It also assumes you are able to keep yourself on task, maintain a schedule, and do not get distracted by other happenings or extraneous tasks. Try to do one task at a time.

To help with impulsivity other strategies are often necessary. It is helpful to learn to use self-talk to monitor impulsive actions. This may involve working with a licensed therapist using role plays to learn to respond to frustration, managing needs and other coping behaviors. Asking for regular, constructive feedback can help provide information in time to self-correct behaviors. Learning and practicing meditation and relaxation strategies can reduce stress and the pressure to act impulsively. It is helpful to anticipate situations that may trigger impulsive reactions and learn to cope better with them. Learning strategies such as saying, "I'd like to, but let me check my schedule," may also help combat impulsive commitments.

Several strategies are recommended to minimize problems with hyperactivity in the workplace. First, look for work that involves a high degree of physical movement; try standing up to talk on the phone if you must sit at a desk for long times; take breaks to do copying, get a drink, go to the mail room, or use the rest room; bring lunch so you can walk during this break; use the stairs; take notes or doodle in meetings to minimize restlessness, or carry a small, unobtrusive object in meetings (e.g., stress ball, paper clip); and get as much regular exercise as you can outside of work to burn off excess energy.

To combat attention or memory problems, take notes in meetings or record them if allowed; write checklists for complicated tasks; use a day planner for everything, and frequently review it to remind yourself of upcoming events for the day, week, and month; use post-it notes in visible places; keep a written list of all requests made of you; place objects you need to take by your keys. You can also use mnemonic devices to help you remember names (e.g, Paul is tall); obtain lists of participants before meetings; enlist the support of a boss or co-worker to provide you with reminders. Dr. Nadeau suggests learning to live by the rule, "Do it now or write it down." Remember that many of these strategies will take some practice before you can implement them successfully.

Given the high need for stimulation associated with ADHD, boredom is often a problem. To help manage boredom, set a timer to keep yourself on task; chunk large projects into smaller ones so there is a sense of completion along the way; take frequent breaks; be proactive in requesting work that you expect to find stimulating. Do boring tasks at times when your energy is at its peak.

Time management is often a real challenge for individuals with ADHD. Consider taking a time management, study skills, or organization class; ask for help in planning your day; get ready the night before and leave everything by the door; use a day planner; use computer reminders, buzzers, or timers; ask co-workers/friends/spouses for help with reminders. The National Resource Center on ADHD recommends breaking large tasks into smaller ones, with sub due-dates. Give yourself some kind of reward for effective use of these strategies and for meeting sub due-dates. You can also learn to say no to avoid being overcommitted, and you can plan to be early. Often, individuals with ADHD need to plan for procrastination and distraction when making schedules.

Deadlines are also useful for managing procrastination, the next ADHD workplace trap. Make them specific, as Dr. Amy Ellis notes that “anytime” becomes “never.” Whenever possible, break a large task into smaller tasks, and consider working on a team with someone who manages time well.

Managing long term projects is a particularly tough challenge for individuals with ADHD, because it requires rolling many of the above strategies into one. Whenever possible, team up with others; break large projects into smaller ones, with rewards for each stage; ask for frequent feedback on your progress; shorten the time you allow yourself for a project to be completed to allow for “sprinting abilities” that many individuals with ADHD possess (i.e., working in productive, short bursts).

Paperwork is often a problem even for individuals without ADHD! Since it requires organization, attention to boring tasks, and attention to detail, it is often recommended for individuals with ADHD to find work with minimal paperwork requirements. If it is inevitable, follow the acronym coined by Ed Hallowell, M.D., -OHIO--Only Handle It Once. Whenever possible, ask for administrative/clerical help with paperwork; handle paperwork demands early in the day; while you are still fresh; ask for help before you get bogged down; develop a filing system and use it.

Individuals with ADHD often engage in behaviors of which they are not aware. At times, this can cause interpersonal difficulties. The most frequent problems included dominating conversations, interrupting, and being extremely blunt, which can be off-putting. Solutions to these problems can include working in a position with as much autonomy as possible; working with a therapist and/or coach to learn to pick up on nonverbal cues; apologizing when you catch yourself interrupting; or

placing your hand unobtrusively on your mouth when in conversation as a reminder to yourself to listen more and talk less.

Considering ADHD Accommodations in the Workplace

The National Resource Center on ADHD notes that individuals with a documented disability may be covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act and may be entitled to reasonable accommodations if they are otherwise capable of performing the essential duties of their job. This is complicated by the fact that what may be a reasonable accommodation for a large corporation may be highly unreasonable for a small employer.

Whether or not to disclose your ADHD to your employer can be a complex decision worthy of thought and consultation with support groups and/or professionals. Reasons for disclosing your ADHD might include fear of losing a job because you have not received the needed accommodations to succeed; imminent termination due to performance issues; or a belief that some easy to make concessions will aid performance and advancement. Obviously, asking for accommodations would require disclosure to one's employer. Reasons for not disclosing may include not needing accommodations; doing well on the job; or concern that disclosure may result in discrimination, or justified termination based upon a determination that you may not be able to perform the essential requirements of a job. The latter may be particularly important in safety-sensitive positions.

More Resources For Workplace Help for ADHD Adults:

For anyone who is interested in learning more about adult ADHD, especially in the work place, there are abundant resources. Dr. Lynn Weiss has written several books on adult ADHD, including *Attention Deficit Disorder in Adults*, which includes a chapter on how to cope with someone else's ADHD on the job; and she has also written *ADD on the Job*. Dr. Nadeau is nationally known for her work on ADHD and has written books on the subject (e.g., *ADD in the Workplace*). Dale Brown has written *Learning a Living: A Guide to Planning Your Career and Finding a Job for People with Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Dyslexia*. There are also several websites which may be helpful resources, including help4adhd.org, and chadd.org, and of course articles on our own websites: cpanfc.com , [neuropsychology central](http://neuropsychologycentral.com), and adhdassessment.com.

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