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ADHD kids don't disappear -- they become ADHD adults

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What do you think of when you hear the phrase "Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder"? If you're like most people, you probably associate it with out-of-control kids who are given medication so they can sit still long enough to learn something.

Maybe you think it's overdiagnosed or can be cured with a little discipline. But have you ever thought about what happens to these kids when they grow up?

They don't disappear. They become working members of society. They become ADHD adults.

Although it's usually thought of as a childhood disorder, about half the kids with ADHD will continue to struggle with it when they grow up. That equates to more than 10 million adults in this country with ADHD — roughly the same as the adult population of Pennsylvania. Because ADHD was virtually unheard of 20 years ago, many adults don't even realize they have it. Or want to accept that they do.

People with ADHD are easily distracted and can't control their attention. They have an inordinate amount of difficulty with tasks that involve planning and organization. They lose anything that isn't tied down. They procrastinate. They lack follow-through. They're restless and impulsive. They're extremely forgetful. They tend to overlook details, leading to mistakes. They interrupt. They're chronically late. They're easily bored, thriving on novelty and instant gratification.

You might scoff and point out that everyone has these problems from time to time. While it's true that everyone has some of the symptoms some of the time, most do not exhibit as many, or to the same degree. An ADHD diagnosis is warranted only when the symptoms cause significant impairment in daily functioning. Traits that are a minor annoyance to someone without ADHD are amplified to disability level for someone with this unique brain wiring.

And unique brain wiring is exactly what it is. ADHD is a neurobiological disorder. It's not caused by bad parenting, laziness or lack of moral character. It's caused by a deficiency of neurotransmitters in the brain. It's been called an invisible disability because we can't see it, like a broken leg or detect it with a blood test. However, differences in brain structure and activity can be seen on a SPECT scan, which shows how well each region of the brain is functioning. Several genes associated with ADHD have been identified, providing strong evidence that it's hereditary.

There are good things about having ADHD. Many ADHDers are highly talented and creative. They're spontaneous and not afraid to take chances. They can manage many projects at once and see things from different angles. Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein were all believed to have had it.

Actors Ty Pennington and Howie Mandel have it, as do actresses Whoopi Goldberg and Lindsay Wagner. Athletes Terry Bradshaw and Michael Phelps have been diagnosed with it. Tommy Hilfiger overcame his ADHD and built a fashion empire. Activist Erin Brockovich used it to her advantage. JetBlue Airways founder David Neeleman appreciates the creativity that comes with having it. Charles Schwab considered it an asset.

I think it's terrific that these public figures have acknowledged their ADHD. Their testimonies have gone a long way toward alleviating the stigma that ADHD holds for some.

Is there a cure for ADHD? No. But there are treatments. A lot of people think treatment means medication, but there's a lot more to it than that. Other options include supplements, diet, exercise, sleep, stress management, neurofeedback, and behavioral interventions such as therapy and coaching. Although medication can certainly be part of a successful treatment plan, it can't teach the planning and organizational skills that people with ADHD often lack. And it won't make it go away.

The key to successfully living with ADHD is harnessing strengths and developing coping strategies for everything else. Like writing everything down. Using a planner, checklists and timers. Creating structure and routines. Wearing a watch that beeps, even if it's ugly.

Accepting the need to do these things is a problem for some, because it means having to admit what they perceive to be a weakness. They self-stigmatize. Only by increasing public awareness will the myths and the stigma subside. Only then will people get the treatment they need and deserve.

About those out-of-control children? They're good kids. They need our help and support. So do the 10 million ADHD adults who once were ADHD kids. They're not lazy. They're not stupid. It's time to reveal the truth about ADHD and the people who live with it.

Beth Main is a certified ADHD coach and the founder of ADHD Solutions (www.adhdsolutions.net) in Camp Hill.

Resources for ADHD Adults:

Attention Deficit Disorder Association — add.org

ADDitude Magazine — additudemag.com

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Forums — addforums.com