

## **Further exploring ADHD and Learning Disabilities: Trying Harder is not the Cure**

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I believe that there is still a large gap in misinformation and lack of education on the impacts and symptoms of ADHD and Learning Disabilities, despite the research we have available. This really causes more misunderstandings and stigmatization of these disorders which can lead to negative attitudes and behaviors towards individuals who have them. Navigating and working to debunk various myths can really help our understanding of LD/ADHD which will in turn make us better equipped to support and assist individuals who have them as well. One of the most harmful myths is the following:

**Myth:** People with ADHD or Learning Disabilities just need to "try harder".

This myth makes it sound like having ADHD or a Learning Disability is a character flaw and is something innately wrong with the person.

**Truth:** ADHD and LDs are not caused by a lack of motivation or effort. Kids and adults who have ADHD are often trying as hard as they can to pay attention. Oftentimes children who struggle with LDs are trying as hard or even harder than their peers.

### **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):**

ADHD behaviors do not result from lack of effort. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects a person's ability to focus, control impulses, and regulate behavior. Individuals with ADHD often struggle with hyperactivity, inattention, impulsivity and regulating behaviour which can impact their academic, social, and emotional functioning. ADHD is a complex condition with a variety of causes, including genetics, brain chemistry, and environmental factors. It is not something that can be overcome simply by "trying harder". Even though many children and adults may tend to struggle with motivation in different areas of their lives, it is important to remember that ADHD is not a matter of willpower.

Most kids and adults with ADHD work particularly hard to understand their symptoms and then learn the appropriate skills to manage them. Many people will take medication and work with a psychologist, psychiatrist and/or physician to develop systems and strategies to address their particular challenges.

### **Learning Disabilities (LD):**

Similarly, Learning Disabilities are neurological conditions that affect a person's ability to learn and process information in certain areas, such as reading, writing, or math. These disorders are not due to a lack of effort or motivation, but rather to differences in brain structure or function that affect how information is processed and retained. They can also interfere with higher level skills such as organization, time planning, abstract reasoning, long or short term memory and attention. It is important to realize that

Learning Disabilities can affect an individual's life beyond academics and can impact relationships with family, friends and in the workplace.

### **Role of Motivation: A Symptom, not the Cause**

For children and adults with LD/ADHD, motivation and ability to complete tasks can be a challenge due to many different reasons. A child with a Learning Disability could be functioning from the fear of failure and also lack of meaning. A child may struggle with an assignment due to previous mistakes or negative experiences with that specific subject.

Individuals with ADHD may be able to focus very well and efficiently to complete some tasks, while being significantly unable to focus on most other tasks. While this may look like different levels of effort, research into the ADHD brain has shown explanations for this as well. Individuals with ADHD tend to persistently have low release and reloading of the neurotransmitter dopamine in the networks of the brain that manage executive functions. This means that they don't get the same level of reward that others do to stick with a challenging task.

Children with LD and/or ADHD may also often think their lack of success in school is not worth the effort. When children notice that their grades often seem lower than peers they may not see a relationship between effort in school and academic success. So it can be especially challenging to create and establish that motivation with them. The lack of success can also lead to increased feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem in these populations as well.

### **Importance of Support**

People with Learning Disabilities often have to put in more effort due to the challenges posed by their conditions. For example, a student with dyslexia may need to spend more time and effort on reading and writing assignments than their classmates, even if they are just as intelligent and motivated. Similarly, a person with ADHD also struggles with executive functioning and may need to use more strategies and tools to manage their symptoms. This could mean using various tools to stay organized, such as a planner, lists or a reminder app.

Teachers and parents of children with ADHD and LD play a significant role in providing them with the right amount of support and understanding. Children with ADHD and LD will often struggle with low self esteem and sometimes have a hard time with having a positive relationship with school. Getting the support and appropriate resources at school and at home makes a big difference for children as they navigate day to day life. The right support and resources can benefit individuals with ADHD or Learning Disabilities to be able to successfully achieve goals and perform at the levels required of them.

### **It's not the same for everyone**

It is also important to note that the severity and impact of ADHD and Learning Disabilities can vary from person to person. Some individuals may have mild symptoms that do not significantly affect their daily life, while others may have more severe symptoms that interfere with their ability to function across school, work, and/or social situations. Supports and accommodations should be provided based on the individual needs of the student.

That said, the narrative that individuals with ADHD or Learning Disabilities should just try harder reinforces a harmful societal narrative that success is solely based on individual effort and merit. This narrative ignores the role that systemic and structural barriers play in limiting access to opportunities and resources for those with ADHD or Learning Disabilities. By placing the responsibility solely on the individual, we fail to acknowledge the broader societal and systemic factors that contribute to their challenges.

For example, environmental factors such as stress, lack of sleep, or poor nutrition can worsen the symptoms of ADHD and LDs. Similarly, social factors such as bullying, discrimination, or lack of support can also affect an individual's ability to cope with these diagnoses. Therefore, it is not enough to tell someone with ADHD or a Learning Disability to "try harder" without addressing these underlying factors that may be contributing to their difficulties.

Telling individuals with ADHD and LDs to try harder also overlooks the many strengths and talents that these individuals possess. Many people with ADHD or Learning Disabilities are creative, innovative, and resilient, and they bring unique perspectives and skills to their communities and workplaces. By focusing solely on their challenges and difficulties, we risk overlooking their many strengths and contributions.

## **Summary**

The myth that individuals with ADHD or Learning Disabilities should just try harder is not only inaccurate but also highly harmful. It perpetuates stigmatizing beliefs about these diagnoses and ignores the many strengths and talents that individuals with ADHD or Learning Disabilities possess. This myth ignores the biological basis of each disorder and takes focus away from offering helpful strategies, skills and resources that would benefit these individuals in the long run. The focus instead should be on providing support, accommodations, and resources, as well as understanding, to individuals with ADHD or Learning Disabilities to help them achieve their full potential and thrive in their personal and professional lives.

Additional Readings:

9 ADHD Myths and Fallacies That Perpetuate Stigma:

<https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-myths-and-facts-learn-the-truth-about-attention-deficit/>

10 Damaging Myths About Learning Disabilities:

<https://www.additudemag.com/slideshows/what-are-learning-disabilities/>

6 Strategies for Overcoming Lack of Motivation:

<https://www.additudemag.com/when-adhd-leads-to-lack-of-motivation-how-to-get-work-done/>

Motivation: The Key to Academic Success:

<https://www.ldonline.org/ld-topics/teaching-instruction/motivation-key-academic-success>