

Not Just for Kids: Grown Ups Can Have ADHD Too

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Receiving an ADHD diagnosis can bring up mixed emotions. We might feel relief at having answers as well as grief over learning that life may not be how we expected. For some parents, believing that ADHD is temporary and that their child will grow out of it may feel easier in the short term. Yet current research shows that ADHD is not something that people grow out of. Approaching ADHD as a lifelong condition can help children and parents manage expectations and create systems that promote success not only in the present, but for the future as well.

Myth: ADHD is something that people eventually grow out of.

This myth seems to persist because sometimes the symptoms that we recognize as being caused by ADHD lessen or change over time and some people stop needing to use ADHD medication.

Truth: Someone with ADHD may learn to manage or control their behaviours as they age, but ADHD is a lifelong diagnosis.

ADHD Brain Differences

ADHD is a *neurobiological* disorder. This means that it is caused by physical differences in the brain. Researchers have found that the brains of people who have ADHD are different from the brains of people who do not have ADHD. Specifically, the parts of the brain that drive decision making, motivation, and cognitive control are smaller in people who have ADHD. People with ADHD also process dopamine differently than people who do not have ADHD. Dopamine is a hormone and a neurotransmitter (brain messenger) that helps with many things including memory and motivation. When our brain releases dopamine we feel good and want to do more of what we were doing at that time. With the right amount of dopamine, we feel happy, motivated, alert, and focused. People with ADHD do not absorb dopamine like other people. These brain differences are present in children with ADHD as well as adults with ADHD. They do not change as a person grows up.

Why do some people seem to outgrow the symptoms of ADHD?

Research shows that while hyperactivity and impulsivity may decrease, symptoms we recognize as being more inattentive persist. This could be one reason why people who struggled with ADHD symptoms when they were children may have an easier time as adults. In addition to this, children with ADHD continue to grow and develop like other children. As some of these young people mature, they are often better able to self-regulate and use strategies to help them function in ways that mask their ADHD

symptoms. This can include things like learning to organize their belongings in ways that work for them, creating habits to help them remember to do everyday tasks, and setting reminders so they do not forget to do things. Another consideration is that adults have greater control over their environment (home and work), so they can make changes that they were not able to make as children. A child who struggles to stay seated at school still must attend every day, but an adult who does not like sitting at a desk can find a job where they are able to move around throughout the day.

ADHD Diagnosis in Adulthood

Almost everyone experiences ADHD-like symptoms at some point, however they may only last for a short time, or they are not disruptive to their lives. Many adults who have ADHD may not realize that they have it but may find everyday tasks more challenging than the people around them. This may be due to many things such as pressure to meet expectations at work, maintaining relationships, and juggling the many tasks that must be done every day. For someone with ADHD, it can be difficult to shift their attention to where it needs to be, which can make it hard to get everything done.

4-6% of adults have ADHD, making it one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in Canada. It has become more common for people to be diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. This may be due to increased understanding about ADHD or because a person's symptoms have changed over time. Online diagnostic tools are available, however many of these screening tools do not follow the diagnostic criteria used by medical and mental health professionals. If you have questions about ADHD, it is best to consult a qualified mental health professional or a physician. This is especially true if you have a child or other family member who has been diagnosed with ADHD, as ADHD is hereditary. Such professionals can include a registered psychologist who specializes in assessments, a psychiatrist, neurologist, or your family doctor.

Symptoms of ADHD in Adults

There are some similarities between ADHD in children and adults. But to be diagnosed as an adult, some of the symptoms must have been present in childhood. Adult ADHD symptoms may include:

- Impulsiveness
- Disorganization and struggles with prioritizing tasks
- Poor time management skills
- Problems focusing
- Trouble multitasking
- Overactivity or restlessness
- Difficulty planning ahead
- Low frustration tolerance

- Frequent mood swings
- Problems following through and completing tasks
- Quick to lose temper
- Trouble coping with stress
- Changing jobs often
- High turnover of friendships and relationships
- Difficulties with speeding while driving and more traffic citations

ADHD Treatment in Adults and Children

There is no known cure for ADHD, however research shows that medication is often very helpful with symptom management. It can take time to find the best type and amount of medication, and this is something that should be done with the help of a doctor or psychiatrist. The most effective treatment for ADHD is a combination of medication and behavioral strategies, which may include parent training, accommodations in the classroom or workplace, and counselling.

Summary

ADHD is a lifelong condition caused by differences in brain structure and functioning. It is not something that goes away with age. For some people with ADHD, symptom severity or presentation may change over time. It is important for parents who have children with ADHD to understand how to support their children at every life stage. If you have questions about ADHD or wonder if you might have ADHD yourself, it is important to speak with a qualified professional.

Additional Resources

Taking Charge of Adult ADHD by Dr. Russell Barkley
When an Adult you love has ADHD Dr. Russell Barkley

<https://caddac.ca/about-adhd/ages-25/>

<https://chadd.org/adhd-weekly/grow-out-of-adhd-not-likely/>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/adult-adhd/symptoms-causes/syc-20350878>

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/signs-of-adhd-at-different-ages>