

Attention deficit (hyperactive) disorder

WHAT IS IT?

Attention deficit hyperactive (or hyperactivity) disorder (ADHD) is a term applied to people whose behaviour is persistently impulsive, inattentive and often overactive in comparison to others of the same mental age. **Attention deficit disorder (ADD)** is the condition without the hyperactivity element. ADHD/ADD is a developmental disability with neurobiological causes. It affects the individual's ability to function adequately in a range of settings such as home and school and impairs social and academic performance.

The term is associated with specific behaviours, for example a difficulty in sustaining attention, listening, following instructions and organising. Those with ADHD/ADD are forgetful and easily distracted, they may blurt out answers, make inappropriate comments and interrupt. The hyperactive element of the disorder can result in fidgeting, leaving

their seat, talking incessantly and generally wanting to be 'on the go.' These behaviours present themselves in a wide range of ways according to age, environment, intelligence and personality.

The way in which ADHD/ADD manifests in the individual will form the basis of how it is categorised, either as a learning disability or as a serious emotional disturbance. ADHD/ADD can be diagnosed by psychiatrists or paediatricians. These professionals may prescribe medication. It may also be diagnosed by psychologists. ADHD/ADD often occurs alongside other disorders such as anxiety and depression and can influence a variety of learning difficulties.

ADHD/ADD is covered by the Disability Discrimination Act as it is a mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a student's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

■ Attention span

Students with ADHD/ADD usually experience severe difficulty in focusing and maintaining attention. They will fidget and possibly leave their seat at the slightest chance, or swing on chairs and fiddle with books, shoe laces or pens. Some will be able to sit still but be unable to get focused. As a result such students tend to miss important points, lose things, and fail to pay close attention to details. They may distract others by talking at times when they should be listening to instructions.

■ Working

Students with ADHD/ADD have difficulty in organising thought sequentially. They tend to experience problems in starting tasks, completing assignments on time and planning. They often have poor handwriting and spelling. Such students often have a 'best time' for working.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

■ Behaviour/attention

Ask the student to sit near the front of the class. Explain to them how this can aid concentration. Maintain eye contact when giving instructions. Repeat important instructions. Use target setting or negotiated agreements to modify disruptive behaviours. For example, to reduce calling out: *you will not call out while I am talking but can write down your question for us to talk over later in the lesson*. Praise and thanks are important whenever the target set is achieved. Allowing a student to doodle or highlight whilst listening, or having a piece of plasticene to fiddle with, can also help.

■ Personal organisation

In order to compensate for gaps in listening, summarise the lesson at the start and end. Remind students of homework by writing it on a *post-it* note to stick in their diary. Have spare pens/equipment available as these may be forgotten.

■ Instructions

Break large tasks into smaller time-budgeted chunks, for example taking in a longer essay at each stage of development will allow smaller pieces of work to be produced. Encourage students to make colourful and visually-interesting notes as this can aid memory and concentration. Make the student aware of the lesson plan. For example: *to start with we will be watching a video for ten minutes, then we will discuss it for a further ten minutes*. This information is a great source of comfort to a student who is restless and should aid concentration.

■ Use of language

The way we talk is important in assisting concentration. Give written and verbal information in plain English. Use clear, concise language for instructions. Follow

guidelines on *readability* (see *Good Practice Guide on Readability*) to ensure that text is accessible. The student will not have the patience to 'dig out' information embedded within unnecessarily long sentences. Engage the student in the learning situation by using active rather than passive verbs. For example, *Macbeth killed the king* (active) rather than *the king was killed by Macbeth* (passive); *make a dough by mixing the ingredients* (active) rather than *you will mix the ingredients into a dough* (passive).

■ Teaching and learning styles

Incorporate a variety of teaching and learning styles into the lesson, allowing the opportunity for movement, discussion, group work and 'hands-on' learning.

■ Music

The idea of music as a background to learning may be controversial but many have found it very effective. The music should be unobtrusive and without lyrics. Mozart's music lends itself well to a calming influence and may well benefit the teacher as well as the students!

■ Examinations

Students with ADHD/ADD may be granted special examination provisions. These will be agreed by the examination boards depending on circumstances. The special provisions may include extra time in exams, a reader, amanuensis (scribe), or use of a word processor. Such special provisions should be taken into account for internal tests and examinations.

■ Be positive

Ask the student what makes learning a positive experience for them. Remember that self esteem may be low in need of boosting.