

# Attention deficit hyperactive disorder

## What's it like?

Imagine that you have reached work and you remember that the iron is still on. Also the previous evening your washing machine broke down, you have a party of visitors to entertain at the weekend, you have lost your credit card, and your car has failed its MOT. Your mind is buzzing with these things but you cannot do anything about them until you have listened to five hour-long lectures. The lecturer asks you a question but you have not heard what they have said, as you have too many other things on your mind. You become impatient and want to talk to a friend about your situation. You are told to be quiet and you do try to listen. Because you have missed so much information you ask a silly question, then another. People laugh and you want to get out of the room. You fiddle with your pen, swing on your chair and look at your watch. Mentally exhausted, you look out of the window, only vaguely aware that the lecturer is talking. You hear the sound of the talking but not the words they say. You are bored and frustrated. You want to get out and stretch your legs, but you have to sit and sit and sit. It seems like two hours have passed but it has been only twenty minutes. You are aware that this is only the first lecture of the day and that you have four more to go.

## What is it?

The terminology applied to these conditions can be confusing. What was formerly known as 'attention deficit disorder' may now be referred to as 'attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder', or AD/HD. Some people call it 'attention deficit hyperactive disorder'. For simplicity it is referred to here as 'attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)'. This is a term applied to people whose behaviour is persistently impulsive, inattentive and often overactive, when compared with other children of the same mental age. 'Attention deficit disorder (ADD)' is the same condition without hyperactivity. 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 functioning. Many see it as an umbrella term for several different disorders as it is often accompanied with other problems.

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 students fidgeting, leaving their seat, talking incessantly and generally wanting to be 'on the go'. Those with ADD may be constantly staring into space or out of the window instead of listening. These behaviours will present in a wide range of different ways according to age, environment, intelligence and personality.

The way in which the ADHD 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 in tandem with other disorders such as anxiety and depression and can influence a variety of learning difficulties.

Most people do not 'grow out of it' but do learn to adapt.

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.

## Students' voices

The following comments are typical of the experiences of students with ADHD/ADD.

It is like living each day with a whirlwind in your mind and your body.

I want to get tasks over and done with.

I forget what I'm supposed to be doing.

I have trouble getting started.

Lessons are too long, we just sit and listen.

I can't help how I behave, I mean to listen but then I don't.

## Implications for learning

### ■ Attention span

Students with ADHD/ADD usually have severe difficulty with 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 throughout a lesson. 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 to them at times when they should be listening to instructions/directions.

Students with ADHD/ADD are likely to speak out of turn and out of context. Questions asked may not be about the task in hand, such as: *Why have you put the plant over there today?* Some students will stare into space and seem to be 'in another world'. This can sometimes be due to the depressive element that can accompany ADHD/ADD.

### ■ Working

Students with ADHD/ADD have difficulty with the sequential organisation of thought. This leads to problems with planning tasks, starting them and completing them on time. They often have poor handwriting and spelling. Such students often have a best time for working, and other less effective times. Lack of concentration leads to tasks being left unfinished. Students forget to write down homework and make notes. For example in Design and Technology one student kept starting again, resulting in five unfinished products.

## Teachers' questions answered

**Q**

**I have a student with ADHD in the class. The main problem is not listening to instructions or realising that I have asked him a question. I start to explain what we are going to do and he starts before I have finished and then doesn't know what to do.**

Ask the student to sit near the front of the class. Start with their name when asking questions or giving instructions. Emphasise that it is important to listen when instructions are given. Maintain eye contact and repeat important instructions. Show approval when he or she waits appropriately. A nod and a smile work well.

The way we talk is important in aiding concentration. Use clear, concise speech for instructions and active rather than passive verbs. These engage the student actively in learning. For example, *Macbeth killed the king* (active) is better than, *The king was killed by Macbeth* (passive); *Make a dough by mixing* (active) is preferable to *You will mix the ingredients into a dough* (passive).

Give written and verbal information in plain English. The student will not have the patience to dig out information embedded within long-winded sentences.

**Q She disrupts the others with her inappropriate comments and jokes. The others laugh at her behaviour and it is easy to feel I am losing control.**

Allocate her a seat at the front of the class. Identify clearly the ground rules of the classroom and give regular reminders. Use agreed and recordable targets to modify disruptive behaviours. For example: *You will not call out while I am talking but will write down your question for us to talk over later in the lesson*. Reflect on the behaviour for the week together. Praise good behaviour.

Have a 'time out' agreement for occasions when behaviour becomes too disruptive as such behaviour is often an indicator of a need for a break. If a student knows they are having a bad day they can indicate this by placing a red counter or some other agreed sign on the desk. On these days expect them to need time out and/or the opportunity to become an active rather than a passive learner.

**Q I am to have a student with ADHD in my class next term. I understand they have problems with listening. How can I keep them interested?**

In order to compensate for gaps in listening, summarise the lesson at the start and end. Remind the students of homework by writing it on a *post-it* note to stick in their diary. Have spare pens available as they may have forgotten to bring basic tools for learning. Incorporate a variety of teaching styles into the lesson that allow discussion and hands-on learning. Allow the student to doodle or highlight whilst listening. Having a piece of *blu-tak* or plasticene to fiddle with can also help.

**Q I am tired of Ben starting tasks and never finishing them. I have half of three essays and two pieces of important work not even started out of five important coursework tasks.**

Break large tasks into short-term time-budgeted 'chunks'. For example, taking in a longer essay at each stage of development will allow smaller pieces of work to be produced. Use writing frameworks to make writing easier.

**Q I have two students with ADHD in my class, one fidgets a lot but does get on with the work, the other stares out of the window most of the time. Why are there such differences? How should I help these students?**

The staring student probably has attention deficit disorder and the other probably has attention deficit hyperactive disorder. They have similar needs in the classroom.

Both will benefit from short time-budgeted tasks. Also let the students know 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 approach is a great source of comfort to a student who is restless and aids their concentration. It also helps the 'dreamer' keep to the short tasks. 'Active listening' such as question and answer breaks will also help. Ensure that each student has a highlighter to allow them to refer to key points.

**Q My student with ADHD gets very stressed at any changes in classroom routine. Is this usual?**

Yes. Prepare them by explaining in advance. For example: *We have a student teacher joining us tomorrow. She will be teaching you for the next piece of coursework. We will be doing some fieldwork later. You will work with Jamie. The reason we are doing this is because....*

**Q My student has been taking medication which seemed to help him keep on task. However lately there is a definite deterioration in concentration and behaviour. How should I respond?**

Medication for ADHD/ADD often wears off after three to five hours. Discuss this with the Learning Support Co-ordinator and/or refer to the student's records for more details. It may be appropriate to ask the student when the dosages of medication are meant to be taken. It may also be appropriate to contact other relevant professionals and parents.

**Q I would like to incorporate some active learning strategies into my maths teaching. I have a GCSE group and the majority of them have short concentration spans. They are generally restless.**

'Show me' boards are small laminated or white boards that can be written on and held up by students. They can easily be wiped clean. Use them to check that learning is taking place and that a concept has been understood. Have 'Show me' breaks throughout the lesson. This will not only allow you to see what concepts have not been understood, it is active teaching. You will need to ensure that the 'Show me' boards are placed face down in between use to avoid them becoming playthings.

**Q How can I stop my student with ADHD disrupting group work?**

Groups must be told the time budget for the group work and the intended outcome. They must understand the task and the purpose. Consider joining the student's group. If you have a classroom teaching assistant, can they be a member of the group? You could also give the student a specific role within the group. For example: *You will note down what people say and remind them when the ten minutes is up*, or *You will give out the handouts to each group and make sure everyone has a chance to speak*.

**Q What can I do to introduce a bit more calm into my lessons?**

Consider using music to set the tone for the lesson. This may be controversial but many have found it very effective. The music should be unobtrusive and without lyrics. Mozart's music seems to have an appropriate calming influence.

Handouts on pastel paper can have a calming influence (the black print on white paper can seem more daunting to a student with ADHD/ADD). If some words can be replaced with illustrations that can also help.

To encourage students to use reading time effectively, provide sub-headings in question form. This helps motivate reading as it gives it a purpose. For example: *When was the 'Great Storm'?* *Why did the Romans leave Britain?* *What were the outcomes of the famine?*

**Q Do I need to make special provision for examinations and assessments?**

The learner may need special examination arrangements such as working in a separate or smaller room, extra time for exams, or a prompt to keep them on task. Any special provisions should be taken into account for internal tests, examinations and extended pieces of coursework. Be aware of the special examination provisions the student has been granted, and advise them how best to use the provision.

**Further information: starting points**

National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service: [www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)  
Mind: [www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Understanding/Understanding+ADHD](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Understanding/Understanding+ADHD)