

AD/HD and Challenges of Early Adulthood

FOR MOST INDIVIDUALS with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), symptoms persist at least into late adolescence and early adulthood. For many, this disorder of the brain's management system not only persists, it becomes more problematic in the inevitable challenges of early adulthood where one has to manage much more for oneself.

A high school graduate with AD/HD moves away from home to go to college or university. Suddenly he discovers that there is no one in the dorm willing to drag him out of bed in time for morning classes, to remind him to take his AD/HD medications, to urge him to get a decent night's sleep before a major exam or to caution him about the need to get started on a term project at least a few days before it is due. Many students with AD/HD learn to cope well with this sudden withdrawal of parental scaffolding; for others, low grades and lost credits announce the need for more adequate self-management.

The massive changes involved in starting college are just one of many challenges of early adulthood that may be especially difficult for those with AD/HD. Others include working to link schooling to a career, managing money, seeking and keeping a job, moderating substance use, developing and sustaining satisfying relationships and utilizing adequate medical care.



by Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D.

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Linking School to a Career

Students in colleges and universities often are uncertain about what kind of career they want to prepare themselves for once they finish school. Because those with AD/HD often live too much in the present and have a hard time keeping in mind a realistic picture of the future, their schooling is often not linked closely enough to career plans. They tend to think of post-high school education much as they thought of their earlier schooling, just something they have to do before they can do something else. This may result in their taking an array of courses that is too diffuse, dabbling in many areas of interest without sufficient

focus in any one area, or pursuing concentration in a major field of study that doesn't prepare them for much of anything.

Many young adults with AD/HD tend to think of career preparation as though it were just a matter of deciding what one wants to do. They may underestimate how difficult it would be for them to get into a particular career, either because it is so competitive or because entry requires courses or internships or networking that they have overlooked. Or, having been discouraged by persistent struggles in school, they may underestimate how their talents and skills might be useful in a work setting where, unlike school, they

can specialize in using skills they have developed while co-workers manage other aspects of the job.

Managing Money

Whether individuals are in college or out working, money management can present a major challenge. Young adults with AD/HD often report that they make too many impulsive purchases in stores or online and then are shocked to realize how much high interest debt they have built up without sufficient income to pay it off. Even those who are working full time and earning decent salaries find it difficult to stretch their paycheck enough to cover rent, meals, utilities,



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cell phone bills, insurance and car payments while still putting gas in their car and having some money in their pocket to go out once in a while. They quickly discover that extensions of due dates are much harder to get from the landlord and credit card companies than from teachers in junior high. Chronic problems with planning and being impulsive with money can have lasting painful consequences in adulthood.

Seeking and Keeping a Job

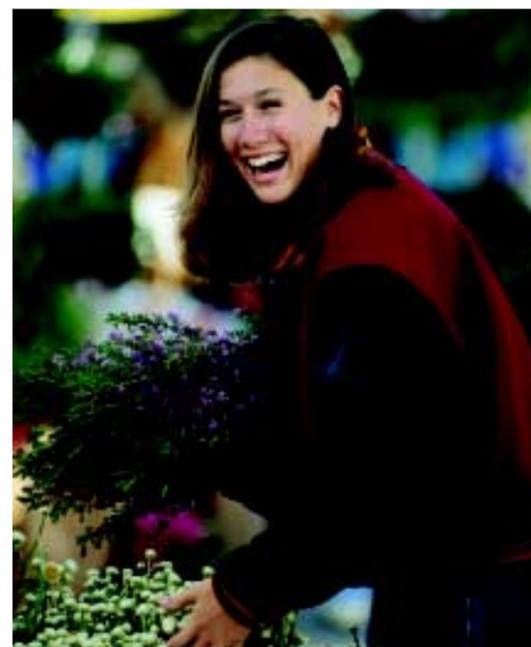
Seeking a new job is not easy for anyone. Job searching can be extremely frustrating for an individual who finds it very hard to continue working at tasks that are not quickly rewarding, such as sending out resumes, going on interviews and following up on applications, often without any encouraging response for long periods of time. Starting a new job brings relief, but also a lot of new tasks and procedures to learn, often in situations where others are not willing to explain more than once or twice how to do something. This can be very difficult for a newly hired employee who has chronic difficulty in catching details and utilizing short-term memory.

Sometimes work problems come not because a person lacks the ability to do the job, but because of how they go about doing it. Many individuals with AD/HD report that they are very productive at their work tasks, but tend to get themselves into trouble with their boss for chronically arriving late at work,

too many absences, or failure to meet deadlines for assignments or routine reports. Sometimes employees with AD/HD find themselves caught up in conflicts with their co-workers or supervisors because they are too quick to complain about procedures or working conditions that they find burdensome or unfair. They may be too impulsive in their responses, expressing with words or attitude what many others may feel, but are more cautious about making known on the job. Making complaints to supervisors too frequently can easily lead to getting discriminated against or getting fired.

Moderating Substance Use

Excessive use of alcohol, marijuana or other drugs can negatively impact any young adult in a variety of ways. Most dramatic and most often talked about are the dangers of addiction or driving while under the influence or binge drinking; these can result in tragic accidents or severe and protracted disruption of daily life. Yet for many young adults, problems with excessive substance use are more subtle: hangovers that too frequently cause absences from classes or poor performance at work or marijuana-induced failure to worry enough about getting an assignment done well or on time. Research has shown that young adults with AD/HD, if not utilizing appropriate treatment, are more likely than their peers to get caught up in excessive and persistent substance abuse. For them such problems tend to persist longer, and the task of recovery is often more difficult and less consistent.



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Developing and Sustaining Satisfying Relationships

Many young adults with AD/HD are lively, animated and good humored. They are very active socially and may enjoy numerous friendships and date many different partners. Yet these same young adults may find it difficult to sustain any particular relationship in a way that can be reciprocally satisfying. Many report that they tend to jump impulsively from one relationship to another, always looking for someone else who might be more attractive or more interesting.

Some others may be shyer, isolating themselves with long hours of video games or surfing the net, while avoiding opportunities to meet new friends. Others will prematurely latch onto one friend or partner who functions as their caretaker, steadily giving support and encouragement to the partner with AD/HD while not getting much back in return. Such lopsided relationships may endure for some time, but eventually they are likely to be disrupted by mutual resentments that escalate into chronic conflicts.

Utilizing Adequate Medical Care

From infancy to the end of high school, parents usually take responsibility for their children getting

adequate medical care and utilizing medications or other treatments that are important for them. Usually it is the parents who set up appointments for their child to see the doctor, who arrange for timely refills of prescriptions and who monitor whether medications are taken appropriately. Many young adults away at college or living independently are simply not accustomed to keeping track of when to take their medicines or of when follow-up appointments or medication refills need to be made. Procrastination may prevail.

Even when a young adult wants to make such arrangements, it is often difficult to find an accessible and understanding physician who understands AD/HD in adults and is willing to prescribe and make needed adjustments in appropriate medications. Usually it is even more difficult to find a competent professional who can provide accurate information about AD/HD in adulthood and who will meet to discuss questions and concerns broader than just the dosing regimen for AD/HD medications.

This picture is complicated even further by the fact that adults with AD/HD are six times as likely as those without AD/HD to suffer from one or more

additional psychiatric disorders. These co-existing conditions might include depression or anxiety problems, obsessive-compulsive disorder or mood disorders, sleep problems or substance abuse. When such other disorders arise, standard treatments for AD/HD are often not sufficient to alleviate the full range of impairment. More intensive treatment or combined medications may be needed. Often clinicians confronted with overlapping disorders will treat only the anxiety or depression, etc., without sufficiently combining treatments to address persisting AD/HD symptoms along with the other disorder.

Meeting the challenges

There is no single plan or simple answer that will help every young adult with AD/HD to address these challenges successfully. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful:

- Educate yourself about the complex nature of AD/HD and how it can continue to impact individuals your age. Several books to help with this are listed at the end of this article. Web sites like www.chadd.org, www.add.org and www.addcollege.org may also be helpful.

- Find a doctor, counselor or friend who understands AD/HD and is willing to talk with you from time to time about how you are doing and how you can deal with problems.

- Collaborate with your physician to “fine tune” your AD/HD medications so you can reduce side effects and get adequate coverage for your needs and work schedule.

- Keep in mind that adults with AD/HD are six times more likely to have at least one other psychiatric problem. If you notice yourself getting too anxious or depressed or having problems with drinking or drugs, get help sooner rather than later.

- Try to find a reasonable balance between getting too much help from your family and too little. Don't expect your parents to solve every problem for you, but also try to avoid becoming a martyr because you're too proud to ask them for help or advice.

- If your parents get too intrusive and micromanaging, let them know that you appreciate their concern but need a chance to run your own life and learn from experience. It's often difficult for parents to realize when their son or daughter is an adult.

Often the road is bumpy, but with adequate treatment and reasonable support, most young adults with AD/HD can successfully meet the challenges of young adulthood. ■

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Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D., is associate director of the Yale Clinic for Attention and Related Disorders at the Yale University School of Medicine. He is a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board. For more information, visit his Web site at www.DrThomasEBrown.com.

Resources

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