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What is ADD/ADHD?

The following quick summary has been produced by Sound Readers™ with information from the book: **Attention Deficit Disorder: The Unfocused Mind in Children and Adults**. Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D. ©2005 Yale University Press (ISBN# 0-300-10641-6).

- ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), or, ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), is a chemical problem in the “management systems of the brain”.
- It is characterized by constant difficulties with (this is only one of many ways to group the symptoms):
 1. Organizing, prioritizing, and getting started;
 2. Focusing, sustaining, and shifting attention;
 3. Regulating alertness, sustaining effort, & determining processing speed;
 4. Managing frustration and modulating emotions;
 5. Utilizing working memory, and accessing recall; and
 6. Monitoring and self-regulating action.
- These six things interact as the “management system of the mind”. Like a symphony without a conductor, individuals with ADD can play their instruments very well individually, but without their conductor, cannot deal with these six things in the right way at the right time.
- There is now considerable evidence that the effective functioning of these six “clusters” depends largely on two neurotransmitter chemicals: dopamine & norepephrine. These chemicals are kind of like the conductors in the brain. They help pass messages along.
- Individuals with ADD *cannot* pay attention to tasks that they know are important, no matter how much they *want* to, but can focus very well on activities that interest them.
- Neurotransmitters in the brain (mainly dopamine & norepephrine) usually regulate how to select the things are most important to pay attention to, and how to regulate alertness. When these chemicals are impaired, so is the ability to handle the above six functions.

Everybody experiences the above challenges of ADD sometimes. It is important to be aware of popular, but overly simplistic efforts to assess ADD, and work with professionals who know how to tell the difference between normal problems of inattention, and ADD.

The core problem is not lack of willpower. There is a tremendous amount of scientific evidence supporting the validity of ADD, as well as the safety and effectiveness of available treatments.

Since ADD is biochemically based, there is considerable evidence that medication is usually the most effective treatment. Recently, new medications and new *delivery systems* for old medications have been developed & used successfully. We’ve come a long way since the 80’s.

Parents and teachers can build a supportive environment by helping children develop self-management skills to behave, to cooperate, to communicate, and to learn to read & write.

People with ADD are six times more likely than others to suffer from other learning, behaviour, or emotional disorders. Untreated ADD can cause severe suffering to individuals and families.

Myths about ADD/ADHD

MYTH: Brains of persons with ADD are overactive and need medication to “calm them down.”

FACT: It is the *under* activity of the management system in the brain that is the problem. There is no “manager” function to help the person focus on what is important, or regulate his/her alertness.

MYTH: ADD is just lack of willpower.

FACT: ADD looks just like a willpower problem, but it is chemical problem in the management system of the brain. The ability of the brain to effectively carry its messages depends on the release and reuptake of neurotransmitters. There is now considerable evidence that the “manager” of the brain depends largely on two of these neurotransmitters: dopamine & norepinephrine.

MYTH: ADD is a simple problem of being hyperactive, or not listening when someone is talking.

FACT: ADD is a complex disorder. It involves the inability to focus, organize, be motivated, regulate emotions, remember, and many other functions that most people find relatively unproblematic.

► **How is ADD diagnosed?** A formal evaluation is needed to discover if a person has ADD. Trained school psychologists, or private psychologists specializing in ADD can conduct the testing. Go to: www.addresource.com/catsearch.adhd?category=17&sub=1&name=Clinics to find clinics near you.

Dr. Timothy Bilkey, a Barrie, Ontario psychiatrist specializing in ADHD, has assessed over 2000 adolescents and adults for this condition. Dr. Bilkey attends regular updates through Harvard Medical School CME to keep abreast of all the latest research and treatments for ADHD. (<http://www.bilkeyadhdclinic.com>). His website is very thorough and informative.

► What are some of the signs of ADD?

- Inability to organize, prioritize, and get started;
- Challenges with focusing, sustaining, and shifting attention;
- Difficulty regulating alertness, sustaining effort, & determining processing speed;
- Difficulty managing frustration and modulating emotions;
- Hard time utilizing working memory, and accessing recall; and
- Inability to monitor and self-regulate actions (self-talk – to help themselves understand the effect of their actions – cause and effect).

Not all students who have difficulties with these skills have ADD.

Those who are legitimately diagnosed with ADD must have these symptoms to a degree that they cause significant problems in school, relationships, or employment. Formal testing is the only way to confirm a diagnosis of suspected ADD.

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