

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Recognizing symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- » Understanding the origins of ADHD
- » Looking at ADHD diagnosis and treatment
- » Coping with ADHD in your life

Chapter 1

ADHD Basics

In 1980, a new term entered the common vocabulary: *attention deficit disorder*. It described a condition that has been recognized since the latter part of the 19th century but called a variety of other names. This term — which later morphed into *attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)* — often rears itself whenever someone has difficulty in school or work, can't sit still, or is unable to control their behaviors. The symptoms of ADHD can affect anyone — people of all ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of this fact, and because the symptoms of ADHD are simply extremes of everyday behavior, this condition is often misunderstood and misdiagnosed.

In this chapter, we introduce you to ADHD. We give you a brief overview of the common symptoms, biological causes, diagnosis, treatment approaches, and life strategies for coping with ADHD. This chapter gets you up to speed on the basics, and we deal with each of these topics in much more detail in the rest of the book.



REMEMBER

As we point out in the Introduction, ADHD is a complex condition that's estimated to affect between 3 and 6 percent of the people in the United States. Rest assured that many happy, successful people live with ADHD, including both of us.

Having so many people around you with ADHD means that quality information, support, treatments, and life strategies are available that can help minimize the negative effects and maximize the positive. (And yes, ADHD does have positive attributes. You can read about these in Chapter 14.)

Identifying Symptoms of ADHD

If you have ADHD, you may have trouble regulating yourself. This difficulty can exist in the areas of attention, behavior, and motor movements. ADHD looks different in almost everyone. For example, one person may have no problem sitting still but gaze off into space unable to focus at all. Another person may constantly fidget but be able to spend seemingly endless amounts of time focusing on one thing, often to the exclusion of everything else in their life. Yet another person may not be able to stop themselves from impulsive and often dangerous behaviors but may be able to sit calmly in school. The following sections break down both primary and secondary ADHD symptoms.

Peering into primary symptoms

Despite all the different ways that ADHD manifests, the condition has three basic symptoms:

- » **Inattention/distractibility:** People with ADHD have problems focusing. You may be able to focus sometimes but not others. This variable nature of being able to pay attention is one of the main features of ADHD. Because attention is inconsistent, people can easily rationalize or dismiss this symptom.
- » **Impulsivity:** Many people with ADHD have trouble regulating their behavior. In this case, you often act without thinking, perhaps talking out of turn or taking unnecessary risks.
- » **Hyperactivity:** Someone who is *hyperactive* is frequently moving in some way. You may be able to sit but may need to move some part of your body when doing so; leg rocking or shaking is one common example. This hyperactivity is more of a problem with children than adults because most ADHD adults have less physical restlessness as they get older and often find activities to channel it.

The term *attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD) comes from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V). The DSM-V outlines three types of ADHD:

- » **Inattentive type:** Having this type of ADHD means that you have difficulty focusing but are able to sit still.
- » **Hyperactive/impulsive type:** If you have this type of ADHD, you struggle to sit still and have difficulty considering consequences before doing or saying something, but focusing isn't an issue.
- » **Combined type:** If you have a hard time focusing as well as difficulty sitting still or doing things without thinking, you have the combined type.

The DSM-V also rates the current severity of ADHD from mild to moderate to severe. These ratings are helpful to understand where you fit within the overall spectrum of the condition.

Seeing a few secondary symptoms

Aside from the basic three symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (which we discuss in the preceding section), ADHD has a ton of other symptoms. These symptoms can include, but aren't limited to, the following:

- » Worry
- » Boredom
- » Loss of motivation
- » Frustration
- » Low self-esteem
- » Sleep disturbances
- » Hopelessness

In Chapter 3, we discuss these and other symptoms in detail.



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These secondary symptoms are also connected to other common disorders. The overlap of symptoms among a variety of disorders is called *comorbidity* and is one of the reasons that diagnosing ADHD is so difficult. (See the “Getting a Diagnosis of ADHD” section later in this chapter, or check out Chapter 5.)

Clueing in on ADHD's Origins

Many people used to believe that ADHD (before it even had this name) was merely a behavioral disorder and had no biological basis. However, research since then has shown that people with ADHD have something different happening biologically than people without the disorder. What exactly that biological basis is no one knows for sure. Some of the discoveries that researchers have made include the following:

- » **Genetic links:** Having the disorder frequently is a genetic predisposition. ADHD runs in families; you're more likely to see a child with ADHD born into a family where at least one parent has it.

- » **Neurological activity:** Some studies show that people with ADHD have brain function differences. For example, some studies have shown a lower level of activity in the front of the brain — the area that controls attention. Others have discovered activity abnormalities in other regions deep within the brain.
- » **Chemical differences:** Certain chemical activity, such as dopamine and norepinephrine, seems to be different in people who have ADHD. Several studies suggest that there are differences in the responses when neurochemicals are created and released by people with ADHD compared to people who don't have the condition. This is an important component when it comes to choosing medication (Chapter 8 explores ADHD medications in more detail).



REMEMBER

Even after decades of research, the actual cause(s) of ADHD aren't known. But despite this lack of completely detailed understanding of the causes, they do know a lot about how to treat the disorder. We give you an introduction later in this chapter in the section “Viewing Various Treatment Approaches,” and we write about treatment options in detail in Part 3 of this book.

Getting a Diagnosis of ADHD

Diagnosing ADHD can be frustrating for some people because there's no definitive way to check for it. You can't see it in a brain scan. You can't test for it with a blood sample. The only way to diagnose ADHD is to do a detailed evaluation of your (or your loved one's) past and present behaviors. This job involves finding a professional who understands the subtleties and variations of ADHD and can make a *differential diagnosis* (a list of conditions that have the same symptoms). The following sections give you an overview of this important process.

Choosing your professional

The first step to finding out whether you have ADHD involves finding the right healthcare professional. You may start with your family doctor or pediatrician, but in order to get an accurate diagnosis (as accurate as possible, anyway), you need to see a professional who understands all the different ways ADHD looks and can review your history properly. Your options can include, but aren't limited to, the following:

- » **Psychiatrist:** A *psychiatrist* is a medical doctor who specializes in mental illness and behavioral disorders. A psychiatrist can prescribe medication and often is up-to-date on the neurological factors of ADHD.

- » **Neurologist:** A *neurologist* is a medical doctor whose specialty is the brain. This person often views ADHD from a biological basis and can prescribe medication. They may not be up-to-date on the best ADHD life strategies or alternative treatments.
- » **Psychologist:** A *psychologist* is trained in matters of the mind. Most psychologists understand the criteria for diagnosing ADHD and can offer many treatment options; some can prescribe medication depending on their license.
- » **ADHD specialist:** An *ADHD specialist* can be anyone from a teacher to a therapist who has experience and expertise in working with people with ADHD. Specialists likely have knowledge of many treatment and coping strategies, but they aren't able to prescribe medication.
- » **ADHD coach:** An *ADHD coach* helps you improve your functioning in the world. Coaches can come from many backgrounds — education, business, psychology — and their focus tends to be on practical, day-to-day matters, such as skills training. Like an ADHD specialist, a coach has expertise in working with people with ADHD but usually can't prescribe medication.

Each professional will immediately recommend the approaches that they're most familiar with and that fit with their treatment philosophy, so choosing the best professional for you depends partly on your values regarding medication and partly on how open you are to unconventional ways of approaching treatment.



TIP

In Chapter 4, we help you explore your values and how they fit with each type of ADHD professional. You also find out how to question a professional to see whether their philosophy fits with yours. Knowing this information prevents you from feeling pressured to attempt treatments you don't agree with and helps you find treatments that fit your style.

Preparing for the evaluation process

After you've chosen a professional to work with (as we explain in the preceding section), you can dig into the actual process of evaluation. This process involves answering a lot of questions and looking at your past. Chapter 5 gives you a heads up on the types of questions you have to answer, as well as the official criteria for being diagnosed with ADHD.



REMEMBER

Diagnosing ADHD isn't easy, and a diagnosis either way isn't the final word. ADHD is one of many similar conditions, and even the best professional can place you or your loved one in the wrong category. We recommend that you seek a second opinion, especially if you have any doubts about the diagnosis. Chapter 6 introduces you to many conditions and symptoms that can appear to be ADHD or that can accompany it.

Viewing Various Treatment Approaches

Treating ADHD has so many approaches that one of the main struggles most people have when they're diagnosed with the disorder is to weed through all the treatment options and choose the best ones to try.

Treatment options break down into several broad categories, which include the following. The most conventional treatment methods for ADHD are medication and behavior modification. Both are useful and effective approaches, but many other types of treatment can work wonders with the right person:

- » Medication
- » Counseling and therapy
- » Coaching
- » Training
- » Behavior management
- » Nutrition and supplements
- » Herbs and homeopathies
- » Neuromodulation therapies
- » Rebalancing therapies
- » Social skills training

We discuss each option in detail in Chapters 8 through 13. Each treatment approach has a place, and many of them work well together. Knowing how to choose and what to combine can be difficult. Our goal is to make this challenge more manageable, which is why we wrote Chapter 7, where we help you develop and implement a plan for treatment success.

Recognizing ADHD's Role in Your Life

One of the best ways to deal with the symptoms of ADHD is to have a toolbox of strategies you can reach into when you run into difficulties. The more tools you have in this box, the easier life becomes. As we explain in the following sections, we dedicate an entire section of this book (Part 4) to helping you fill your box with the best tools possible.

Accentuating the positive

ADHD doesn't just create challenges. In some areas, people with ADHD have multiple strengths. When you understand these positive attributes — such as heightened creativity, high energy, hyperfocus, and a willingness to take risks — you can discover ways to maximize and amplify them to help you succeed in the world. For example, you can identify your style of working to keep you on task and motivated to get a job done. We created Chapter 14 to inspire and encourage you to find your strengths and make the most of them.

Dealing with daily life

Whether you're at school, at home, or at work, you can develop ways to minimize the negative impacts of your ADHD symptoms by using some strategies that have worked well for other people, including us. In Chapters 15 through 17, we offer you insights, tools, and ideas for making daily life as successful and stress-free as possible.

For example, we suggest ways to help you develop healthy family relationships, motivate your child with ADHD to do their homework, know your legal rights at school and in the workplace, keep organized on the job, develop a solid career path, and much more. We hope the information in these chapters also spurs you on to create your own unique ways of dealing with ADHD in your life.

