

ADHD, Anxiety, Worry and Returning to School.

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Recap: What is ADHD?

A neurological condition where neurotransmitters (hormones) such as dopamine are not produced in levels that allow brain signals to travel across the synapse connecting different areas of the brain allowing them to communicate.

Executive functioning difficulties: children with ADHD find it difficult to pull different ideas together. If they are given more than one thing at a time the ideas become muddled, overwhelming and the 'task' very quickly seems much bigger than it really is. This is not a problem all of the time. In activities where the child excels or is interested the executive functioning can be quite efficient.

Hyperfocus: Sometimes (and not by choice) the brain focuses on an idea or activity. The child will become so involved in what they are doing..... have crazy and wonderful elaborate ideas. However they are unlikely to notice how much time has passed. They will be unable to stop doing that task. This could mean not going to the toilet, eating lunch or even playing with friends. Video games or social media are often sources of hyperfocus.

Big Emotions: Research has shown that people with ADHD 'feel' things much more deeply! It is felt so strongly that it is a physical pain not just emotional. Extreme happiness (hyperactivity), sadness, anger, worry and anxiety. Add hyperfocus on these feelings and the child could easily react to these strong emotions.

Difficulty maintaining attention: Due to the lack of communication between parts of the brain people with ADHD often seek out activities which will help produce more dopamine. This is often seen in 'risk taking' behaviour. Children may behave unpredictably, climb on things, run away, act in seemingly dangerous ways. Children's difficulty to maintain focus makes activities feel impossible to start. Tasks

seem overwhelmingly huge and boring! Children feel like they don't know where to start, what order to do it in or when it will ever end! Following instructions in order feels impossibly hard.

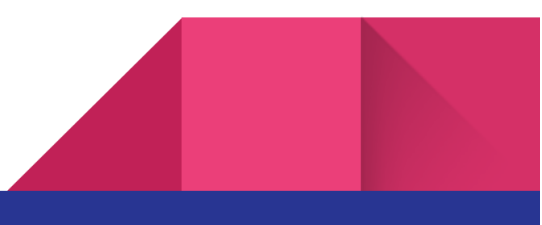
Gender difference: ADHD affects each individual differently but there are some gender differences. Girls tend to internalise their impulses so may not be as easy to 'spot' often they go undiagnosed. Girls tend to conform to their gender roles trying exceptionally hard to 'fit in'. A lack of organisation is one of the few noticeable signs (due to poor executive functioning). It may even seem out of character that they are so bad at this skill when compared to their usual behaviours. Girls will try to follow the rules rigidly so as not to be 'found out' or seen as inadequate. They are perfectionist and relentlessly self monitoring. Girls are more likely to have a tendency to lie, to manipulate and be verbally aggressive in friendships than boys. Boys, however, are more likely to engage in physically aggressive behaviours, seem to be apathetic about classwork, and need to get out of their seat.

Returning to school

Stress: People with ADHD react more to stress, producing more of the stress hormone cortisol which inhibits many body processes like executive functioning, working memory and impulse control. It becomes more difficult to focus and maintain attention. The environmental overload of information around them is overwhelming and overstimulating adding to the feelings of stress.

How: Find something they can take 'control' of. Physically being in control of something external will help reduce the feelings of lack of internal control. Laughter! The brain can not feel stress and laughter at the same time! Replace the feelings of stress with a quality joke or something you can laugh about together. Reduce feelings of being overwhelmed by making routines constant and predictable. The ADHD brain appreciates the routine even though it may not naturally want to follow it and a child may outwardly resist it as 'boring'.

Worry: Anxiety and worry differ. Anxiety is a physiological response to negative thoughts and beliefs. Everyone experiences anxiety particularly after the year we have had. Worry is what sets the ADHD brain apart. Worry about managing feelings, emotionally overreacting knowing they are misreading social situations and visual cues, not fitting in with peers or being like their peers adds to the worries. The



vigilance over these worries is exhausting and becomes the physiological anxiety response. Without the internal resources needed to manage this the ADHD brain may refuse to do anything for fear of failing. Children find it difficult to tolerate or deal with uncertainty, they can not realistically evaluate the safety of any given situation.

How: Recognise the early signs of worry. It may begin with a seemingly unconnected random comment..... This could show something is playing on their mind. They may not even realise this themselves. Build resilience daily but identify situations where things have gone wrong for you to show that 'it's not the end of the world' The ADHD brain struggles to sensibly self regulate, hyperfocusing on the worry overreacting at will. Project a sea of calm; people with ADHD use the behaviour of others to self regulate. If they are unsure of how to behave they will look to their adult for markers or appropriate behaviour.

Rejection sensitivity: People with ADHD are more sensitive to criticism; taking off the cuff comments to heart. They are more sensitive to the comments made by other children and often over react far more excessively than the situation warranted. Change in moods will have a trigger and the mood shift is instant ...like a switch. The mood is short lived but the person often feels ashamed of their outburst knowing that the reaction was an overreaction.


How: Acknowledge the child's feelings:- this is unpleasant but it will go away soon. Try to engage them in another activity to focus their attention.

Sustaining Motivation: Children with ADHD thrive on immediate and continuing reinforcement. This type of reward schedule helps produce dopamine in the brain's reward system (that non ADHD people produce automatically) and helps arouse and sustain motivation.

How: This is very personal and will require development over time so that rewards move from external (choosing time/ tokens/ gifts/ stickers) to more intrinsic rewards of success (volume of work completed/ satisfaction of time sat still/ on task).

Smooth transitions: Many children with ADHD have trouble moving from one task to another.... Especially if it is from an enjoyable one!

How: Use time reminders to prepare for the transition. Give choices where possible (even two not so good ones!) Remain calm..... If your emotions are running high the child's will too. Offer rewards for the



appropriate behaviour, this may seem like bribery but ADHD brains are wired differently (see **sustaining motivation**) . Mean what you say and say what you mean. Clear concise communication and don't offer rewards that are not possible or immediate.

Sleep: Up to two thirds of children with ADHD struggle with either anxiety or sleep difficulties. The racing brain is difficult to switch off at night. In addition the possible emotional outburst and tantrums may add to the difficulty of the ADHD child getting enough sleep. The ADHD brain uses far more energy than the average brain. ADHD brains jump from idea to idea, trying to maintain focus to the task is a feat of strength and uses a lot of energy! This can be exhausting. Children with ADHD may feel tired or even exhausted either due to difficulties getting enough sleep or brain power!

How: Think about the task being completed. How much focus does it require from the child? If it is a high demand task take breaks. Be mindful that fatigue could affect moods and be a cause of over-reactions.

Different isn't better or worse..... It's just different!