

Teaching Students with Attention Deficit

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) is a neurological disorder that is characterized by chronic difficulty in sustaining attention and significantly impacts learning and behavior. Some persons with ADD/ADHD also may display hyperactivity as evidenced by excessive physical movement and difficulty in sitting still for long periods of time or impulsivity as evidenced by poor planning and poor attention to details. ADD/ADHD is often first diagnosed during childhood, but many people with less severe symptoms and minimal hyperactivity are not diagnosed until late adolescence or adulthood. For many years, it was thought that ADD/ADHD was “outgrown” after adolescence. We now know that it is a lifelong disability, but that the severity of symptoms, especially physical hyperactivity, may decrease after childhood.

The impact of ADD/ADHD varies from individual to individual. Within the educational setting, it can range from a minimal impairment that impacts both academic and interpersonal success and requires treatment with medication. In college, the student’s ADD/ADHD may impact his or her organization and efficiency in areas such as reading, listening to directions or lectures, taking notes, prioritizing tasks, completing assignments, and taking tests. Students with ADD/ADHD may have difficulty adhering to schedules and expectations, unless these are communicated clearly both verbally and in writing. Some will display an impulsivity and impatience in their interpersonal interactions that may make communication with instructors and peers problematic.

A comprehensive assessment assists in determining both the severity of the impairment and the best accommodations for an individual student. ADD/ADHD may present many of the same symptoms as academic difficulties or co-occur with other disorders, such as Learning Disabilities, Anxiety Disorders, or Depression. For these reasons, the documentation requirements for students with ADD/ADHD include a comprehensive psycho-educational evaluation by a psychologist. The most common accommodations for students with ADD/ADHD are a low distraction environment, extra time on tests, a reduced course load, tape recording of lectures, and obtaining copies of overheads prior to lectures. Many students find that individualized coaching in time management, study skills, and organizational skills are necessary for their academic success.

The way a class is organized and material is presented can be critical for a student with ADD/ADHD. Students with ADD/ADHD often lack the ability to organize and structure information or activities. A course syllabus with all requirements, materials, and deadlines clearly marked will assist the student with meeting those requirements. A graphic or bullet format for presenting information with key terms and dates highlighted or underlined may be helpful for many students with ADD/ADHD. When lecturing, an instructor could provide advanced organizers and verbal cues in the form of introductory statements, transition statements, and concluding summaries. Most students with

ADD/ADHD will benefit from sitting near the front of the class where they can stay focused and mentally engaged in the lecture with fewer distractions. Instructors should explicitly state both verbally and in writing what is expected of students in terms of quality, quantity, and deadlines for all assignments. In addition, instructors could encourage students to meet with them during office hours to review deadlines and expectations in a quieter and less distracting environment.