Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Imagine living in a world where sights, sounds, images and thoughts are constantly changing and shifting. Unable to focus on whatever task is at hand, your mind wanders from one activity or thought to the next. Sometimes you become so lost among all the thoughts and images that you don't even notice when someone is speaking to you.

This is what it is like for many people who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. Once called hyperkinesis or minimal brain dysfunction, ADHD is one of the most common mental disorders among children. It affects 3 to 5 percent of all children, and it is likely to occur two to three times more in boys than in girls.

People who have ADHD may be unable to sit still, plan ahead, finish tasks, or be completely aware of what is going on in the world around them. However, on some occasions, they may appear "normal", leading others to believe that the person with ADHD can control such behaviors. As a result of this, ADHD can hinder the person's relationships and interactions with others in addition to disrupting their daily life and lowering self-esteem.

To determine whether or not a person has ADHD, specialists must consider several questions: Do these behaviors occur more often than in other people of the same age? Are the behaviors an ongoing problem, not just a response to a [temporary] situation? Do the behaviors occur only in one specific place or in several different settings?

In answering these questions, the person's behavior patterns are compared to a set of criteria and characteristics of ADHD. The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) presents this set of criteria. According to the DSM, there are three patterns of behavior that indicate ADHD: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.

According to the DSM, signs of inattention include: becoming easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds; failing to pay attention to details and making careless mistakes; rarely following instructions carefully and/or completely; and constantly losing or forgetting things like books, pencils, tools, and such.

Some signs of hyperactivity and impulsivity, according to the DSM, are: the inability to sit still, often fidgeting with hands and feet; running, climbing, or leaving a seat in situations where sitting or quiet, attentive behavior is required; difficulty waiting in line or for a turn; and blurting out answers before hearing the entire question.

However, because almost everyone will behave in these manners at some time, the DSM has very specific guidelines for determining if they indicate ADHD. Such behaviors must appear early in life, before age 7, and continue for at least 6 months. For

children,
these behaviors must occur more frequently and severely than in others of the same age.
Most of all, the behaviors must create a true handicap in at least 2 areas of the person's life
(e.g. school, home, work, social settings).

One of the difficulties in diagnosing ADHD is that it is usually accompanied by
other problems. Many children who have ADHD also have a learning disability. This means that they have trouble with certain language or academic skills, commonly reading
and math. A very small number of people with ADHD also have Tourette's syndrome. Those affected by Tourette's syndrome may have tics, facial twitches, and other such
movements that they cannot control. Also, they may grimace, shrug, or yell out words
abruptly.

Almost half of all children with ADHD, mostly boys, have another condition known as oppositional defiant disorder. This sometimes develops into more serious conduct disorders. Children with this disorder, in conjunction with ADHD, may be stubborn, have outbursts, and act belligerent or defiant. They may take unsafe risks and
break laws -- ultimately getting them into trouble at school and with the police.

Still, not all children with ADHD have an additional disorder. The same is true for
people with learning disabilities, Tourette's syndrome, etc. They do not all have ADHD
with their initial disorder. However, when ADHD and such disorders do occur together,
the problems can seriously complicate a person's life.

As we speak, scientists are discovering more and more evidence suggesting that
ADHD does not stem from home environment, but from biological causes. And over the past few decades, health professionals have come up with possible theories about what
causes ADHD. But, they continue to emphasize that no one knows exactly what causes ADHD. There are just too many possibilities [for now] to be certain about the exact cause. Therefore, it is more important for the person affected [and their family] to search
for ways to get the right help.

A common method for treating ADHD is the use of medications. Drugs known as stimulants seem to have been the most effective with both children and adults who have
ADHD. The three which are most often prescribed are: methylphenidate (Ritalin), dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine or Dextrostat), and pemoline (Cylert). For many, these drugs dramatically reduce hyperactivity and improve their ability to focus, work, and learn.
Research done by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) also suggests that medications such as these may help children with accompanying conduct disorders control
their impulsive, destructive behaviors.

However, these drugs don't cure ADHD, they only temporarily control the symptoms. Many health professionals recommend that these medications be used in combination with some type of therapy, training, and/or support group. Such options include: psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, social skills training, parental skills
training (for parents with ADHD children), and support groups.

Although most people with ADHD don't "outgrow" it, they do learn how to adapt and live better, more fulfilling lives. With the proper combination of medicine,

family, and
emotional support, people who have ADHD can develop ways to better control their behavior.

Through further studies, scientists are better understanding the nature of biological
disorders. New research is allowing us to better understand how our minds and bodies
work, along with new medicines and treatments that continue to be developed. Even though there is no immediate cure for ADHD, research continues to provide information,
knowledge, and hope.