

ADD or Modern Life?

By [Judi Ketteler](#)

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Attention Deficit Disorder affects adults every day -- and many have no idea.

From the outside, Jennifer Koretsky was confident and in-control. She loved school and had done well, and as an adult, she had a good job. But at age 25, she found herself in a constant state of stress. She had always struggled with concentration, but more and more, she felt overwhelmed by the tasks of daily life, and her temper seemed to be growing shorter. "I was blowing a fuse over little things in my day," Koretsky says. She went to a therapist to discuss her issues, wondering if she was suffering from [depression](#). But Koretsky got something she didn't expect: Her therapist suggested that she might have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD, alternately known as ADHD). "I thought she was crazy. I thought of ADD as little boys being wild in school," Koretsky says. "It was a total disconnect for me."

But once she began reading about ADD and its symptoms -- which don't always include hyperactivity -- she began to realize that her issues with focus and attention, along with the feeling she had of constantly being overwhelmed, were real hallmarks of ADD. Koretsky, now 33, runs the site [ADDManagement.com](#), is a senior certified ADHD coach, and is the author of [Odd One Out: The Maverick's Guide to Adult ADD](#)

(2007). She learned how to get control of her ADD, and now works as a coach for adults who have been diagnosed with ADD to help them do the same.

Diagnosing ADD

According to the [Attention Deficit Disorder Association](#) about five to seven percent of kids have ADD, and about three to six percent of adults have it. However, those numbers are likely much higher because so many people (both kids and adults) go without a diagnosis, says psychiatrist [Ned Hallowell, M.D.](#), founder of the Hallowell Centers in New York and Boston, and author of [Delivered From Distraction: Getting the Most Out of Life With Attention Deficit Disorder](#) (2005). It's important to understand that adults don't suddenly develop ADD -- it was there in childhood. But the symptoms can be easy to miss in childhood (or may have been attributed to something else). Also, the structure of school and home life may have helped to keep the ADD in check for the child, but when that scaffolding is gone, the symptoms worsen for the adult.

In adults, ADD is often missed and diagnosed as something else too, such as depression (this is especially common in women, Hallowell says). At the same time, it's also diagnosed without proper evaluation, and sometimes confused with what Hallowell calls "a severe case of modern life"-- basically an acute response to an overbooked schedule. The difference between ADD and a case of modern life is that ADD is chronic, and not simply related to one specific situation. "The real tell-tale sign is if you know could be doing better, and you don't know

why you're not," Hallowell says.

ADD is genetic, and it has real physiological roots; the brains of people with ADD actually work differently than people without. The three main characteristics of ADD are inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. However, people can have a combination of those types, or just be one main type (such as inattentive, but not hyperactive). That means ADD symptoms are varied, from fidgeting to non-stop daydreaming; from struggling to follow directions to the inability to ever make it anywhere on time; from becoming bored very easily and having trouble finishing tasks to constantly interrupting others and impatience.

One of the symptoms that almost all adults with ADD share is the feeling of always being overwhelmed, Koretsky says. "People with ADD wake up in the morning with this feeling that there is so much to do," Koretsky says. "By the end of the day, they've been running around, and the to-do list is longer than it was at the start." We all have days like this, but for a person with ADD, it's a constant -- and it deeply affects the quality of their life.

Treatment Makes the Difference

Both Hallowell and Koretsky stress that people who recognize ADD symptoms in themselves should seek a diagnosis from a qualified professional who deals with ADD, such as a psychiatrist (keep in mind that child psychiatrists who specialize in ADD usually see adults as well) or a trained therapist. Getting a diagnosis -- which is an incredibly freeing moment for many people because they finally have a reason *why* -- is just the first step. Treatment is the real key, and there

are various approaches -- from drugs to life coaching to behavioral therapy.

“People shouldn’t be afraid of medication,” Hollowell says. Two drugs commonly prescribed are [amphetamine](#) (Adderall) and [methylphenidate](#) (Ritalin), and they can work remarkably well for adults. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) sometimes antidepressants (particularly older antidepressants called tricyclics) can help with ADD too (though they’re not FDA-approved specifically for ADD treatment). The NIH also mentions that Wellbutrin (which affects the brain chemical dopamine) showed benefits for adults with ADD in a recent clinical trial. Figuring out the right medication and dosage can be tricky, which is why people should work with someone experienced with ADD, Hollowell says (most likely not your primary care physician).

Working with a therapist or an ADD coach such as Koretsky is another powerful piece of the puzzle. “The first thing that people have to learn to do is to break the cycle of overwhelm,” she says. “The piece that’s often missing is planning.” She teaches her clients how to plan -- it sounds obvious, but for people with ADD, it’s a skill that doesn’t come naturally. Neither do things like learning how to delegate, how to manage challenges, how to survive boredom, how to stay on track with tasks -- but they can be learned. Once people with ADD figure out things like time management and reasonable to-do lists, their distraction can be transformed into creativity and productivity “When your challenges are managed, you can really thrive,” Koretsky says. Hollowell agrees. “I have ADD,” he says. “And I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

Watch Jennifer discuss ADD on the Today Show.

