

COMMENTARY

Everything I want to tell my adult ADHD patients during the pandemic

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An ADHD brain thrives with daily routines, and requires spontaneity and challenge to remain engaged in work, academics, relationships, and even leisure activities. ADHD is a performance issue and not one of intellectual understanding. It is not a problem of knowing what to do, but rather, difficulty doing it.



Dr. Dara Abraham

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the loss of structure, with many parents working out of their homes alongside their children engaged in virtual learning. There has been a significant loss of impromptu events, since all activities outside of the [house](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=house) require proper planning and safety precautions.

To help normalize the struggles of the adult patient with ADHD during the pandemic, I have compiled a list of everything I want my adult ADHD patients and their family members to know so they don't feel shame, guilt, or

brains.

Adult ADHD is a misnomer – and not just a disorder of inattention and hyperactivity

A better name for this often misconstrued disorder is inconsistent attention and motivation disorder with internal or external hyperactivity/impulsivity.

An ADHD brain vacillates between inattention and hyperfocus. It is not uncommon for individuals with ADHD to lose interest in a new television series when they become hyperfocused on finding the best pandemic-friendly toy for their 5-year-olds, which inevitably turns into a 3-hour Google [rabbit](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=rabbit) -hole search.

These same individuals with ADHD may have low motivation for mundane household chores but become highly motivated when their nonessential Amazon purchases arrive. They may even go as far as pulling an all-nighter to have an electric toy [jeep](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=jeep) built and ready for the youngster by morning.

Adults with ADHD can also exhibit hyperactive symptoms, such as physical restlessness with fidgeting, and an internal restlessness with anxious and repetitive thoughts that affect their ability to unwind, relax, and even sleep. Impulsivity in adults with ADHD can present as rushing through tasks that one finds uninteresting or unimportant, interrupting others on a Zoom work call, or impulse buying an expensive hot tub instead of a more affordable one their spouse agreed to.

ADHD is a risk factor for contracting COVID-19

Untreated ADHD can increase one's risk of contracting COVID-19. Israeli researchers published a study in the [Journal of Attention Disorders](#)

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[2003&rfr_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%20%200pubmed>](#) showing that individuals with ADHD are 52% more likely to test positive for COVID-19, compared with those without ADHD, because of risk-taking behaviors, impulsivity, and carelessness. However, individuals whose ADHD symptoms are treated with stimulant medication do not increase their risk of contracting COVID-19, the researchers wrote.

ADHD might be noticed in family members

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the development of the brain. We know that structural, functional, and chemical differences affect our patients' ability to regulate attention, motivation, impulses, and emotions. ADHD tends to run in families and is highly genetic. Since spending more time with family members during the pandemic, patients might even recognize ADHD symptoms in siblings, children, and one or both of parents. A child who has ADHD has a 25% chance of having a parent with ADHD.

Strengths and attributes are related to ADHD

Your ability to thrive in new, stressful, and challenging situations is an ADHD attribute that will be beneficial during the pandemic. Creativity, great problem-solving skills, and ability to be flexible will be admired and helpful to our patients with ADHD and others during these uncertain times.

Those with ADHD might be highly sensitive to their environments

As previously mentioned, ADHD is a misnomer and not just a disorder of inattention but also too much attention. Unfortunately, this hyperfocused

difficult to filter and process sensory information correctly and, therefore, can be easily distracted by auditory, visual, tactile, and olfactory stimuli. The change to working at home during the pandemic might make it hard to ignore children's voices, the uncomfortable new mask bought after losing yet another mask over the weekend, and the smell of cookies emanating from the kitchen. This increased sensitivity may affect one's emotions.

Heightened emotions are expected during the pandemic and even more so among adults with ADHD. The inability of adults with ADHD to properly filter information can also affect emotional stimuli. These intense emotions, coupled with impulsive behaviors, can cause disagreements with partners, lack of patience with children, and conflict with colleagues. When individuals with ADHD feel attacked or invalidated, they can become emotionally dysregulated and "vomit" their pent up feelings.

ADHD may affect interpersonal relationships

ADHD symptoms of inattention and impulsivity can affect the ability to connect with friends and family. When one is easily distracted by the pandemic's chaos, it is harder to be mindful and emotionally and physically connected to one's partner, which also disrupts their sex life and intimacy.

ADHD sensory integration issues can make people sensitive to particular touches, smells, and sensory information. A gentle touch from one's partner might be annoying during the pandemic, since other senses may already be overstimulated by the loud sounds of children screaming, the visual and auditory distractions of a neighbor mowing the lawn, and the sun beating down because one forgot to get blinds in the home office <<https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=office>> before the pandemic.

can profoundly affect an ADHD brain since one must use valuable energy to tune out these unwanted disturbances.

Your brain uses a different motivational system than a non-ADHD brain

You have a deficiency in the neurotransmitter dopamine, which affects your motivational system. Your motivational system is based on what you find interesting, challenging, new, exciting, and urgent. Your non-ADHD partner, family members, friends, and colleagues motivate and accomplish their daily tasks differently from you and most likely use a system based on rewards and consequences.

Do not be surprised if you notice that your motivation is diminished during the pandemic because of less novelty and excitement in your life. The coronavirus's chronic importance level may make everything else in your life not as essential and, therefore, less urgent, which indirectly also lowers your motivation.

Your non-ADHD partner may see that you can focus, prioritize, initiate, and complete tasks when you “choose” to, and confuse your inconsistent behaviors as being within your control. However, this lack of motivation for things that do not pique your interest, challenge you, and are not urgent is not voluntary. It is caused by a lack of neural connections in the area of the brain that controls motivation.

You can still have ADHD even though you were not diagnosed as a child or adolescent

Your symptoms of ADHD may not affect your level of functioning until you go away to [college](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=college) , obtain

pandemic alters every aspect of your daily life.

It is, therefore, never too late to get assessed and treated for ADHD. Stimulants are the first line of treatment for adult ADHD. Nonstimulants may also be prescribed if you do not tolerate the side effects of stimulants or have a [history](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=history) of certain medical conditions. These options include some antidepressants and high blood pressure medicines. Sometimes, just identifying the deficits of those with ADHD and how they may affect their performance at work, [school](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=school), and interpersonal relationships can help the person living with ADHD. Many other any nonmedication types of effective treatment are available for adults with ADHD, including therapy, executive skills, and mindfulness training.

- ADHD focused cognitive-behavioral therapy can help one change your distorted, negative, and irrational thoughts about themselves, others, and situations and replace them with more realistic and rational thoughts that allow for helpful and adaptive behaviors.
- Executive skills training is a type of ADHD treatment that focuses on developing effective systems, routines, improving time management, organization, planning, productivity, and emotional self-regulation.
- Mindfulness meditation training is an additional treatment for adult ADHD. Mindfulness training teaches skills to focus on the present moment and become aware of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions without judgment. The goal is to learn to accept your ADHD deficits and all that is out of your control while remaining mindful of your ADHD strengths and focusing on the daily choices within your control.

Silver linings of the pandemic

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psychiatric care. Many primary care physicians and even some psychiatrists are uncomfortable diagnosing and treating attentional disorders because of a lack of proper training in medical [school](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=school) and fear related to the fact that the first-line treatment for adult ADHD is a controlled substance.

In response to the pandemic, the expansion of telepsychiatry services, state waivers that allow clinicians to practice across state lines, exemptions that enable the prescribing of controlled substances without an in-person medical evaluation, and the acceptance of employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the accessibility of adult ADHD psychiatric assessments and treatment.

It is hoped that when the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us, many of the benefits that have emerged, such as the growth of telepsychiatry, changes in state licensure and prescriber regulations, and reduced work commutes will continue into our postpandemic lives.

Dr. Abraham is a psychiatrist in private practice in [Philadelphia](https://keyword-connect.com/s/?q=Philadelphia). She has no disclosures.

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