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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

GETTING A HANDLE ON ADD

Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD) in adults is a chronic condition with symptoms tracing back to childhood. The capacity for attention of an individual with ADD varies from low-interest activities in which he or she finds it very difficult to engage or maintain focus to high-interest activities in which the problem is disengaging from the activity. This fluctuating attention can be accompanied by mild to significant difficulties with organization, impulse inhibition, and interpersonal and emotional regulation. It affects about four to five percent of adults. (See sidebar.)

Neurotransmitters and ADD

ADD has a biological component that is aggravated by environmental factors. Two neurotransmitters (dopamine and norepinephrine) are believed to underlie the attention variability and low impulse control characteristics of ADD.

Dopamine activates attention and improves focus and concentration. It activates the pleasure and reward centers in the brain. Lack of or poor regulation of dopamine by the body can result in attention problems, emotional volatility, and addiction. When you read something very interesting or get involved in an “important discussion or negotiation,” dopamine gets released and activated. You feel very focused. In low-interest activities, dopamine is not released at the same level in someone with ADD as it is in a person who does not have ADD. Consequently, the person does not have enough electrical activity to power his or her brain to complete the neutral or low-interest task. As

Most Common Characteristics of ADD

- Significant difficulty in starting tasks, organizing, and planning related to low-interest activities
- Being easily distracted by the environment and getting lost in one’s internal thinking
- Making decisions impulsively and desperately searching for novelty
- Quickly moving from one idea to another, or one thing to another
- Difficulty stopping activities or behaviors that are of high interest, even if they are affecting other tasks and relationships
- Poor impulse inhibition
- Often beginning a project without planning or preparation and failing to sustain the activity
- Significant difficulty following through with time deadlines in low-interest activities, such as paperwork
- Difficulty regulating emotions, such as getting easily frustrated or overwhelmed to an extent that affects personal and work relationships
- Difficulty retaining instructions, staying on topic, and noticing cues to accurately read people
- Low self-esteem due to poor motivation and difficulty getting tasks completed

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a result, finding keys, completing a deadline, finding notes, or writing, for example, can be a struggle.

Norepinephrine is also believed to play a part in memory, learning, focusing, and general alertness. Too little of it can contribute to being easily distracted, depressed, impulsive, and fatigued. Too much norepinephrine can contribute to overfocusing, high anxiety, and even aggression.

Environmental Factors Rewiring the Brain

Environmental factors, if not managed, contribute to poor attention and emotional difficulties. Our brains are responding to and being shaped by technology every day. Neurological experts believe that technology is forcing the brain to adapt to the most significant environmental changes of the last 200,000 years, rapidly changing the speed with which we receive and process information. The increased speed and constant barrage of stimuli affect how we regulate our attention and emotions. Consequently, computers, television, laptops, tablets, e-mail, the Internet, social media, and smartphones all need to be managed or our attention becomes impaired.

Managing ADD

Organization, planning, and time management can be extremely challenging for adults with ADD. When facing a task or project, they can become anxious, overwhelmed, avoidant, and sometimes angry and irritated. Although medication may help the ADD attorney tackle these challenges by increasing capacity for sustaining attention, this attention boost must be combined with training and tools on how to organize and complete tasks.

Organizational and Planning Tips

Listed below are some ways to improve organization and planning. These take time to learn, so do not try to master them all at once. Within a few weeks, however, they can come together as a habit.

- Use a daily planner. It is important to make the daily planner fit you. A common problem is not prioritizing tasks from unimportant to urgent. Have a set time to start the daily planner each day, and designate times to review it during the day.
- When breaking down a task, set simple, realistic, and achievable goals. Write down steps in the

planner. Do not try to remember the steps.

- Give yourself more time than you think is needed to complete a task – perhaps three times more time. This very important planning skill is often overlooked because you think a particular task will get completed quickly.
- Set up a filing system. Color-code it, if needed, and use dividers. Get help, if you need to, with the filing system.
- Respond to e-mails and use the Internet at set times each day. E-mail and the Internet can be big distractions from task completion. Making sure you don't get "off task" (i.e., using e-mail or the Internet for purposes other than the set purpose) is a constant battle that requires a good structure (such as designated time) and self-monitoring.
- Use external alarms to help you remember time. Set an alarm to start a low-interest activity and an alarm to indicate you should stop a high-interest activity.
- Identify a work coach you trust to help you with organization and planning if you have problems starting and maintaining your organization and planning. Coaches can help with a variety of things, such as billing, organizing files, or getting tasks completed.
- Reduce office environmental distractions. Try to minimize external noise by using headphones or earplugs. Turn off sound on the computer, or take your work to a quiet spot, if necessary. Close your door, if that is helpful. It is especially important to implement a strategy to reduce external office distractions during low-interest activities.
- During staff meetings, practice active listening and take notes. This process will help you become more involved in the meeting.
- If something is bothering you, try to talk about it with someone you trust before the day ends. This will allow you to be less distracted.
- Identify your learning style. Howard Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* proposes eight distinct learning styles. Understanding one's learning style can help improve the way you plan and organize daily tasks.

Moving Forward

Getting an assessment is an important starting point to determine whether you have ADD. Support and skills groups, work coaches, and individual counseling can help an attorney with ADD achieve and sustain gains in productivity and performance. If you are interested in learning more about ADD and some tools for practicing law with ADD, see the box below.

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