

Ask Dr. Allen:

Alternatives to stimulants for ADHD behavior

What can a parent do about their child who can't focus and has been labeled with ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)? The usual recommendation is a medical evaluation, followed by a prescription for a stimulant drug, such as Adderol.

Let's review what happens from taking a stimulant drug. The side effects can be decreased appetite, insomnia, headache, irritability, and increased heart rate and blood pressure. More importantly, stimulants affect our brain's neurotransmitters. The point of stimulants is to increase dopamine production, which causes an increase in attention and focus, and thus productivity. But the drug also causes the natural production of dopamine to be stopped.

When someone stops taking the drugs, their brain will not produce dopamine naturally for many months or even a year.

Effects of low dopamine levels can include decreased motivation, low energy, trouble concentrating, memory problems, mood swings, and difficulty experiencing pleasure or reward. Some have described it as the world being black and white and without color. In more severe cases, it can manifest as tremors, muscle stiffness, or difficulty with movement, similar to Parkinson's disease.

The continual use of stimulant drugs also can cause a tolerance as it

loses effectiveness and dosages have to be increased to get positive effects.

A study looked at the correlation between pharmacy zip codes in Los Angeles County and ADHD prescriptions. The results indicated hardly anybody in lower income areas receives prescriptions for ADHD.

This suggests the intent of getting the stimulant drug isn't to treat ADHD. The motivation of many parents and their medical advisors appears to be to help kids to get good grades in school and be successful.

Certainly, increased focus and achievement will accomplish these goals. Stimulant drugs are often the means to get more success academically.

However, I would offer the possibility of trying different means of learning mental and behavioral skills as an option for a kid who has the distractibility and hyperness happening.

There are many techniques and strategies that can be implemented to increase focus and organizational skills. Professionals in Europe have long confirmed that it is better to learn mental skills improvement than to prescribe stimulant drugs. Adderol, which is commonly prescribed in the U.S. is illegal in Europe.

Other successful strategies to improve focus, concentration, motivation and success are similar sports psychology practices used by top athletes. Additionally, some of the

same strategies used for dementia or post-stroke recovery for the mind are useful for people diagnosed with ADHD.

We have to realize learning to implement new mental skills takes time and patience. It is like learning to play an instrument or speak a new language. It takes consistency, discipline, practice and time.

A person who actually does have ADHD is at risk crossing the street, being alone in the kitchen or even at home. Their unpredictability and impulsiveness could lead to a tragic mistake or accident. But many kids receiving the diagnosis and medications are not like this. They are only given the drug on school days and not on weekends, thus showing the goal is achievement.

To resort to drugs for our kids also teaches them drugs are the way to cope with life and can make them dependent on many types of substances in the near future.

I know these statements are controversially unpopular as is saying that marijuana can cause mental illness. When considering medications for ADHD, parents should opt for non-stimulant drugs. These are recommended in order to avoid the negative effects of stimulants.

Otherwise, take the time to teach your kid how to increase awareness, concentration and focus. Help them find what relaxes them, how they can avoid negative thoughts and keep their mind and body in sync with the task at hand. This will increase their competency and confidence.

Recognizing ADD, ADHD

The terms ADD and ADHD are commonly used to generalize our cultural mindsets, especially when referring to kids.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), formerly known as ADD, is considered a form of neurodivergence. This means the brain of someone with ADHD functions differently than what is considered typical.

Neurodivergence is a term used to describe differences in how the brain works, leading to unique ways of thinking, learning, and perceiving the world.

The three main symptoms of ADHD are inattention, hyperactivity

and impulsivity.

To summarize briefly: specifically, this would be having difficulty focusing, being easily distracted, being forgetful, having poor organization and time management, and difficulty following instructions.

Along with hyperactivity and impulsivity: physically moving a lot, and impulsive with decisions and interactions.

As you read this, you may think, that's me. Well the reality is we all have some of these characteristics. If placed along a continuum, we can have less or more of different traits described as ADHD.

While many consider the causes to be something someone is born with, it is also thought to be caused by our fast-paced, technological culture. Technologic activity has caused us to have shorter attention spans. Because of technology dependence, many attention spans are only 3 to 5 seconds.

I'm sure you have noticed people at Starbucks or another busy and noisy environment doing homework or their job on a computer. Some may also have ear plugs in, which blocks out the room noise, while still listening to something else that has nothing to do with the work they are doing.

Some have suggested the human brain has expanded now and can multi-task and do more things at the same time. This is not true. The reality is, we have learned to have noise such as people talking, music, videos and other things going on at the same time as we are seeking to concentrate on work.

Maybe the days of quiet study in a library or quiet place are over? For many people, quiet isn't tolerable. Many young people can't be comfortable in their own skin and sit in silence and have only one thing to focus on.

Personally, I think most of our distractibility is learned and not to be blamed on the brain we were born with that can't focus and is hyper. Which means we can learn new mental and behavioral skills to reverse the distractibility and impulsiveness. **Pen**

Dr Greg Allen is a practicing therapist in PVE and San Pedro. He is also founder and director of Hearts Respond (hearts-respond.com) and Freedom4U (freedom-community.com)



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Suzy Zimmerman, Agent
Insurance Lic#: OF71296
4010 Palos Verdes Drive North
Suite 103
Rolling Hills Estates, CA 90274
Bus: 310-377-9531
www.zimziminsurance.com

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