

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Part II: How is ADHD Diagnosed?



Professionals who are specifically trained in ADHD should make the diagnosis, if one is needed; great care must be taken to rule out other reasons for the child's behavior. The professional (who could be a mental health counselor, clinical social worker, clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, behavioral pediatrician or neurologist, or a psychiatric nurse practitioner) should consult with teachers and parents and allow them to fill out a behavioral rating chart.

Parents are often the first to spot impulsivity, hyperactivity and inattention before they start school. Developing toddlers are very different from one another, however, and a parent should consult with the family pediatrician or other professional to see if the child is just very active or high-spirited or immature. Sometimes this kind of behavior is never really noticed until it starts to cause problems in school. When functioning is affected it is often the teacher, who works with many children and understands average behavior, who notices that the child is hyperactive (which is the most noticeable) or inattentive (which is sometimes harder to pin down).

When ADHD is suspected, the most available professional is often the child's family doctor or pediatrician, though the other professionals I spoke of above are often competent to diagnose the child, or to refer that child to someone who specializes in this disorder. Someone trusted is always a good bet; often community or government agencies or volunteer organizations can make recommendations. Not all professionals can prescribe medications for ADHD, but there are many who feel that these drugs are over-prescribed and can do more harm than good. We shall discuss this next week.

Doctors and in some states nurse practitioners (and in two states psychologists - Louisiana and New Mexico) can perform tests and give medications, but they usually don't provide psychotherapy or emotional support like some mental health counselors and clinical social workers.

Firstly, the causes of the behavior have to be determined. Some potential causes are: a sudden change in the child's life (like a loss of a parent or grandparent, parents' divorce or loss of job, and so on); small seizures, sometimes not even noticed (such as temporal lobe seizures or petit mal); middle-ear infections that can cause temporary hearing loss; other medical problems affecting brain function; depression or anxiety which can be misinterpreted as ADHD, and; a child might have a learning disability.

Checking through school or medical records, the expert might find previous problems in hearing or vision, a history of a stressful or chaotic home-environment, or problems with

parents or teachers. Most importantly, the specialist will interview the child and observe behavior, gestures, body movements, and listen to the responses as well, and then make a diagnostic assessment, using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) manual that we all use for diagnostic purposes. The professional will also talk to teachers and parents about the child and ask them to fill out certain behavior rating scales. A profile of the child's behavior in various social settings will be created by these interviews and by the expert's own personal observations. They will focus on mental health and on social adjustment. Sometimes intelligence tests and learning achievement tests will also be performed to see if the child has a learning disability. Some times tests will cover several academic areas such as math, reading, and other tasks that require concentration.

The DSM defines very specific criteria for making a diagnoses of ADHD asking when the behavior started, how long it has endured, how frequent is the behavior, does it interfere with school or friendships, and if there are other related problems. If the answers show significant and enduring hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention, then the child may be diagnosed with ADHD.

If a negative diagnosis is made, then other causes for the behavior must be determined. Otherwise, once a positive diagnosis is made, treatment can begin on a level of emotional help (behavior therapy), educational support (changing the learning setting if need be), and sometimes medications (selecting the right one and the appropriate dose, and hopefully assessing the risks of using drugs.

Next week we shall discuss the controversies swirling around the use of certain drugs to treat ADHD, particularly Ritalin, the most widely prescribed drug given for this condition. Some say it is effective and others say it is deadly.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Sigmund Freud emphasized the importance of motherhood and fatherhood. He stated, "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror." He also said, "I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection."
