

# How to Explain Your ADHD



## Key Points

- **ADHD is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental disorder.**
- **The symptoms of ADHD include issues with attention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness, but not everybody has all the symptoms.**
- **People with ADHD can also have issues with controlling emotions.**
- **ADHD can also mean we often lose or forget things.**
- **People with ADHD also really struggle with being rejected or ignored.**

## What is ADHD?

ADHD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder in which the brain develops differently to the brain of a person without ADHD. The way in which an ADHD brain develops means that the behaviours of somebody with ADHD are different to most people. The core symptoms of ADHD are separated into 'Inattentiveness' (Figure 1) and 'Hyperactivity/impulsivity' (Figure 2).

People with ADHD can have issues solely with attention, solely with hyperactivity or impulsiveness or issues with both areas.

## Inattentive Type ADHD

People with inattentive type ADHD, and generally struggle with focusing on, or paying attention to tasks which their brains do not find rewarding. It is not for people with ADHD don't want to do these tasks, it's often *tasks which one wants to do* that we struggle to pay attention to.

In the real world, this means that somebody with inattentive type ADHD may often do the following things:

- Forget an appointment or birthday.
- Struggle to listen to you while they are doing something else.
- Struggle to start or finish tasks or activities.
- Lose things frequently throughout the day.



When trying to explain this to people without ADHD, it's important to point out that ***people with ADHD do not choose to do these things!***

The reason behind these things happening is because the parts of our brain that normally allow us to pay attention to things, we want to pay attention to work differently to non-ADHD brains.

### **The nine diagnostic symptoms of inattentiveness:**

1. Making careless mistakes/lacking attention to detail.
2. Difficulty sustaining attention.
3. Inability sometimes to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Failure to follow through on tasks and instructions.
5. Exhibiting poor organisation.
6. Avoiding/disliking tasks requiring sustained mental effort.
7. Losing things necessary for tasks/activities.
8. Being easily distracted (including unrelated thoughts).
9. Being forgetful in daily activities.

## **Hyperactive Type ADHD**

People with hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD, can struggle with being still, waiting their turn, controlling impulsive behaviours, or taking time off.

In the real world, this means that somebody with hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD may often do the following things:

- Interrupt people.
- Spend money impulsively.
- Struggle to sit still while in meetings or at gatherings

Again, people with ADHD don't want to be hyperactive or impulsive, the parts of the brain which inhibit movement or impulsive behaviour do not work the same as in the brains of people with ADHD.

### **Figure 2: The nine diagnostic symptoms of hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD**

1. Fidgeting with or tapping hands or feet, squirming in seat
2. Leaving seat in situations when remaining seated is expected.
3. Experiencing feelings of restlessness
4. Having difficulty engaging in quiet, leisurely activities
5. Being "on-the-go" or acting as if "driven by a motor".
6. Talking excessively
7. Blurting out answers
8. Having difficulty waiting for your turn
9. Interrupting or intruding on others

## **Combined Type ADHD**

People with combined type ADHD have issues with both attention and hyperactivity/impulsiveness, and therefore may struggle with all the issues mentioned above!

## **Non-Diagnostic Symptoms of ADHD**

People with ADHD, often have other issues which aren't included in the diagnostic symptoms listed above for inattentiveness or hyperactivity/impulsiveness. These can include:

### ***Emotional Regulation***

Because the parts of the brain that regulate our emotions often don't work as well in people with ADHD, people with ADHD can often underreact or overreact to things that happen in life.

This can show itself as becoming very upset at small things, like a spilt drink, or underreacting to very large life events such as the death of a loved one.

It is important to remember that people with ADHD don't choose to be emotional, but that our brains often do not allow us to respond appropriately.

### ***Poor Working Memory***

Working memory is there a specific type of short-term memory, which is a little bit like in mental 'post-it note'. Your brain uses this mental 'post it note' to store information for a very short period while it decides whether it is important or not, and whether it should process the information. Think about the last time you put your car keys down, and whether you remember where



you put them or not. People with ADHD generally have poor working memory, which means it is difficult to remember people's names, where you put things, why are you walked into to a room etc.

Again, whilst many people will forget things like this, someone with ADHD will do this many times every day, and it is not their choice to do this!

### ***Rejection Sensitivity***

Nobody likes being rejected. However, almost every adult with ADHD also has rejection sensitivity, which means that rejection, criticism, or being ignored can cause intense, emotional distress. To complicate things, even if you ***think*** you have been rejected, or you ***think you will be*** rejected in the future with ADHD, you can feel this sense of distress.

People with ADHD may therefore respond very negatively if they are criticised or ignored, or if they think they have been criticised or ignored. Again, nobody with ADHD chooses to feel like this or wants to be this way, it is related to have our brains developed.



## **Explaining these things to someone who doesn't have ADHD**

It is sometimes difficult to explain your ADHD to somebody that doesn't have it. Many people think that ADHD isn't real, and that it's an excuse for being lazy.

In trying to explain why you cannot do some of the things that most people do to you, sometimes useful to use analogies.

For example:

- **Engaging with a task that your brain finds 'unrewarding', but that you *want to do* is a little bit, like trying to force yourself to put your hand on to something very hot. It's very difficult to do, and therefore you're unlikely to be able to do it.**
- **Trying to stop yourself from acting impulsively when you have ADHD is a little bit like trying to not to catch a ball when it's thrown at your face. People with ADHD do not have normal activity in parts of the brain which act as our internal 'brakes', and therefore, stopping ourselves from being impulsive, can be very difficult.**
- **Our lack of normal emotional regulation is a little bit like picking something out of a lucky dip; sometimes you'll get something good, sometimes you'll get something not so good. People with ADHD do not choose how they respond emotionally to events in life.**

- **Feeling rejection intensely can lead to people becoming people pleasers or completely withdrawing from a group or from society. This is a little bit like if a newspaper printed a photo of somebody and accused them of doing something awful, an event which would likely have a huge effect on the person and how they engaged with other people.**
- **Everybody forgets things now, and again, and this means that being forgetful with ADHD can often be dismissed as ‘everyone does that’. But with ADHD, poor working memory is every day for all your life. Another way of thinking about this is visiting Disneyland for one day it’s very different from living at Disneyland every day for all your life**