



ADHD Needs Early Diagnosis and Treatment

By Charlie Swarbrooke

It is universally agreed that ADHD presents in childhood, and usually before someone is 10 years old. So when someone is given a diagnosis in adulthood, inattentive or otherwise, it means they've lived with ADHD their whole life.

And when we think of ADHD, we think of troublemakers and class clowns, bad grades and bad habits. But research shows that less than 20% of adults with ADHD have been officially diagnosed - how can so many diagnoses fall by the wayside?

Because ADHD is a lot more complicated than that. And when you're living with Inattentive ADHD, it's very hard to get the system to pay attention. The more 'typical' symptoms described above are the only ones really looked for.

But what about the children who are quieter? The day dreamers who seem to do fine in the classroom? Can it still be ADHD when the symptoms are so different?

How My Inattentive ADHD Presented During Childhood

The majority of ADHD cases start to become apparent to parents, guardians, older siblings, and teachers, and can be diagnosed by doctors from 7 years and up. Inattentive ADHD is no different. For me the main symptom was just how 'away with the fairies' (as my parents would say) I could be. I daydreamed a lot, found it incredibly hard to focus, and the adults around me had to pull my attention back to the task at hand multiple times.

I could get easily overstimulated. If there was too much noise or too many people, or even if the clothes I was wearing were too bright, I would shut down and refuse to do anything. I found such situations frustrating and even immobilising and my parents soon learned to keep me away from 'loud' events due to how upset I got..

But can't these behaviours just simply be classed as growing pains?

Of course, you might believe this is all to do with being a child - kids have a lot of energy, can get bored quite easily, and need a lot of activity to wear them out enough for bedtime. And all kids have their own little pet hates!

As such, it can be hard to notice inattentive symptoms when a child is this young. When your 6 or 7 year old doesn't pay attention and needs a little nudge every few minutes, you can naturally assume it's par for the course.

But even these 'hyperactive' traits can mean a child is living with Inattentive-type ADHD.

And once again, that makes it hard to notice that a child is struggling to focus and make decisions, or that that's what causes the tantrums.

It's never just daydreaming for people with Inattentive ADHD - there are other symptoms that'll become noticeable as your child gets older. For example, I did a lot of attention seeking when I was 4 or 5, and was constantly badgering my parents for words of praise. I needed to be around them at all times, especially if I felt I was being ignored. Then I'd get upset and throw a tantrum. Inattentive ADHD can cause someone to be weighed down by anxiety thanks to how fast their brain fires, and my parents were the only ones who could comfort me.

I was easily riled up, especially if something didn't turn out the way I imagined it in my head. I hit others and behaved badly towards my siblings and friends. Being misunderstood is an emotional trigger for kids with ADHD. Having an inattentive brain that struggled to focus made it hard for me to explain my feelings, so pushing problems away or getting upset seemed like my only option.

Another thing that made me angry was having time limits. Being suddenly told I had only 5 more minutes to play with my toys or that I needed to go to bed soon could make me feel panicked and overwhelmed. I couldn't suddenly leave something - everything had to be finished before I was able to move on and focus on something else. Throwing a tantrum meant I could continue to do the thing I was focused on. I couldn't explain why I was resistant and rebellious.

I liked talking to myself and to others. I talked all the time to anyone who listened and sometimes got into trouble because of this. (delete or move) Being overwhelmed with anxiety, Inattentive ADHD can cause a mind to go into hyperactivity as attention is easily caught and a flurry of rapid thoughts can follow.

I would talk to other children, and even adults, I didn't know from time to time. As I got to my teen years I had to learn to be quiet, especially when others were talking. I was frequently told to be quiet.

I could never sit still. Even to this day I fidget and 'tic' on a regular basis. I'm constantly jiggling my legs when I sit, playing with my hands when I'm talking, and tensing muscles in my face and body in repeated patterns over and over.

When I was 9 I was diagnosed with Tourettes, but ADHD and Tourettes are [frequently comorbid](#) with each other. Seeing as around half of all kids diagnosed with ADHD also get a Tourettes diagnosis, I find it strange that I was told I had Tourettes so young but I was never considered for ADHD until I asked for a referral in my adult life.

I Had a Lot of Trouble in my Later School Years

Kids with ADHD generally have trouble with breaking things down into tasks. Let me serve you an example here: washing the dishes. In the world of ADHD, it isn't just getting the dirty cups and plates together and cleaning them.

It's also the energy of simply getting up, filling the bowl with soap, waiting for the water to heat up before you can add it, and then every single dish is its own separate task. You have to find a cloth and make sure every item is actually clean - you're also hyper aware of the way the water feels on your hands. Then you have to fit them onto the draining board, empty the bowl, get rid of the bubbles, and find a towel to dry your hands.

Now this might seem like a normal step by step, but an ADHD brain finds a mundane task like this hard to bundle together and get on with. It can be exhausting to force yourself through because the to-do list seems so long.

And this issue plays havoc on academic success. Inattentive ADHD can make it hard to focus within a classroom environment. It's easy to get distracted, it's easy to feel 'chronically' bored, and the energy needed to complete a school task is next to non-existent.

For me that meant schoolwork was ten times harder than it had ever been. The problem became incredibly apparent when I went into high school. I didn't know how to ask for help as I wasn't even sure what was wrong. I just couldn't do it! I easily zoned out, went back to daydreaming, and lagged behind my classmates. Even when I completed something in the wrong way and I knew it, I didn't care enough to go back and change it.

It felt like I couldn't even sum up the motivation to pick up a pen and write things down. And this is a common obstacle for people with Inattentive ADHD - it's confusing! After all, feeling a 'lack of motivation' is one of the number one symptoms of depression. In my experience, from talking to friends who were also diagnosed at a late age, it can often be confused for depression. I saw the depression label long before I ever saw an accurate ADHD diagnosis.

But it wasn't motivation that was the issue; it was being overwhelmed and not knowing where to start. In Inattentive ADHD, one of the 9 diagnostic criteria is 'difficulty following instructions', as well as an 'inability' to put in the mental effort needed for essentially all tasks we face. It's hard

to start, and even harder to finish, because the executive functioning area of the brain (where all your self regulation skills live) isn't built for flexing strength like in a neuro-typical brain.

And to me there were just too many obstacles in the way. What should I write? How much do I need to write? What is the answer to this problem? How do you work it out? What did the teacher even say about what to do? It took me twice as long as anyone else to work out what I needed to do even after it had been explained and eventually, I just gave up altogether. Inattentive ADHD often means a person struggles to even listen, or they focus so hard on trying to listen they miss everything that was said.

My trouble in school also meant I lost friends very easily. It's not often talked about, but ADHD can be incredibly socially isolating - we see others succeed where we would like to. When we fail at something one of our peers in the same classroom was just fine at doing, it feels genuinely painful.

I just couldn't make the connections necessary to answer questions or finish any school work, and that was incredibly embarrassing when the teacher called on you to answer. It feels like you just can't do something, like there's something in the way and it doesn't even occur to you to find a way over the block. You don't think like that because you can't, especially without any practice.

These Are Common Problems When Living with Inattentive ADHD

Before high school comes along, kids with Inattentive ADHD can find it very easy to skate through schoolwork. But the jump between these two difficulty levels is very hard to adjust to. Suddenly you go from a school setting where you need no help to one where you don't even know how to ask for support. For a lot of kids with Inattentive ADHD, you were never even taught how.

Teenagers with ADHD are twice as likely to drop out of high school, or finish later than their peers, compared to teens with no kind of psychiatric disorder. And it was no different for me; I spent a lot of time outside of school during my teen years, with my whole family threatened with legal action over school attendance simply because they didn't know how to help me.

I wasn't diagnosed with Inattentive ADHD until I was 20, and for adults diagnosed later on in life, this is still rather early. I can't imagine what the people diagnosed in their 30s, 40s, and 50s had to deal with through their school and young adult years. How different they must have felt in the workplace and in their relationships, and how worrying it must be if you're a parent noticing your child starting to act just like you did.

Life before my diagnosis was difficult. I felt so different from everyone else who could just get on with things, and didn't have to pull things together right at the last minute or simply leave it and try to accept another failure. When I tried to explain the way I felt, no one really knew what I was talking about. I got very bored very easily, which was labelled as simply laziness, and no one thought to try and provide some support with that. And as a teenager who had little say over what I wanted from my life, this meant I was reliant on the adults around me to help. But no one knew how.

As an adult now, and with a proper diagnosis down on paper, I can advocate for myself. I know it's not just me being 'lazy' - it's because I have ADHD! And now that I know I live with the associated executive dysfunction, I can work with it. I can use management strategies to help

propel myself into a task, such as the Pomodoro technique. With a timer in place, I can work for a slotted period of time and take a consistent break after each one - it's amazing for Inattentive brains who like to wander and get distracted. And I never would have thought to even consider something like that could work before I knew what I was working with. It's a small thing, but it's made such a difference.

Would an Earlier Diagnosis Have Helped?

Absolutely. If we knew that I had Inattentive ADHD, something could have been done to support me as I got older. School troubles would have been addressed properly and with real understanding, and they wouldn't have been as scary to face as they seemed.

For me, the earlier an ADHD diagnosis, the better. A child deserves to grow up knowing why they're experiencing troubles people around them don't have. They should be aware of why they may be having an issues with their memory, organizational skills, or social situations, and be able to work with it, rather than be labelled 'stupid' or 'lazy'.