



AD(H)D – MIS-NAMED AND MISUNDERSTOOD

Do you know people who are ‘hyperactive’?
You know, the ones who run around a lot?

Around 3% - 5% of the global population is estimated to have Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder*. That is probably a massive underestimate, especially for girls and women, who are rarely identified as having AD(H)D.

AD(H)D is a complex cognitive developmental difference involving several aspects of executive function such as planning, memory and focus. It’s NOT bad parenting, or extended toddler tantrums. But it is often misunderstood, and always misnamed.

Attention ‘deficit’ - a lack of attention?

No. People with AD(H)D do not have less attention to give to the outside world. OK, there are the ‘day-dreamers’ – the ‘inattentive’ types who seem to be lost in their own imaginations, miles away from the classroom. That may be why so many children (especially girls) do not have their AD(H)D identified; they don’t disrupt lessons, and so they are often overlooked. They ARE paying attention – just not to what we want them to focus on.

In fact, people with AD(H)D are more likely to be paying attention to everything, all at once. Their brains are not good at inhibiting the desire to switch focus from one thing to another, so their attention is easily redirected, and they want to follow up every new stimulus. Imagine how exhausting that must be.

Well, lucky they are all hyperactive, then – all that extra energy must be useful, right?

Not really. Not everyone who has AD(H)D also experiences the hyperactivity. Many will at some point in their lives, but not all the time. (That’s why I write AD(H)D with the ‘H’ in brackets.) And that ‘hyperactivity’ is more likely to manifest as a general feeling of restlessness, rather than a desire to run a marathon, which would require quite a lot of focus on one task.

This restlessness often manifests as fidgeting and impulsive behaviour, even in adults with AD(H)D. Sometimes, their assessment of risk is not as thorough as parents might hope, but this can make them very popular with their classmates, who see them as daring and entertaining; they make friends quickly enough. Unfortunately, intense emotional swings can also be also part of the mix, so they fall out with peers quickly, too.

How can we help people to understand AD(H)D better? Well, maybe we should change the Ds to something else: Attention Direction Difference? What would you suggest?

*according to the UK’s National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.