

College Success

Accommodations and Strategies that Work

A SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE EXPERIENCE for a student with AD/HD depends on identifying the particular problems that might arise due to unique learning styles and needs. Success also depends on overcoming the obstacles that often arise due to AD/HD symptoms, including:

- The desire for independence or wanting to go it alone
- Problems with working memory functions
- Difficulty sustaining attention and concentration over long periods
- Impairments in executive function
- Co-existing conditions (i.e., oppositional defiant disorder, learning disabilities, bipolar, etc.)

Wanting to go it alone. Feeling stigmatized is common for many students who have been diagnosed with AD/HD or a learning disability, leading many to shy away from seeking help in favor of coming up with their own remedies.

It is important for people to seek and receive appropriate accommodations. Furthermore, unless the diagnosis of AD/HD or a learning disorder is formally documented, with current recommendations for accommodations, and officially on file with the learning or disability services office, no additional support services will be provided at the college level.

Working memory. Working memory functions refer to processes involved in the encoding of information, categorizing it through a logical filing system for later retrieval and holding the information in temporary storage while the filing process takes place. These functions are often most impacted by underlying AD/HD. Understanding how working memory affects the learning process is essential for self-understanding, but is often misunderstood by students with AD/HD.

This is unfortunate, as college learning typically places great demands on working memory. Rote memory, once highly effective in the elementary school years and to some extent later in middle school and early high school, is no longer an effective learning strategy. Scanning texts and recalling just enough information to pass tests no longer works because too many of the salient details are missed in the scanning process. These important details serve as the building blocks for more advanced course work, and if they are missed, learning is further impeded.

Students starting college face a far different experience than any they have previously known. This is particularly true for individuals with AD/HD who must learn new strategies as they transition from high school to college.

by Lynda J. Katz, Ph.D.



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Sustaining attention and concentration. Understanding AD/HD as a dysfunction of the attention system is also important. There are students whose error rate on exams is intensified because of impulsive response patterns, such as having a difficult time staying with a subject or reading passage that is not perceived as “interesting.” Students who have hyperactive tendencies often find it difficult to stay with a long multi-hour examination without drifting off. Others vacillate between hyperfocusing and being distracted by everything going on around them.

Impairments in executive functions. In addition to working memory, other executive functions important for academic success involve time management, organization and planning, prioritizing, activation, arousal and effort. These aspects of executive function can also be problematic for students with AD/HD because of the unstructured nature of the college environment, an environment that does not readily reinforce this internal executive function system.

Parents have often served the role of “external executive functioner” for their children, providing external cues and supports in order to help the student meet deadlines and manage his or her time effectively. Without those external parental supports, students will need to explicitly identify other means to successfully

get to class on time (for example, several alarm clocks strategically placed in the dorm room, timing of medication, personal digital assistants, etc.), to follow through with and complete homework and prioritize long-term assignments.

Students often mention difficulty getting started on a homework assignment. With the freedom and choice that the college environment provides, problems with activation are intensified, as distractions become rationalizations for not beginning homework or other long-term projects. Getting access early on to an advisor/coach who can support the gradual internalization of these aspects of executive function, as well as the appropriate use of medication, may be critical to the success of the student making the adjustment to the college setting.

Co-existing conditions. Finally, it is important to recognize that some 20–25 percent of students with AD/HD at the college level will also have a specific learning disorder (Semrud-Clikeman et al., 1992). A significant number may also have other diagnostic conditions such as an anxiety disorder, depression, substance abuse and sleep disorder found typically in adult populations with AD/HD (Biederman et al., 1993). Understanding the impact of such co-existing conditions on memory and learning functions as well

as interpersonal and social relations are also factors that need to be considered when talking about successful adjustment at the college level.

Accommodations

Any request for accommodation must meet both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 standards and be justified in a psychoeducational or neuropsychological report using the guidelines established and recommended for use by the Consortium on AD/HD Documentation (1998). It is important for students to understand the specific accommodations they will need. Not all students with AD/HD benefit from identical modifications nor do they use them in the same way or to the same degree (Richard, 1995). The guidelines have been adopted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) as their *Policy Statement for Documentation of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adolescents and Adults*. The policy is available through their Web site at www.ets.org/disability/AD/HDpicy.html.

Accommodations must be individualized to the needs of the particular student. There is no “one size fits all” approach or recipe to follow with respect to reasonable accommodations. A list of possible accommodations might include:

- Extended time for examinations
- Examinations to be provided in a non-distracting environment
- Use of a computer with spell and grammar check for all essay examinations and those having a short-answer format
- Access to a writing center for assistance with proofing final drafts of papers
- Access to a calculator for all math classes and examinations
- Access to a note taker for large lecture-based classes
- Ability to choose class times that facilitate the learning process
- Access to assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software programs, cognitive mapping programs and those with speech dictation capabilities
- A waiver for foreign language study
- Access to a quiet space for study
- Access to a coaching center or advisor/mentor

Learning Strategies

In addition to the accommodations discussed previously, there are a number of specific learning strategies that the individual student can take upon himself to institute. In some cases, he or she may need some



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What about Medication Management?

WHILE MEDICATION MANAGEMENT is not necessarily a reasonable accommodation or a learning strategy, it is often a critical factor in the initial adjustment to college life for many students with AD/HD. The following suggestions address student and parent concerns in this area.

If a student has a physician at home who currently manages his or her medications, that physician can call in a prescription to the local pharmacy where the college or university is located. The phone call must be followed by a paper copy of the prescription. It is a good idea for the paper copy prescription to be post-dated, as mail may take as long as four or five days to reach the pharmacy. This is important because, in some states, prescriptions for scheduled drugs will be honored only for a certain number of days. In Vermont, for example, there is a seven-day limit on prescriptions for scheduled drugs (the class into which psychostimulants such as Ritalin, Concerta and Adderall fall).

Some insurance companies only cover medication costs if the prescription is filled in the state in which the student permanently resides. In this case, it might be helpful to call the college’s health services prior to enrollment for assistance in finding a local physician and/or psychiatrist to manage the medications.

One of the other major problems that occurs for college students is remembering to renew a prescription. Let’s say that the student is down to his or her last pill, and no prescription is at hand. In this case, students should give the name and phone number of their home physician to the campus health service. Oftentimes, the health service will place the call to the physician and, as a temporary measure, fill a one-month prescription until the official refill prescription has been received. Obviously, this is a last resort and one that cannot be abused.

Finally, colleges generally offer student health insurance coverage as part of student services. It is important to check ahead of time to see whether the college’s student health insurance covers prescriptions including psychostimulants. If it does, then problems with out-of-state insurance coverage can be alleviated. ■

specific instruction in how to undertake these, as they have never been a part of his or her skill sets. Many colleges will offer summer courses for high school juniors and seniors that deal with specific study skills and techniques. They teach strategies for handling reading assignments, written reports, essays and math classes.

Understanding the impact of co-existing conditions on memory and learning functions as well as interpersonal and social relations need to be considered when talking about successful adjustment at the college level.

Reading and listening. College texts used in the natural and social science, as well as those used in the humanities, require a high level of cognitive processing. In order to achieve that processing most efficiently, it is helpful to apply a consistent strategy across subject matters. Specific study skills and strategies become the building blocks for this “metacognitive” approach to learning and its transferability across subject specific content. These include:

- Active reading
- Highlighting
- Making margin notes
- Identifying new vocabulary
- Making summary statements
- Note taking
- Using two column paper with all discrete notes in the right column
- Reviewing notes and then applying main ideas or headings in the left column

Study skills manuals also suggest prereading as a strategy (identifying major headings or sections in the chapter prior to in-depth reading). While this often works for science texts, it is less useful with humanities texts. Also, students who typically skim the material may miss crucial details. Finally, tackling the most difficult reading materials when one’s mind is the freshest makes the most sense. Taking part regularly and consistently in some form of physical exercise or activity after a day of classes helps to refresh the attention system for later study hours.

Listening to lectures in large auditorium-like classrooms is often the rule vs. the exception for introductory freshman courses at many universities.

Being able to take notes in a consistent and meaningful way will be critical to later retention. If the student’s handwriting is illegible, then taking notes with a pen or pencil is essentially useless. Using a laptop computer for this purpose is far more efficient and effective as long as the student has the necessary keyboarding skills or facility. Students with AD/HD may find that distractibility and hyperactivity can be major barriers in large classrooms. Getting access to a fellow student’s notes for comparison purposes or

reviewing one’s own notes with the faculty member or classroom assistant during office hours can pay off.

Writing. Visual mapping or dictation software can be extremely useful for those students who have problems with transitional sentences or phrases or who have problems with the logical sequencing of ideas.

Computers are wonderful for students with AD/HD; however, some students can delete whole sections in an attempt to make everything perfect and have nothing to show after several hours of work. Using a writing center to help support the initial formulation of ideas into written notes may be helpful. Learning how to brainstorm ideas without self-censorship can be a very liberating experience. Receiving reinforcement from a writing coach or peer tutor for sections of a written paper rather than getting feedback on the entire draft may prove to be useful as well.

Making the Most of AD/HD

It has been my experience that students with AD/HD are some of the brightest, most creative and best thinkers in our classrooms today. But it takes effort to help them make creative ideas become concrete realities. I have a son-in-law, a highly successful surgeon, who also has AD/HD. In high school he played football and marched with the band during halftime. Now he can work on four journal articles at the same time, take breaks to watch TV, spend time with his 15-month-old son, talk with his buddy and then run to the Home Depot to get porch furniture, which he puts together with the ease of a skilled mechanic. During a two-week break in his fourth year of medical school, he built an office for me. At one point in his early medical school days, this young man doubted his ability to succeed because he had AD/HD. He would not tell you that today; he has learned to use his gifts with positive results, leaving the rest of us to catch up. ■

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Author’s Note: Special thanks to Simonne Holton, FNP, director of Student Health Services at Landmark College, Putney, Vt., for her input regarding medication management issues.