

# Focus on Disability Awareness

An Occasional Bulletin from the Office of Disability Services for LVC Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

## Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder in College Students

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a biological, often hereditary, predisposition to defects in the regulation of behavior by rules and consequences (Barkley, 1990). Its primary symptoms include inattention (problems with selective, focused, and sustained attention), behavioral disinhibition or impulsivity, hyperactivity, deficient rule-governed behavior, and great variability in task performance. Onset is prior to age seven years.

Between 70 and 85% of children diagnosed with ADHD will continue to be impaired by their symptoms during adolescence, and between 50 and 65% will display symptoms into adulthood (Barkley, 1990). Adolescents and young adults with ADHD are at great risk for academic problems in terms of skill development and behavioral adjustment. When ADHD co-exists with a learning disability, the risk is even greater. Current estimates suggest that only 5% of children diagnosed with ADHD will go on to complete a university degree program (Barkley, 1990).

Core symptoms and associated features of ADHD frequently interfere with successful mastery of many of the developmental tasks of adolescence. Teens with ADHD experience developmental lags in their ability to manage their time wisely and organize their approach to academic tasks. They often have difficulty individuating from their parents, who have necessarily been very involved in overseeing their schoolwork and imposing external structure on their daily lives. Frequently, these adolescents have difficulty developing and deepening peer relationships appropriately, and experience social problems due to their immature social skills and poor recognition of social cues. They tend to say what comes to mind without considering the timing or the appropriateness of their comments. They are delayed in the development of self-observational skills that allow us to step outside ourselves and accurately evaluate our performance. Thus, many students with ADHD, even when medicated, arrive on campus poorly prepared to meet the sophisticated academic and interpersonal demands that will be placed upon them in college classes and in the dormitories. The result of greater emphasis on individual self-control, organization, independent learning, and responsibility for keeping up with assignments and long-range projects, as well as greater emphasis on critical thinking and abstract reasoning skills, is a dramatic drop in educational performance. Behaviors such as skipping class, avoiding professors, procrastinating and failing to hand in assignments are most often not the CAUSE of the problem, but are maladaptive RESPONSES to the problem of becoming overwhelmed by many complex demands.

Educators are often inclined to interpret ADHD behavior in students as irresponsibility and laziness - volitional behaviors that the student could change if he or she "put his (her) mind to it." Such attitudes make no more sense than believing that students with visual deficits are simply not trying hard enough to see clearly. If you are made aware that students in your class have ADHD, it would be helpful to invite them, individually, to talk to you early in the semester about their condition, in the privacy of your office. Encourage them to share with you what they believe are their strengths and areas of weakness, and find out what they believe will be most difficult about your class. Encourage them to seek you out for further explanation whenever they are unclear about concepts presented in class or in the text. These students need to be assured that they will not be criticized for asking questions that may have been addressed in class, but that they "missed" due to lapses in concentration or attention. Creating a "user-friendly environment" by making your interest in the students' academic progress known will help to stem the unproductive academic behaviors that typically jeopardize their success.

Source: Barkley, R. (1990). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. New York: Guilford

Typical accommodations for students with ADHD may include:

- Extended time on tests
- Permission to take tests in a room with few visual and auditory distractions, apart from other students
- Peer note-takers (NCR paper is available through the Office of Disability Services)
- Permission to tape-record lectures for use as personal study aids
- Reserved seating at the front of the class.

The following suggestions are helpful for all students, but may be critically important for students with ADHD:

- Clear, highly legible copy of the course syllabus, which includes professor's name, the course name and number, professor's office location, phone number and/or email address; an introduction to the subject matter; a statement of the course goals; a description of the evaluation procedures; a preview of class activities and assignments as well as a course outline providing a week-to-week schedule of topics, assigned readings, test dates, project completion dates, etc.; policies governing attendance, late assignments, make-up work, etc.
- For lengthy projects or research papers, assign due dates for various stages in the development of the final project; e.g., separate due dates for the written proposal, for a review of sources, for a draft of the introduction, etc.
- An advance organizer for each class lecture, giving the student an outline of the topics and subtopics to be covered that day. At the conclusion of class, briefly summarize key points.
- Animate your lecture style with gestures, facial expressions, changes in intonation and volume in speech. Vary the method of presentation of information, including the use of visual aids, videotapes, experiential opportunities, guest lecturers.
- Present new or technical vocabulary on the blackboard, and use new terminology in context to convey deeper meaning.
- Interrupt lengthy lecture with opportunities for questions, comments, small group tasks, etc.
- When possible, choose a text with an accompanying study guide, or provide study questions that are similar in style to those you will include on tests.
- Recommend that the student work with a peer tutor, coordinated through the Writing Center, on a regular basis. A small cadre of peer tutors has been trained to work with students with ADHD and learning disabilities. They can assist with studying and organizational strategies, and are available in some, but not all, content areas.
- Recommend that the student meet with the Coordinator of Disability Services on a regular basis to work on time management skills, learning strategies, etc. The ODS utilizes a "coaching" approach to intervention, which provides much needed external structure and encouragement for these students.