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UM Employee Assistance Program Newsletter

## ADHD - What Do We Know?

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

The University of Manitoba Employee Assistance Program (UM EAP) is a voluntary and confidential counselling service for all University of Manitoba and UMG Employees (full-time, part-time and casual) and their Families.

For first time appointments and counselling, please call 1-800-387-4765 toll free.

For appointment changes and general information, call 1-888-814-1328 toll free.

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*John is a very energetic eight year old, but often he cannot control his behavior.*

*Susan, who is fourteen, has the patience and determination to train her dog, but she never seems to be able to complete her homework.*

*Edward, in his mid-thirties, supervises the warehouse of a major corporation but he has difficulty concentrating. He once drove his car off the road at 60 miles per hour. This lapse in attention left him with stitches in his face.*

#### PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS

It is not unusual for a young person to be over-active, not like school work, or have trouble paying attention. When children, adolescents and adults are highly over-active, inattentive and compulsive, they have a disability known as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD.

ADHD is a perplexing and puzzling disorder for professionals and families alike. This is due in large part to the fact that the symptoms of ADHD are often seen in normal individuals. It is also not uncommon for adults to occasionally have trouble concentrating, paying attention, organizing their work, following through on directions, or controlling their impulses. But when this pattern of behavior is persistent and highly disruptive, ADHD may be the underlying cause.

People with ADHD show their symptoms of inattentiveness, impulsiveness and over-activity far more frequently and to a more serious degree than other people of the same mental age. It is these three principal behaviors – inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive – that are used to define ADHD.

The first symptom of ADHD is an impairment in attention, particularly in sustained attention. Children with ADHD struggle to maintain their attention during any activity that is long and tedious, precisely the kind of activities that take place in school. ADHD is not a problem of being easily distracted. Actually, children with ADHD lose interest in things much faster than others. As a result, they begin to look for something, anything, more stimulating to do even if that means ignoring the task at hand.

The second symptom of ADHD is the inability to control impulsive behavior regardless of the consequences. People with ADHD do not think about the consequences of their behavior. That may explain why they have more accidents than others. Impulsive people tend to be greater risk takers.

The third symptom related to ADHD is excessive movement or hyperactivity. This may appear as restlessness, fidgetiness, unnecessary locomotor activity, and even excessive talking. When required to sit for long periods of time, those with ADHD often shift in their seats more often than others, tap their fingers or feet excessively, move about more, needlessly fidget and play with objects nearby.

Although these three symptoms are used to define ADHD, there are other related behaviors. A fourth commonly seen symptom is the inability to follow through on instructions and adhere to rules as well as others of their age. A fifth problem seen in those with ADHD is their inability to produce work at a consistent level of performance – they often show a striking pattern of variability. On some days, at certain times, they seem able to complete their assigned work easily and without the aid of others. At other times, or other days, they finish little, if any, of their work, often requiring that others step in to supervise them more closely. Even then, not much

work may get done. The person with ADHD cannot maintain a consistent pattern of work productivity the way others can. The problem is not that they cannot do the work. It is that they cannot persist at a constant, high level of work productivity as easily as others can. Thus, ADHD is not a chronic deficit in a skill or ability such as a reading disability, language impairment, or physical handicap might be. Instead, it is a problem in regulating behavior over time, especially work-related behavior. ADHD is not a problem of knowing what to do, but of doing what you know. It is a problem of sustaining effort over time and of motivation, not one of skill. However, the problems of motivation or effort are not under the control of the ADHD person. It is a biological problem involving an under-activity in those centers of the brain responsible for sustaining motivation and effort over time.

ADHD individuals seem to do better when things are novel or unfamiliar to them, particularly if the situation is interesting. They also seem to do better if the task or activity they have been asked to do involves a frequent schedule of feedback, or if it involves immediate consequences for getting it done, e.g. Nintendo. ADHD children may appear less inattentive and impulsive during one-to-one encounters. They work more effectively under close supervision and when instructions are repeated frequently.

#### PREVALENCE

ADHD is found in approximately 3-5% of the childhood population, or in one in every 25-30 children, making it one of the most prevalent disorders in children. As 50-65% of the children diagnosed will continue to have the disorder in adulthood, the disorder would seem to be present in about 2-3% of adults, or in one in every 35-50 people. ADHD is seen in all social classes and ethnic groups. ADHD is seen in males more than females.

#### CAUSES OF ADHD

There is little doubt that ADHD has multiple causes. It is primarily biological factors that are most closely associated with and may perhaps be causal of ADHD. So far studies indicate a very strong genetic contribution to ADHD – one that is much greater than the contribution of environmental factors. Everything that is known points to the idea that children with ADHD have less brain activity in the frontal regions, precisely those brain centers known to be involved in behavioral inhibition, persistence of responding, resistance to distraction and controlling one's activity level. The precise cause of this under-activity is not known. We have much more to learn about ADHD and its potential causes. When scientists fully comprehend what causes this disorder, perhaps they will also discover how to cure it.

#### WHAT TO DO

As all parents know, ADHD is a perplexing disorder that can make day-to-day coping a unique challenge. By its very nature it seems to create aversarial relationships between the ADHD child and everyone else. It is possible to make life easier, and a good way to begin is to become informed. Know all you can about the nature of this disorder – what you can and cannot change. While most ADHD children continue to have symptoms of their disorder into adolescence and adulthood, the majority have adjusted to their symptoms and have made a satisfactory adjustment. A thorough evaluation and accurate diagnosis are the stepping stones to successful management of a child's ADHD.

Treating ADHD requires medical, psychological and educational intervention, and behavior management techniques. It requires the coordinated efforts of a team of health professionals, educators and parents. It is important in the ADHD adult diagnostic process to obtain a careful history of childhood, academic, behavioral and vocational problems.

EAP counsellors deal with a wide range of family and parenting issues and can assist by identifying outside resources such as support groups and professionals who are familiar with ADHD. Armed with as much information as you can gather about your local resources, you can choose what you feel is the best course of action for evaluation of your child.

Our EAP counsellors know that many families of ADHD children are under more stress than other families. They are highly skilled and trained to deal with a wide range of family issues. They are empathetic and non-judgmental in their approach to working with people. Should you be struggling with a family problem, no matter how big or small, please contact the EAP for assistance – help is just a phone call away.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

**All contact between you and your counsellor is completely CONFIDENTIAL**

English Service: 1-800-387-4765  
 French Service: 1-800-361-5676  
 General Information: 1-888-814-1328

**WARREN SHEPELL**  
*The EAP Professionals*