

Exaggerated Emotions: How and Why ADHD Triggers Intense Feelings

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TYPICAL ADHD BEHAVIORS

Emotions Rule

Few doctors factor in emotional challenges when making an ADHD diagnosis. In fact, current diagnostic criteria for ADHD include no mention of “problems with emotions.” Yet recent research reveals that those with ADHD have significantly more difficulty with low frustration tolerance, impatience, hot temper, and excitability than a control group.

A Brain Thing

Challenges with emotions start in the brain itself. Sometimes the working memory impairments of ADHD allow a momentary emotion to become too strong, flooding the brain with one intense emotion. At other times, the person with ADHD seems insensitive or unaware of the emotions of others. Brain connectivity networks carrying information related to emotion seem to be somewhat more limited in individuals with ADHD.

Fast Feeling

When an adolescent with ADHD becomes enraged when a parent refuses him use of the car, for example, his extreme response may be due to “flooding” — a momentary emotion that can gobble up all of the space in his head just like a computer virus can gobble up all of the space on a hard drive. This focus on one emotion crowds out other important information that might help him modulate his anger and regulate his behavior.

Extreme Sensitivity to Disapproval

Individuals with ADHD often become quickly immersed in one salient emotion and have problems shifting their focus to other aspects of a situation. Hearing a slight uncertainty in a coworker’s reaction to a suggestion may lead to interpreting this as criticism and an outburst of inappropriate self-defense without having listened carefully to the coworker’s response.

Bottled Up by Fear

Significant social anxiety is a chronic difficulty experienced by more than one third of teens and adults with ADHD. They live almost constantly with exaggerated fears of being seen by others as incompetent, unappealing, or uncool.

Giving In to Avoidance and Denial

Some people with ADHD don’t suffer from a lack of awareness of important emotions but from an inability to tolerate those emotions enough to deal with them effectively. They become caught up in behavior patterns to avoid painful emotions that seem overwhelming — looming deadlines or meeting an unfamiliar group of people.

Carried Away with Emotion

For many people with ADHD, the brain's gating mechanism for regulating emotion does not distinguish between dangerous threats and more minor problems. These individuals are often thrown into panic mode by thoughts or perceptions that do not warrant such a reaction. As a result of the intensity of the thoughts or perceptions, the ADHD brain can't deal more rationally and realistically with events that are stressful.

Sadness and Low Self-Esteem

People with untreated ADHD can suffer from dysthymia — a mild but long-term mood disorder or sadness. It is often brought on by living with the frustrations, failures, negative feedback, and stresses of life due to untreated or inadequately treated ADHD. People who are dysthymic suffer almost every day from diminished energy and self-esteem.

Emotions and Getting Started

Emotions motivate action — action to engage or action to avoid. Many people with untreated ADHD can readily mobilize interest only for activities offering very immediate gratification. They tend to have severe difficulty in activating and sustaining effort for tasks that offer rewards over the longer term.

Brain imaging studies demonstrate that chemicals that activate reward-recognizing circuits in the brain tend to bind on significantly fewer receptor sites in people with ADHD than do those in a comparison group. People with ADHD are less able to anticipate future rewards or pleasure, or register satisfaction with tasks for which the payoff is delayed.