

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Information about ADHD

ADHD is a neurobiological condition that leads to extreme difficulty with attention, concentration, and impulsivity. ADHD can be predominantly an inattentive type, predominantly a hyperactive-impulsive type or both. Individuals with the hyperactive-impulsive type might appear excessively restless or fidgety and have difficulty sitting still. They may also display erratic, unpredictable, inappropriate, or (unintentionally) aggressive behaviour. People without the hyperactive element are extremely easily distracted and will find it exceptionally difficult to stay focused, or have extreme difficulty switching focus, or listen for extended periods of time. Problems with sleep, mood (irritability, mood swings), and relationships can also be a feature for some individuals.

There is a high degree of co-occurrence with specific learning difficulties and Autism Spectrum Disorders, but this is not always identified. Once diagnosed, an individual might be offered medication, but they can also benefit from teaching or behavioural support so they are able to better manage their condition in an educational context.

Implications for study

Students at Oxford have often developed very good coping strategies that allowed them to manage the impact of their condition at school. However, their strong academic abilities and skills might come under pressure once they are at university when the level and pace of work increases substantially, and this can be extremely stressful and undermining to self-confidence and esteem.

Some students with ADHD might also find it hard to cope with the day-to-day domestic tasks and activities associated with independent living, particularly if they have come straight from home and school where they have previously been used to a high level of support.

The impact of the condition will of course vary depending on the nature of the environment and the task, but common areas of difficulty can include:

- maintaining concentration during teaching sessions; difficulty note taking due to inability to concentrate on listening and writing simultaneously, and student subsequently missing important information;
- working under timed conditions due to difficulty sustaining attention;
- reading and writing for prolonged periods and expressing ideas (verbally and in writing) because of frequently losing track of where they are with the task at hand due to high levels of distractibility heightened sensory sensitivity to environmental stimuli;
- group work and relationships - tensions might arise due to poor listening skills and a tendency to speak before fully thinking ideas through, make inappropriate comments, interrupt frequently, dominate conversation, or display restless behaviour;

- punctuality and meeting deadlines resulting from poor organisation and time management
- task completion - tendency to take on too much and have too many things on the go at once; student might rush through activities and so miss out key steps; they might become hyper-focused on one project at the expense of all others.

Guidance for working with students with ADHD

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with ADHD and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

Communication

- Talk to the student about their ADHD. Ask them discreetly about the impact and discuss with them what might be helpful.
- Consider if meeting the student more regularly than might usually be expected is necessary to promote progress; additional individual support to establish priorities for work might be needed given the extra time required for study and difficulties with focus and organisation.
- Use clear frameworks for written work with precise instructions; be prepared to give extra clarification or more structured feedback than you normally might; provide instructions and feedback both verbally and in writing (typed/electronic format), and send a written summary after meetings/discussions with clear action points; be prepared to repeat/rephrase more than might be usual if the student has lost concentration or missed what you have said; be prepared to break tasks/information/instructions down into smaller more manageable chunks or stages.

Environment

- Assess teaching spaces for adequate heat/light etc. and limit background noise where possible (open windows, noisy extractor fans and heating/cooling units) as these things can compound existing concentration problems; allow students to bring in objects to 'fiddle' with discreetly during lectures/tutorials/classes (such as a soft ball, worry beads, blue tack) as this can help maintain concentration.

Planning / Organisation

- Give key course information, deadlines and timetables well in advance.
- Keep timetables as consistent as possible to help provide structure, and give advance notice of any changes (times, venues).

Study

- Standard features of good teaching practice will provide sufficient support for many students with ADHD. In particular: provide an overview of the aims of a teaching session at the start; summarise salient points regularly throughout and again at the end; pause regularly when delivering information verbally so students can catch up and ensure they have enough time to take any necessary notes / copy written information from the board.

- Consider the provision of a more targeted/graded reading list that points to specific resources to ensure the student focuses on the correct information - this can help if individuals are having trouble knowing what to focus on or moving from task to task.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.

- Provision of a specialist tutor to help students develop study strategies which recognize their ADHD but build on individual strengths.
- Provision of examination adjustments such as extra time, a separate room, rest breaks, and use of a computer.
- Permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer or access to lecture capture.
- Provision of reading lists and lecture/teaching materials (includes handouts, notes, PowerPoint slides, and articles for discussion) in advance to allow the student adequate time to prepare in light of their disability.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended loans.

Additional resources

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on disability@admin.ox.ac.uk or telephone 01865 (2)80459, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.
- [ADDiSS](#): the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service.
- [AADD-UK](#): information on University and College issues for students with ADHD.