

How supervisors can support employees with ADHD

When hearing the term “ADHD” (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), does the image of a pencil-tapping third-grader staring out the window while fellow students focus on a math lesson come to mind? While the condition does affect many children, plenty of adults (roughly 2.5%, according to the American Psychiatric Association) struggle too. And as Generation Z—the group roughly defined as born between 1995-2010 —enters the workforce, experts predict adult ADHD will become an even greater concern since 11% already hold that diagnosis.

In recognition of October being ADHD Awareness Month, here’s a look at what managers can do to help employees with ADHD:

Understanding ADHD

Per the American Psychiatric Association, symptoms of ADHD include:

- Inattention (not being able to keep focus)
- Hyperactivity (excess movement that does not align with the setting)
- Impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought)

Many people, including managers, may look at this list and not realize the extent to which these things can cause problems.

After all, don’t we all experience some forgetfulness or get fidgety from time to time?

The difference comes in the severity and ongoing effect on so many aspects of life.

Tia Cantrell, a therapist who treats adults with ADHD and has the condition herself, offers this insight:

“In a nutshell, ADHD is a constant struggle with your executive functioning skills: planning, prioritizing, regulating attention, impulse control, etc. All of the skills that you need, not just as a kid at school, but as an adult in the workplace. That presents quite the challenge! When you are given a list of things that need to be done, struggling to prioritize is a problem. The noise and chaos in the office makes it increasingly difficult for workers with ADHD to focus. Then there’s the battle of planning your task. ADHD brains tend to see a big project as one huge step.”

Success strategies

Obviously, managers hold a vested interest in helping employees with ADHD to thrive.

Leaders must remember, however, that they aren’t health care professionals and should stay away from offering diagnoses or suggesting medication/treatment options.

Rather, managers can make a substantial impact through concrete measures. Some actions hold the added benefit of increasing productivity among the whole staff. A few to consider include:

Limit distractions. Promote the use of noise-cancelling headphones. Station the watercooler (and its talk) away from where people work. Remind everyone to close all computer tabs not in use. Suggest relocation to a quiet conference room as needed for concentration. Favor one-on-one conversations by an employee's desk instead of stopping the person in the hallway.

Recognize the importance of movement. Schedule movement breaks into meetings. Be open to the use of fidget spinners, doodle pads, and other objects that workers feel help them concentrate. Consider offering the option of a standing desk. Encourage people to use the stairs, step outside for some air, or stretch at their desk.

Assist with organization and prioritization. Provide a variety of helpful office supplies (colored folders, post-it notes, white boards, calendars, planners, etc.). Break down projects into smaller, doable chunks. Offer to look over employee to-do lists. Schedule regular check-ins. Post deadlines for stages of projects, not just the final due date. Suggest exploration of task-

management apps and tools until arriving at one that yields results. Confirm understanding after presenting a new topic by asking people to restate or write down what you've told them. Ask about learning styles and how information can be presented for maximum comprehension. Put important information in an email to serve as a point of reference rather than rely solely on workers taking notes at meetings.

The importance of empathy

ADHD affects people differently, so what works for one individual may not work for another. Likewise, realize that employees with ADHD might have difficulty picking up on social cues. Try to assume a faux pas isn't intentional, and do your best to counter awkwardness.

Above all, communicate your willingness to help. Employees may have their own ideas for accommodations but be afraid to express them.

"There's still a lot of stigma around ADHD. There's a significant number of people who consider it to be an excuse for being lazy or irresponsible. This is why, for someone with ADHD, seeking help around challenges can be a challenge itself," says Ana Jovanovic, psychologist and life coach at the health site Parenting Pod.

"Communicating that you find the challenge to be real and legitimate and that you are ready to do what you can to support them can be quite encouraging."