

Leaping over the procrastination trap.

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Individuals who suffer the effects of attention deficit disorder struggle with sustaining the energy needed to consistently focus, attend to details, think ahead, follow through on tasks or instructions, order things sequentially, organize information and personal space, think abstractly, and concentrate on routine tasks. Many form procrastinating habits in response to the fear of failure or because of the need for a surge of adrenaline to marshal intention into action. These students frequently pull all-nighters in order to complete assignments. Without cramming the night before, ADD students often find that they cannot get their brain worked up enough to complete the assignment. Without sufficient stimulation, the brain looks for ways to increase activity—sometimes in the form of negativity, the urge for instant gratification, or adrenaline-producing substances. Students end up feeling discouraged and negative, confusing their ability to perform with their self-worth. Many ADD sufferers self-medicate with mild stimulants like caffeine and/or nicotine to produce the adrenaline they need to start and complete tasks. The downside, of course, is that they decrease the overall blood flow to the brain, making their symptoms worse over time, and reducing the effectiveness of medications.

As a neurobiological condition, ADD is often misunderstood by those who assume that the label is an excuse for inconsistency, laziness, and procrastination, when in fact the ADD brain is inconsistent by nature and cannot perform with equal amounts of energy 100% of the time. It has significant problems with the integration of sensory information, and is, thus, overly attuned to external and internal stimuli. Individuals with ADD are generally distractible because of the inability to discriminate between useful stimuli and those that are irrelevant. Medications can regulate the effects of the condition to some degree; however, triggering the part of the brain that shuts down before it is turned “off” and regulating the environment are key elements to effectively manage ADD and improve academically. ADD individuals need to develop good internal supervision skills—which they innately lack—and a system to reduce procrastination and indecision. Generally, they have more difficulty with auditory, sequential instructions and require time to turn the information into a mental picture. They respond better to whole-to-part (concept to details) learning and need to see the relevance of the information—i.e., understand why they are learning it. ADD students work best in short, intense bursts of activity; therefore, taking breaks and doing assignments in chunks increase focus. They may require more idle time to work their brain into motion. Too much pressure also creates performance anxiety, which sabotages their ability to learn, shutting down the attention centers of their brain.

Since ADD individuals generally have the advantage of seeing things from many perspectives and are creative, critical thinkers, they benefit from developing intuitive systems that work for them. They respond better to the novelty of a task than to repetitive activities, as their brain needs a challenge to stimulate it for focus and concentration. Pictures help them remember better than using lists. They have the ability to hold images of the finished product in their mind’s eye for extended periods of time; therefore, harnessing this skill will help them succeed academically and propel them to enormous success in fields requiring visual-spatial intelligence.

In addition, thinking differently about themselves as achievers rather than accepting the label of slacker, procrastinator, or dummy—words ADD individuals often use to describe themselves—sets the right emotional tone to change attitudes and activity levels. Celebrating small incremental changes and having an air of expectancy instead of failure create the right environment to succeed.

Thus, leaping over the procrastination trap starts with a change in attitude and then a focus on the desired future. Without a mental picture of who they want to become, learners lack the mental energy needed to tackle the tedious aspects of life—be it in school or elsewhere. Once dreams are clear, it is essential that individuals believe in their ability to achieve them. If students set goals and attempt to act upon them before developing a compelling “why” and a strong belief, they are starting backwards—an exercise in frustration and futility. Belief drives behavior. The ageless success pattern—dream-belief-commitment-goal-action—is a critical “tip” that creates lifelong mindful habits. Reversing the thinking process that has created bad habits involves visualizing their cancellation and replacing them with the attitude of “I can,” “I will,” and “the price is worth the prize.” Taking ownership of one’s own learning is the highest form of focus.

Parents and teachers can make a big difference in retraining the difficult behavior of ADD students by noticing and applauding their strengths and their small, incremental improvements. An acceptance of the genuine struggle within the mind of an ADD student and its potential advantages is a critical step in leaping over the procrastination trap and reversing the tide of underachievement.

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