Neurodivergence and Recovery: Considerations for the ADHD brain

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Agenda

• **Objective 1**: develop a sense of the ways that executive functioning is hindered for someone with ADHD
• **Objective 2**: gain an understanding of how PAWS present for individuals in early recovery, and the risk these symptoms pose to their recovery efforts
• **Objective 3**: learn strategies to offer to those in early recovery who may be struggling with PAWS and/or ADHD to better manage their recovery efforts
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Lingo

- Neurodiversity: A word to describe the endless variation in neurocognitive functions among human beings
- Neurotypical: Individual with typical neurological development and functioning
- Neurodivergent: An “umbrella” term for individuals whose brains develop and function differently than the norm. *encompasses other conditions, including mental illness, but will be used here to refer to ADHD
- ADHD: A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning or life’s achievements

Stats

- Approximately 10 million adults have ADHD
- For adults with ADHD, more than 80% have at least one other disorder, more than 50% have two, and more than 33% have at least three other disorders
Stats....

- approximately 15% of adolescents and young adults with ADHD have a comorbid substance use disorder
- 11% of individuals with a SUD also meet criteria for ADHD

(Galan, 2017)

Individuals with ADHD are:

- twice as likely to have ever smoked cigarettes and nearly 3x more likely to become addicted to nicotine
- almost twice more likely to develop an alcohol or cocaine use disorder
- approximately 1.5 x more likely to meet criteria for cannabis use disorder
- more than 2.5x more likely to develop any form of substance use disorder

(Martinez, 2019)
While ADHD is associated with increased risk of SUD...and while stimulant ADHD meds are prone to misuse and diversion....

**ADHD & SUD**

- There is no evidence that stimulant treatment for ADHD increases the subsequent risk of SUD (in adulthood or childhood).
- Use of stimulant medications to treat childhood ADHD neither increases nor protects against the risk of later development of a SUD.

(Galan, 2017)

The lived experience of ADHD

*What is it like?*
“It’s like mind spaghetti where figuring things out feels like untangling yarn.”

“I’ve always felt like a dumb person because the easiest things are the hardest for me.”
“Having ADHD is predictably unpredictable. I never know if my brain will be firing on all cylinders.

“I wish people understood that ADHD isn’t something that needs to be fixed. It doesn’t need to be a goal to perform as a neurotypical, because that’s not actually the brain that I have, much like I can’t change my skin color. I wish people understood that ADHD doesn’t look one way and also exists on a spectrum of support needs and impairments. I wish that people understood that there isn’t a lack of trying on the part of people living with ADHD, or some hidden “harder” trying that we could do.”
"Now that I’ve quit using, I feel like I have ADHD."

PAWS

- Post-acute withdrawal syndrome:
  - Refers to the body’s process of healing as the brain recalibrates after active addiction
  - Symptoms are more of the psychological and emotional aspects of withdrawal (unlike the physical symptoms in the acute phase)
Common symptoms of PAWS

- Foggy thinking/forgetfulness
- Irritability/mood disturbances
- Sleep disturbances (vivid dreams/insomnia)
- Fatigue
- Lack of initiative
- Impaired ability to focus
- Issues with fine motor coordination

Medication considerations...

- Consider significant overlap between ADHD and PAWS/AOD use
- It is recommended that practitioners prioritize the treatment of substance use and then re-evaluate patients for ADHD after a period of prolonged abstinence.

(Galan, 2017)
Behaviors to expect....

- late/missed appointments
- poor follow through on homework/treatment
- memory/retention issues
- high rate of relapse
- rigid/all or nothing thinking
- RSD

Treatment Planning

Areas of Focus:

1. Attention/Focus
2. Time management
3. Organizational systems
4. Managing impulsivity
5. Motivation
6. Decision Making
Attention/Focus

• Sensory Stimulation tools
• Verbal mediation
• Body-Doubling

2. Time management

• Time blindness
• Parkinson’s law
• procrastination
3. Organizational systems

- Object permanence
- Academic/workplace accommodations
- Habit stacking

4. Managing impulsivity

- Self-monitoring
- Mindfulness
5. Motivation

- Dopamine hacks
- Setting rewards

6. Decision Making

- Indecisiveness
- Perfectionism
- Building cognitive flexibility
Strategies to manage time blindness:

- Setting clocks a few minutes fast
- The “10-minute rule”
- Segment manifesting
- Chunking
- Giving fast deadlines (Parkinson’s law)

Creating Systems: some examples

- Meal prep: using a formula
- Cleaning: storing items in the location being used
- Habit stacking: cleaning while brushing your teeth
- Using the washing machine as a laundry basket
**Object Permanence hacks**

- Using clear Tupperware
- Open shelves versus a cabinet
- Medications out on the counter
- Analog clock
- White boards

(Davis, 2022)

**Spoon theory/filler episode days**

“The difference in being sick and being healthy is having to consciously think about things when the rest of the world doesn’t have to.”

“Its hard, the hardest thing I ever had to learn is to slow down, and not do everything.”

(Miserandino, 2003)
Slow breathing Meditation

- People who meditate just 10 minutes a day build gray matter in their prefrontal cortex and after a couple of months their brains look different.

- Slow breathing increases our heart rate variability (helps shift our brain and body from a state of stress to a relaxed self-control mode). A few minutes of this breathing will help you feel calm, in control, and capable of handling your challenges (this technique has been used with dieting, slowing down breathing just prior to looking at dessert).

Accommodations you can do on your own:

- Ask for verbal instructions to be sent to you in an email.
- Wear noise-cancelling headphones.
- When scheduling your workday, allow extra time for meetings.
- Spend time in the AM just answering emails/returning phone calls.
- Take frequent, short breaks during the workday.
More Accommodations

- Go outside and take a walk during breaks
- Break large projects into smaller tasks and assign a due date for each smaller task
- Make sure you receive clear deadlines
- Shut off all notifications from electronic devices
- Use “do not disturb” signs on work spaces

(Sarkis, 2017)

Apps for executive functioning:

1. Habit Nest (https://habitnest.com/
3. Effecto: https://effecto.app/
4. Sensa health: https://sensa.health/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=15848947592&adgroup=13263014952&utm_term=sensa+app&utm_content=&gclid=Cj0KCQiAmaiSbAARIsAKUlQc7HUd7lw4B_oIPRatbObCzCT47D-1AAgy-ELw_wcB
Other Resources

- Focus Mate: body doubling
  www.focusmate.com

ADHD strengths

- Innovative
- Creative
- Seeing the big picture
- Hyperfocus
- Empathic
- “out of the box” thinker
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“I wish others would recognize neurodivergence as part of my human diversity and not overlook my intelligence, great work ethic and skill sets which enable me to make connections that most neurotypicals miss.”

References

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