

Yoga for ADD/ADHD

By

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Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder aren't just for kids. There may be some of you who are reading this who know you've got it and some who are wondering if maybe you would have been diagnosed as a child. People are researching the effects of a regular yoga practice on the symptoms of ADD. (ADHD and ADD will heretofore be referred to as ADD. The hyperactivity part is just one of the symptoms of this problem with maintaining focused, sustained attention and it is usually but not exclusively common to young boys. Girls tend to be dubbed "spacey.") The symptoms of ADD (ADHD) are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders as meeting six or more of either 1) Inattention or 2) Hyperactivity/Impulsivity Symptoms and must have persisted for at least 6 months to a degree that is maladaptive and inconsistent with an individual's developmental level.

1. Inattention

- often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in homework, work, or other activities
- often has difficulties sustaining attention in tasks or play activities
- often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly
- often does not follow through instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (not due to oppositional behavior or failure to understand instructions)
- often has difficulties organizing tasks and activities
- often avoids, dislikes or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental efforts
- often loses things necessary for tasks or activities (toys, school assignments, work materials, planners)
- is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli
- is often forgetful in daily activities

2. Hyperactivity/Impulsivity

Hyperactivity

- often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat
- often leaves seat in classroom or in other situations in which remaining seated is expected
- often runs about or climbs excessively in situations in which it is inappropriate for children (in adolescents or adults, may be limited to subjective feelings of restlessness)
- often has difficulty playing or engaging in leisure activities quietly
- is often "on the go" or often acts as if "driven by a motor"
- often talks excessively

Impulsivity

- often blurts out answers before questions have been completed
- often has difficulty awaiting turn
- often interrupts or intrudes on others (butts into conversations or games)

There is a particular area of the brain that controls the above symptoms and it is the prefrontal cortex. A PET scan reveals decreased activity in this area. The prefrontal lobes do not light up as much as a normal brain on this scan. Interestingly, as intuitive human beings, we decided that we are “adults” at age 21. That just happens to be when the prefrontal lobes have finally matured. Actually it is closer to 24 in males. That is why when you look back on the years before 21, you wonder how you could have made some of those stupid decisions and assumptions. Some of you may wonder how you actually survived intact. Well, you just weren’t working with a full deck yet. That’s why children need parents through those years when they think they know everything, sometimes to literally keep them alive. Having birthed three children in four years, there were a lot of teens around the house for a decade. There was a sign on the refrigerator that said, “Quick! Leave home now while you still know everything!” It was a great diffuser. Children and teens with ADD act on their half baked ideas and may actually seek out dangerous activities.

Things are interesting to us when we can give them our undivided attention. Even watching ants take food twice their size across a sidewalk can be fascinating to someone who can stay with the ant’s feat. People with ADD don’t find much in life interesting because they just can’t stay with it. However, if what they are doing is thrill-seeking and dangerous, the ability to focus is forced by the instinct to stay alive. Sensation seeking becomes a way of life for many boys who have ADD because finally they can focus on something. What we focus on, to the exclusion of everything else, we enjoy.

Pharmacological interventions, when they are right for an individual, can work like flippin’ magic. Being in a position where I can discuss the effects of medication with children, I do every chance I get. Comments like, “It is like the teacher is talking just to ME!” and “I am a new Jeremy!” attest to the increase in self esteem that some children have. The effects of medication range from instantaneous to the time it takes to get the right dose and type of medication. Sometimes meds don’t work because ADD isn’t the root problem. Most adults who have a psychiatric diagnosis also had problems focusing attention when young. We are pretty complicated beings. Medication can be extremely helpful for ADD. However, it is most helpful when it is part of a comprehensive behavioral plan that can foster life-long skills. Yoga is an extremely valuable life-long practice that fosters the development of the entire physical body, the higher mental functions (to include the prefrontal cortex), as well as the spiritual body.

The effects of a regular yoga practice on ADD/ADHD are not immediate like pharmacological interventions. However, they are profound and can stay with an individual forever, unlike a dose of medication that wears off. Dr. Cantwell, past director of the UCLA Child Psychiatry department described the life of an ADHD youngster as a “headlong rush into life.” Accidents and poor decisions sometimes cause serious consequences. Some such children don’t have a sense of where their bodies are in space and they suffer bodily injury far more often than the average child.

The phenomenon of knowing where your body is in space is called proprioception. It is a feedback mechanism that keeps us safe and functioning efficiently. Yoga is an awesome way to learn proprioception because the asanas are performed with awareness and there is ample time for feedback from both the teacher and the student. For example, when teaching a child to stand like a mountain, a teacher would say, “Now look down at your feet. Are they standing just the same? Now look up at your arms. Are they reaching up just the same?” Amazingly, some children have no idea where they are in space and surprise themselves at how much adjustment they need to make.

When the whole body is involved in learning, brain function is enhanced by the integration that is coming in from the senses. Bilateral stimulation of the two sides of the brain with a prescribed flow of activity, such as a Sun Salutation, helps brain integration and makes the brain more efficient for learning. The yoga class itself is constituted by a prescribed ritual that is comforting for scattered minds. A class for these children perhaps begins with arranging your mat space, sitting on the mat, and preparing for the opening breathing practice, a Peace Breath. Peace Breath is a series of a full breath in, coordinated with the raising arms, and a slow out breath as the arms come down, palm to palm to the center of the body. The teacher suggests to the children that they bring all their attention and energy into the body as the hands come together. Next they might “pick grapes.” From their seated position, the hands reach up but this time cross the midline of the body as they reach up and over. Crossing the midline of the body enhances brain integration also and helps with balance.

Balancing postures are many. The children learn to balance on one foot, on their hands, and on their heads in a variety of ways. All balance postures require a focused mind. The children learn to first attend to alignment and a visual focus before moving into the balance posture. They learn the effect that talking, laughter and looking at someone else has on balance because they quickly lose it. They get instant feedback from their bodies. They know the mind affects the body.

And because their minds are distractible, they seem to entertain multiple thoughts at once, or at least very few to a conclusion. Video games and television programs are enjoyable to these distractible minds because the field changes so very quickly. The next time you watch TV, count the number of seconds before the picture changes. Dr. Cantwell cautioned parents to severely limit video game and TV time because it reinforces the ADD symptoms. In yoga class, the children learn to be aware of the thoughts of the mind field and learn that they can choose to give their attention to the ones that are useful at the time. They learn that they do not have to continue to think a thought that is not useful or that can get them in trouble. This fosters the development of the executive center of the brain.