

Attention Deficit Disorder is an Explanation, Not an Excuse

Myles L. Cooley Ph.D. ABPP

I have just read yet another cynical commentary about Attention Deficit Disorder. Newspaper columnist, Kathleen Parker (1997) claims that "children have learned how to justify bad behavior and lousy grades. They can't help it; it's ADHD...the excuse *du jour*." Tucked away in the middle of Parker's column is the acknowledgment that "some children truly do suffer from ADHD." This admission almost sounds like an afterthought. Emphasizing the legitimacy and consequences of the disorder was clearly not the intent of this author.

In the past few years, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and every other major weekly TV news-magazine have featured stories questioning the legitimacy of ADHD and the safety of the medications used to treat it, and, more recently, a major university has attempted to require reevaluations of students with ADHD and learning disabilities. There are increasing reports of denials of services to these students. Should this reaction surprise us when Parker proclaims that "college students have elevated the ADHD excuse to an art form. Nobody's dog eats the homework anymore. ADHD did it." As a psychologist who treats both ADHD youngsters and adults and struggles with the parents and spouses who live with them, I am increasingly dismayed at society's growing backlash regarding this disorder.

There is probably some skepticism that is justified. ADHD is probably overdiagnosed by some practitioners. There is also evidence that stimulants are being abused by some high school and college students. This is only part of the picture, though. ADHD is grossly under-identified in minority populations and in children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Most stimulant abuse occurs among the non-ADHD population. Do we throw the baby out with the bathwater?

One would think that the neurobiological evidence for ADHD would be sufficient to counter the cynics. However, maybe the problem is not with the evidence, but in how this evidence is being used. Perhaps the brain-based explanation for the disorder has been misconstrued by some ADHD individuals and their families, as well as by others, as an excuse for certain behaviors. There is little doubt that society is fed up with the mentality that abdicates personal responsibility, and there is little tolerance for those who would blame ADHD on their biology.

Clearly, the neurobiological evidence for ADHD was never meant to be an excuse for behavior. The evidence was intended to help understand, explain, and treat the disorder effectively. It appears that those of us who treat, raise and teach children with ADHD must work hard to emphasize that ADHD *explains*, not *excuses* behavior.

The way ADHD is explained is critical. When I explain ADHD to an individual I have just diagnosed, I describe (in age-appropriate language) how all human beings look, think, and behave differently. Then I point out how people differ specifically in their abilities to pay attention, concentrate, remember, sit still, obey rules, etc. We discuss some of the particular difficulties this person experiences. I emphasize that I understand the person would like not to have these difficulties, but it is difficult for the person to *not* behave in these ways.

Next, I point out that people make many different choices when they run into something that is difficult. Some people say, "I can't do this because it's too hard." The person I've just diagnosed could say, "I *can't* behave differently because I have ADHD." The problem is, I tell the person, this is an excuse, a cop-out. Furthermore, it's a lie.

I go on to tell the patient, "It is simply not true that you can't do something because you have ADHD. You can do anything or be anybody you want to be. It may be more difficult. You may have to work harder than other people at certain things. It's no different than building a stronger body or getting better at a sport. You have to work hard lifting weights or practicing your sport or a musical instrument." Taking on the responsibility of accomplishing something that is difficult is the challenge we must emphasize to individuals and families with ADHD.

Then there is the issue of medication. Some parents are concerned that if they choose medication as a treatment for their child, the child will attribute too much responsibility for his behavior to the pill. Again, the explanation that is offered to a child is critical in how the child views the role of medication. I explain to the parents and child that medication may help the child behave the way she wants to, but a pill does not make decisions about how to behave. People make choices, not pills.

Finally, we must clarify for educators that ADHD does not excuse a student's behavior. Teachers and administrators are objecting to what they perceive as parents' demands for different or lower standards for ADHD students. Different or lower standards should never be requested. This would be an implicit admission that ADHD students are not capable of attaining the same standards and goals as other students. Parents must be careful to avoid using the term "cannot" when referring to an ADHD child's behavior. Teachers may interpret this as excusing behavior that justifies lower standards because of ADHD. If parents make sure to clarify that ADHD *explains*, not *excuses* why their child has a harder time with certain behaviors, accommodations that

enable and facilitate the attainment of the *same* standards become the logical outcome instead of lower standards.

Certainly, mental health practitioners, physicians, as well as parents and teachers of ADHD individuals have no doubts about the legitimacy of the disorder and the efficacy of medication as one intervention. These are the very people, however, who must take increased responsibility for accurately understanding and

then disseminating information about the disorder.

Again, ADHD can explain but should not excuse behavior. Medication facilitates behavior change but it is not responsible for the choices people make. Educational accommodations are meant to facilitate a means to an end, they are not intended to modify standards. Deviations from these assumptions that would imply a lessened degree of responsibility for ADHD in-

dividuals threatens to further undermine the precarious tolerance society currently affords these people.

Myles Cooley, Ph.D., is a private practitioner in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

REFERENCES

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