

TYPICAL ADHD BEHAVIORS

Fight, Flight, Freeze... or Fib?

What if your child's lying is not evidence of a character flaw or disrespect? What if his fibs are actually a self-preservation strategy rooted in poor inhibition, emotional regulation, working memory, and attention — all hallmarks of ADHD? This is the premise behind a new theory that is giving caregivers and educators a new, neurological lens through which to view lies.

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As the human brain has evolved, it has developed a self-protective mechanism designed to ensure survival in times of extreme danger or stress. Faced with a threat, the brain must react in a split second; deciding how to best protect itself is an instantaneous reaction. This is widely referred to as the “Fight or Flight” response¹.

More recently, the field of psychology has added “freeze” as a significant and common behavioral response². In the event of a harmful attack, this may mean playing dead while literally petrified with fear.

Today, psychologists are beginning to observe and document a fourth “F” that manifests in times of real or perceived danger for children, adolescents, and even adults with attention deficit disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)): “fib.”

The [Limbic region of the brain](#) processes an immense variety of information from myriad sources. It senses the presence of danger, assesses threats, and activates defense. These Limbic structures are ready to respond to threat. By activating the sympathetic nervous system, which is in contact with the brainstem or cerebellum, a person is “chemically fueled” by the provision of adrenaline being released into the body. This adrenaline, in turn, triggers the decision to Fight (attack and defend) or Flight (to flee) or Freeze (play dead). Meanwhile, the body is flooded with the stress hormone cortisol.

As neuroscience research itself continues to evolve, it appears to support these [observed behaviors related to stress](#). However, neuroscience also encourages us to study the development of the neocortex (the outermost layer of the brain), which is an additional avenue for processing thoughts and a new line of self-defense achieved through language. With complex and advanced language (not available to our primitive ancestors), we have the ability to verbalize both factual and/or fictitious reasoning instantaneously at point of performance, most notably in times of stress and threat.

[Self-Test: [Oppositional Defiant Disorder in Children](#)]

As you know, ADHD is a condition of [impaired or challenged executive function](#). Having coached many individuals (some with a diagnosis of ADHD, but all with a challenge of executive function), we have observed this Fib mechanism as a powerful response.

The Fib mechanism protects its maker in a number of ways:

1. Protection (temporary) from the feeling of having disappointed someone, such as a parent, teacher, coach, or mentor. Fibbing often follows poor academic outcomes, incomplete assignments or projects, and missed appointments or classes.
2. Deflection (temporary) of parental/ significant other anger and the anticipated consequence.
3. Extension: This may be caused by a desire to “buy some time” in the momentary absence of information, or information that is not acceptable to the person that is perceived as a threat. This provides the maker with an extension of available processing or thinking time. The consequence of the fib is not planned for.
4. Self-preservation: Preserving self-esteem and self-efficacy; perceived reduced self-esteem of a “failure” due to an ADHD related behavior that ended in a negative consequence, leading to shame and embarrassment.

[Free Checklist: Common Executive Function Challenges — and Solutions]

Often, a “fib” or “fabrication” does allow an individual to avert a present danger or threat, at least for the time being. The escape from fear, embarrassment, judgment, guilt, or shame provides a brief but powerful sense of reward (or escape/victory). This is evidenced when an individual lies to lessen the intensity of an inquisition about work completion. He is able to gain relief from what seems like a barrage of questions, while justifying possible completion scenarios in their own mind. “Oh, I’m nearly finished with the essay. I’ve only the quotes to add, but I have the quotes in my notes.” The reality is far different.

What’s more, an individual may lie to him or herself to avoid the fear of the perceived threat of their current situation. An example of this might be delaying a complicated or unpleasant task in order to undertake something more enjoyable.

Examining four key elements of executive functioning (adapted from [Russell Barkley, Ph.D.](#)³) and the associated challenges faced by those with ADHD, we can understand how this self-fibbing happens easily and readily:

1. Weak Inhibition: The inability to stop an action — in this case, the verbal or physical communication — when under pressure for an answer.

2. **Poor Emotional Regulation:** Overwhelming fear in the face of the stressful situation.
3. **Faulty Working Memory:** Planning for the future consequence of potentially being “found out” in the heat of the current moment does not happen. By not accessing the information of “the relief of now” in contrast to the later unpleasant outcome, the working memory weakness is evident. Also, the inability of “self-talk” to self-soothe and plan a logical way forward.
4. **Inconsistent Attention Regulation:** This may be implicated if the subject had succumbed to a dire situation from ineffective regulation of attention or was distracted, causing their inability to achieve success.

So what can we do as parents, coaches, teachers, mentors, or healthcare professionals to identify, support, and alleviate the impact of this stressful situation and the maladaptive fibbing strategy/habit that follows?

1. Use **metacognitive** or Socratic questioning techniques, encouraging awareness of the Fib response, and supporting the individual in changing the identified response at the point of performance.
2. Assist the individual with creating a “space for time” in order to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed.
3. Create extra, or intermittent accountability opportunities to ensure effective self-monitoring and evaluation.
4. Encourage the individual to seek assistance or input from others, such as an accountability partner, early in a problem-solving situation.
5. Implement a perspective of curiosity in place of judgment. Use open-ended questioning to uncover the fear component of a situation. “Is there something you are worried about?”

The evolving and adaptable human brain has undergone significant expansion and modification over millennia as we progress and face new threats to our survival. With the advancement of complex brain

regions and neural networks, we are able to access a more complex, self-preserving response beyond Fight, Flight, or Freeze.

The Fib or Fabrication response (while not solely the domain of people with ADHD) is a less successful self-preservation strategy, but that doesn't make it any less popular. When ADHD is in the mix, challenges with inhibition, emotional regulation (and motivation), attention management, and working memory almost certainly contribute to this phenomenon.

Still, taking a psychological approach may provide an opportunity for caregivers and educators to identify fibbing as a neurological response and one sign of a fractured self-esteem, *not* as a character flaw.

[Read This: How to Stop Anxiety and Panic Triggers]

Footnotes

¹Oltmanns, T. and Emery, R. *Abnormal Psychology, Eighth Edition*. (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2015), 231.

²Lissy, F. Jarvik, MD, PhD. and Russell, Dan, MA. "Anxiety, Aging, and the Third Emergency Reaction," *Journal of Gerontology*. Volume 34, March 1, 1979.

³Barkley, R. *Taking Charge of Adult ADHD*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 7-12.

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