

What Inattentive ADHD Really Looks Like

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about inattentive ADHD is how frightfully easy it is to miss — and misdiagnose — in both children and adults. This can lead to a lifetime of disappointment, battered self-esteem, and shame. Which is why learning the signs and symptoms is so important.

by the ADDitude Editors

The Inattentive ADHD Problem

Children with hyperactive ADHD symptoms are difficult to ignore. The ones bouncing out of their chairs or clowning behind the teacher's back are the first to be evaluated for and diagnosed with ADHD.

Meanwhile, the students with inattentive ADHD (predominantly girls) are quietly staring out the window at a bird while their work lays unfinished. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, their symptoms are far less likely to be recognized by parents, teachers, and medical professionals, and they rarely get the treatment they need. This leads to academic frustration, apathy, and undue shame that can last a lifetime. This is a big problem.

The 3 Presentations of ADHD

The stereotypical ADHD patient is a 9-year-old boy who loves to jump off dangerously high things and never remembers to raise his hand in class. In reality, only a fraction of people with ADHD fits this description. Here are the three distinct presentations of ADHD:

1. Predominantly Hyperactive/Impulsive – see above
2. Predominantly Inattentive – lack of focus and attention are the primary symptoms, not hyperactivity
3. Combined – when inattention and impulsivity go hand-in-hand

How Inattentive ADHD Is Diagnosed

The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual for ADHD, the DSM-V, lists nine symptoms of inattentive ADHD. At least six of these must be present and must significantly disrupt a patient's life in order to merit a diagnosis.

- Often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes
- Often has difficulty sustaining attention
- Often does not seem to listen when spoken to
- Often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish projects
- Often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities
- Often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Often loses things necessary for tasks or activities
- Is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli
- Is often forgetful in daily activities

In adults, these symptoms are easily mistaken for anxiety or depression. In children, learning disabilities are often suspected before ADHD.

Symptom 1: Careless Mistakes

A child with inattentive ADHD may rush through a quiz, missing questions he knows the answers to or skipping whole sections in his haste. An adult may fail to carefully proofread a document or email at work, drawing unwanted attention and embarrassment. If you tell yourself to slow down and pay attention, but find it mentally painful and physically uncomfortable to do so, this may be a sign of inattentive ADHD. Your brain is aching to jump to the next thing, and ultimately you just have to give in.

Symptom 2: Short Attention Span

Unfinished classwork, half-done art projects, and incomplete reading assignments are all hallmark signs of attention problems in students. Adults with inattentive ADHD despise boring work meetings 10 times more than their colleagues, and need to be chewing gum, sipping coffee, or even standing during meetings in order to sustain their attention throughout. If you are consistently frustrated by your inability to make it through long documents, stay focused during meetings, and see projects through to completion, that could be a sign.

Symptom 3: Poor Listening Skills

Students with inattentive ADHD typically get about half the instructions relayed to them verbally — if that. Their notebooks are filled with more doodles than notes, and they may need to record and listen back to lectures several times to absorb all of the information. Adults don't do well at cocktail parties. They interrupt others' stories with their own anecdotes, never remember names, and zone out about halfway through every conversation. If you're constantly being asked, "Weren't you listening?" or "Why am I wasting my breath?" that could be a sign of inattentive ADHD.

Symptom 4: No Follow-Through

For children and adults alike, inattentive ADHD can manifest as a million small projects — started but never finished — laying around the house in states of disarray. The vegetable garden that got planted but never watered. The new organization system that was assembled but never used. The abandoned sheet music for the piano lessons started and then ditched after a few tough months. If you love to plan and start projects but get sidetracked and leave a trail of unfulfilled promises in your wake, that could be a sign of inattentive ADHD.

Symptom 5: Disorganization

Lost your phone again? Your keys? That report that's due tomorrow? Since we're often thinking about something else when we're putting down important things, inattentive adults are prone to the worst of ADHD's hallmark disorganizational symptoms. Our homes, cars, and workspaces often look like a tornado just hit them — which can fill inattentive adults with a crippling amount of shame when they compare them to others'.

Symptom 6: "Laziness" or "Apathy"

"He could pay attention if he tried." "She's just not dedicated — that's why she misses so many deadlines." Unfortunately, inattentive symptoms sometimes make us look lazy or uncaring, especially if the ADHD is undiagnosed or hasn't been disclosed. Without treatment, we're prone to losing jobs and friends — or even developing a hard and bitter persona as a defense mechanism. If everyone's pinned you as lazy your whole life, it's easy to start to see yourself that way, too.

Symptom 7: Bermuda Triangle Syndrome

Everyone misplaces their car keys or cell phone from time to time. People with inattentive ADHD trade stories about finding their glasses in the freezer, and the frozen peas in their purse. They tend to misplace the essential things they need for living — keys, wallet, backpack, sports equipment — on a daily basis. If you have found that you need a "launch pad" near the door to ensure you don't forget your cell phone, and couldn't live without the locator device attached to your key ring, that could be a sign.

Symptom 8: Distractibility

Inattentive ADHD adults are dreamers, doodling on their notes during a big meeting or studying a fly on the wall while their spouses are asking about bills. Often nicknamed “space cadets” or written off as flaky, many people misinterpret inattentive ADHDer’s lack of focus as lack of interest — and can get frustrated by their inability to pay attention, especially when it’s important that they do so.

Symptom 9: Forgetfulness

How many times have you missed a scheduled doctor or dentist appointment in the last year? Inadvertently stood up friends for lunch? Joined a conference call 20 minutes late because you forgot all about it? These are all common occurrences for adults with inattentive ADHD, who struggle to pay bills on time, return friends’ messages, and send out birthday cards on time. This may be perceived as rudeness or laziness, but this behavior is rarely done on purpose.

Getting Treatment

Since inattentive ADHD is often missed, it can languish for years without treatment. But treatment is critical, no matter the stage of life. Medication can be a lifesaver for some, tackling underlying attention issues while you work on coping strategies. For individuals who can’t — or choose not to — take ADHD medications, there are a plethora of other treatment options available.

Put Me In, Coach

Coaching that targets better organization and memory is particularly helpful for adults with inattentive ADHD. Depending on her expertise, an ADHD coach can help with everything from financial planning to social skills — two common problem areas. Coaches can be expensive, and they’re not for everyone. In the long run, however, it’s important to consider how much a coach can save you in late fees, spoiled food, and other hidden costs of living with inattentive ADHD.

Tricks Just for Inattentive Types

Becca Colao, an inattentive adult, recommends these strategies for living better with ADHD:

- *Set a timer* to get yourself going on a boring task.
- *Put on high-energy music* to rev yourself up before a long meeting, difficult chore, or anything else that tends to let your mind wander.
- *Hire a friend* to check in on you periodically during a big project. If you’re off task, they can nudge you back to work.
- *Change up the view*. When you find yourself getting distracted, move to a different location — outside, or maybe a coffee shop down the block. Moving locations can “reset” your brain when you get bored.

Overcoming Self-Doubt

Inattentive ADHDers don’t always have a name for what they’re dealing with — and face far too many snide remarks about being “lazy,” “flaky,” or even “stupid.” Because of this, inattentive types often struggle with low self-esteem. Even after diagnosis, lingering doubt remains. It’s important for you to face these feelings head-on and get help, whether it’s from a therapist, your spouse, or a close friend. ADHD alone doesn’t make you lazy or flaky, and with proper treatment and self-acceptance, you can learn to recognize your strengths and accomplishments.