

Assessing Adults With ADHD and Comorbidities

Approximately 4.4% of US adults have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).¹ Yet, this condition remains underdiagnosed as only 10.9% of adults with ADHD receive treatment.¹ To complicate diagnosis, adults with ADHD often have comorbid psychiatric disorders, which may mask the symptoms of ADHD.

ADHD Diagnostic Criteria

Although ADHD is a developmental disorder, up to 85% of children with ADHD are at risk for having the disorder as adults.¹ The current diagnostic criteria² for ADHD were developed for children, and modifications are necessary to address the progression of the disorder into adulthood.³ For example, unlike in children, gross motor hyperactivity is relatively rare in adults. Adults with ADHD more often exhibit symptoms of impulsivity, inattention, and/or executive dysregulation, such as high distractibility, impulsive decision making, poor time management, difficulty following directions, working memory problems, excessive speeding while driving, difficulty engaging quietly in leisure activities, and poor follow-through.

Assessment of Adult ADHD

When assessing adults for ADHD, the following recommendations may be helpful: (1) obtain patients' self-report on current functioning (using only 4 of the DSM-IV-TR criteria) as well as functioning before 16 years of age, (2) obtain corroboration of symptoms and evidence of impairment in several major life activities, (3) obtain evidence of a chronic course of illness without periods of remission, (4) define impairment relative to the average person, (5) explain impairment that developed after 16 years of age, (6) use rating scales for adult ADHD, and (7) rule out a low IQ, learning disabilities, and other co-occurring disorders. Comorbid disorders are common in ADHD and can make accurate diagnosis difficult.^{3,4}

Adult ADHD and Comorbidities

Many adults with ADHD also have co-occurring psychiatric disorders, including anxiety (47%), mood (38%), impulse control (20%), and substance use disorders (SUD, 15%).¹ Symptoms of ADHD can be concealed by more robust symptoms of these

co-occurring conditions. Conversely, comorbid anxiety and learning disorders can be obscured by more obvious ADHD symptoms.

Some comorbid disorders may be a direct reflection of the impact of ADHD symptoms; for example, poor academic achievement owing to ADHD may lead to anxiety. Additionally, other frequently co-occurring conditions, such as depression, share common environmental risk factors with ADHD.⁵

Comorbidities may differ in frequency between adults and children with ADHD. Adults with ADHD are more likely than children to have one or more anxiety disorders, SUD, personality disorder, and social phobia, but children are more likely to have comorbid oppositional disorder and separation anxiety.⁶

Adults with undiagnosed ADHD and comorbidities are likely to seek treatment because of problems associated with a co-occurring disorder, not because of ADHD symptoms. Further, the presence of comorbid psychiatric conditions can affect the presentation and course of ADHD and may require treatment independent from that of ADHD. Therefore, clinicians should screen patients with ADHD for other DSM-IV disorders as well as assess patients with other DSM-IV disorders for ADHD.

Take-Home Points

Adults with ADHD often present with different impairments than children with the disorder. Accurately assessing adults for ADHD requires using different criteria than are currently available. Additionally, comorbid psychiatric disorders may complicate the clinical presentation of ADHD. Thus, clinicians should thoroughly screen adults for ADHD as well as for mood, anxiety, substance use, personality, and impulse control disorders to begin to comprehensively address all conditions and improve patients' overall outcomes.

Disclosure of off-label usage: Dr. Barkley has determined that, to the best of his knowledge, no investigational information about pharmaceutical agents that is outside US Food and Drug Administration–approved labeling has been presented in this activity.

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