

SURVIVAL TIPS

for the World of Work

by Frances Prevatt, PhD

FOR ADULTS WITH ADHD,

the world of work can be especially frustrating due to the symptoms of the disorder.

How do inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity impair your job functioning?

Here are some examples of behaviors that you might encounter.



If you experience **inattentiveness**, you might:

- have a cluttered desk and misplaced paperwork
- have difficulty getting to work on time
- not listen to directions and then get in trouble for doing things incorrectly
- have a hard time finishing tasks even though you work as long as your co-workers
- have trouble prioritizing or organizing your job duties



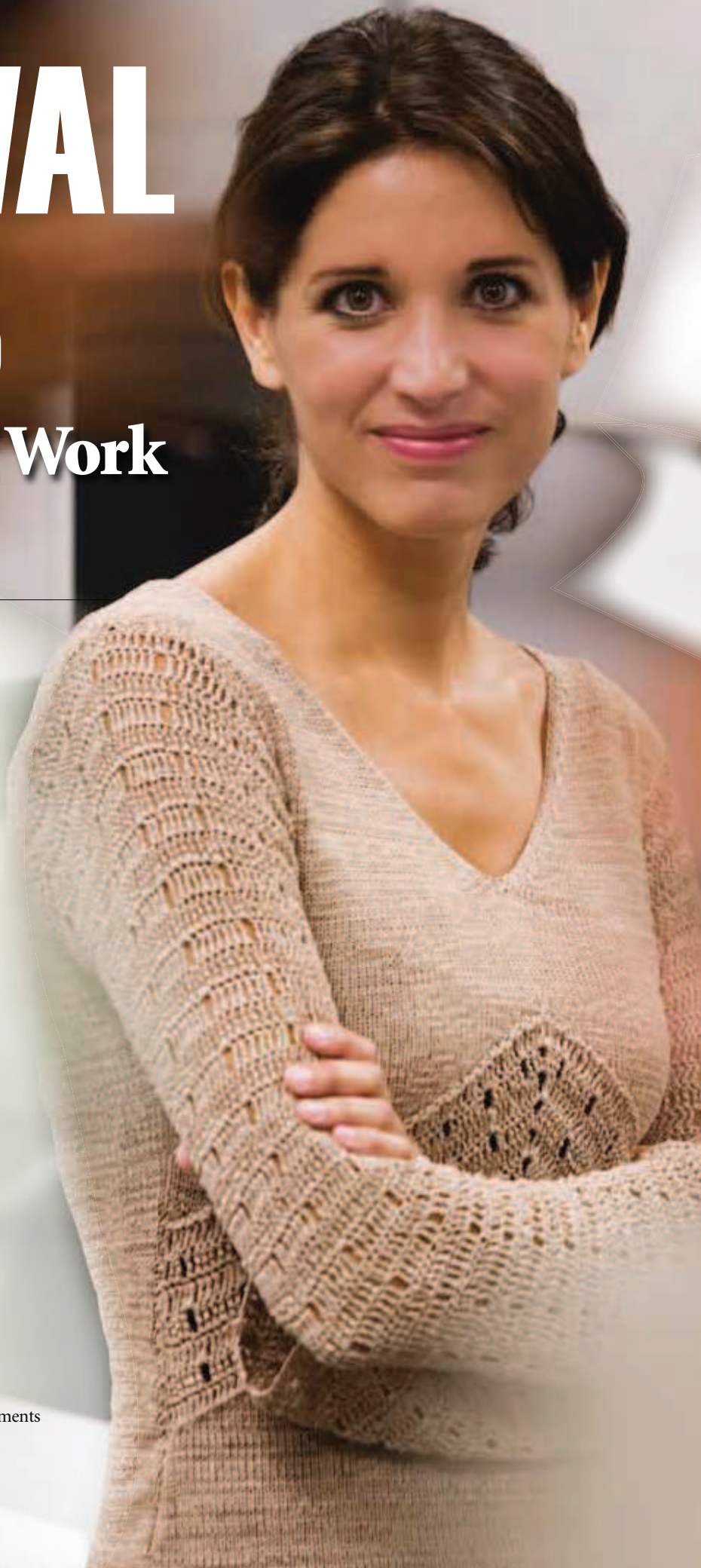
With regard to symptoms of **hyperactivity**, you may notice that you:

- have a really hard time sitting through meetings
- miss quite a bit of information in meetings as you squirm, fidget, play with a paper clip, or need to go out for a break.



Finally, if you struggle with **impulsivity**, you might:

- interrupt your boss or co-workers before they've finished telling you something
- take on new tasks or volunteer for an assignment quite enthusiastically, but then have difficulty with follow-through
- have a reputation for temper outbursts or angry comments
- have had a blow-up with your boss that got you fired



What the research says

Some studies show that adults with ADHD tend to earn less, are promoted less frequently, and are less likely to become senior managers or have similar positions of authority. Adults with ADHD report more conflict with their supervisor and are more likely to receive disciplinary actions and negative performance evaluations. They are more likely to hold down only a part-time job, and to be fired from the job that they do hold. They are also more likely to switch jobs voluntarily, both due to their dissatisfaction in their present position and their need for change and new challenges. As a result, adult workers with ADHD generally report more career dissatisfaction, confusion, anxiety, and conflict regarding their employment.

There has been some controversy regarding the performance of adults with high IQ or high overall ability. Some people believe that if you are

ally successful, that means you can't possibly have ADHD. However, there are many instances of adults who do very well in high school and college, manage to cope with many of their symptoms, yet still have difficulty in their career. For example, someone may complete all the coursework for a PhD degree, yet be unable to finish a dissertation. Another adult might be able to complete law school coursework, but lack the ability to study for and pass the bar exam. Very successful adults may still have a diagnosis of ADHD, and may cope with their symptoms in some but not all situations.

A related enigma has to do with the fact that ADHD symptoms may not seem to emerge until you reach a certain level of success. For example, you may do quite well in a job with low stress and fairly circumscribed job duties. However, a promotion to a higher level might require managerial and organizational skills, increased stress, and added job duties. At this

Tips for Improving Work Performance

1 Use a daily planner that also has a long-term (week or month) view. Highlight important dates, meetings, and deadlines. Supplement with reminders on a whiteboard, in your phone, or other system that works for you.

2 Develop a system to accommodate your restlessness. Build in physical activity all day long, such as taking the stairs, short exercise breaks in your office, walks to the copy room, or volunteering to do minor errands. Try to leave the office during lunch.

3 Develop a system to accommodate your boredom. Reward yourself on a set schedule (at least once an hour) with something enjoyable (read a novel, surf the internet, have a snack, do some exercise, make a phone call).

4 Develop a system for prioritizing your day. (Rate your tasks A, B, C; list them in order, or give them stars). Stick to this priority list. Repeat this daily.

5 Consider using a set time each day to open mail, answer email, or complete other tasks that tend to distract you.

6 Break your larger tasks into smaller units, preferably things that can be accomplished in less than an hour. It will help you to be able to mark these off as you accomplish them, rather than feel overwhelmed by a job that takes several days to complete.

7 When you are distracted by something that pops into your head, write it down, but resist the urge to do it right away. Wait until you have finished the task you're working on.

8 Develop a system for organizing your space. Have a place for everything (papers, pens, books, work-to-do, completed work). Use labels, files, or baskets. Always put things in its place as soon as possible. Learn to throw things away.

9 Stay focused in meetings by taking notes and asking questions. Bring a small object to manipulate in your hands to help with your need to fidget.



10 Use a phone or clock or timer to ring an alarm five minutes before you need to be somewhere.

11 Use some of the functions on your new smartphone, such as an electronic calendar or a system that rings or notifies you of appointments or deadlines.

12 Always carry a small notebook for reminders. Transfer these to your scheduler as soon as possible.

13 When having conversations, try to repeat back or paraphrase what is being said. This helps you focus, helps you remember, and lets the other person know you are interested and paying attention.

14 Ask your boss or colleagues to put requests in writing. Make sure you understand what is to be done, and the due date.

15 Create self-imposed deadlines for tasks. Many adults with ADHD report that they are motivated by deadlines and tend to procrastinate unless they have a specific time constraint.

16 Take time at the end of each day to straighten, file, and organize. It's much easier to get started the next day if you come in to an organized office.

17 Try to incorporate daily exercise, meditation, relaxation or deep breathing into your routine.

level of functioning, you might find that your limits of productivity have been met, and you may not be able to handle the increased responsibilities of the job.

The emotional problems that often accompany ADHD can be a distinct area of difficulty for adult workers. You might have some symptoms of depression and anxiety, or a tendency to be angry and perhaps aggressive. Sometimes these symptoms can be a reaction to years of frustration, poor performance in school, and constant negative feedback or criticism. Research shows that if you have a diagnosis of ADHD, there is a higher than normal chance that you will also have a diagnosis of an additional psychological disorder. The added stress of dealing with emotional symptoms can make work performance and interacting with co-workers and supervisors more complicated.

Overcoming distractibility and lack of focus

If you have a diagnosis of ADHD, it is probably difficult for you to put in an eight-hour day while maintaining maximum concentration. It may be hard for you to do this for even thirty minutes. Fortunately, there are numerous coping strategies to help you focus.

A good place to start is making your physical environment less distracting. Consider your work space. Are there ways you can reduce noise and traffic flow? You might have a private office, a cubicle, or work on your feet most of the day. Regardless of your circumstances, spend some time evaluating your environment, and work with your supervisor to make any structural changes you can to your physical space.

If physical changes are not possible, can you vary your work hours so that you can come in early or work late, when other people are not around? A white noise machine is fairly inexpensive, and can block out a good deal of noise when it's not possible to change your physical setting.

Next, consider the types of things that distract you:

- people interrupting you with questions specifically for you
- people interrupting you with non-essential information, gossip, or just being noisy within hearing distance
- your telephone
- email
- your own thoughts
- other

Each of these will require different solutions, but the more distractions you can identify and treat, the more efficient you will become. If other people interrupt you, work with your boss and colleagues to determine whether your job requires that you be available at all times for things that “come up.” Is there an expectation that you will be available on an immediate basis? If not, are you allowed to close your door or put up a Do Not Disturb sign during specified times when you are working on tasks?

If responding to your phone and email get you off task, can you turn your ringer off, let your voice mail pick up, and pick selected times during the day to listen and respond? The same goes for email. Even those with the best of intentions can spend all day long just responding

to email. Can you train yourself to check your email at specified times? This method for both phone and email can also work as a type of reward to keep you on track with other tasks (“I’ll work solidly on this report for forty-five minutes, and then check my phone and email as a way of taking a break”). Remember, a task doesn’t necessarily have to be “fun” to qualify as a reward; sometimes it just has to be different. Some adults with ADHD can work for long periods of time, as long as the actual tasks have variety.

If your distractions occur inside your head, you will need an outlet to keep yourself from jumping from one task to another. Keep a small notebook or list handy. When you find intrusive thoughts about other things you need to be doing popping into your head, jot them down and promise to add them to your to-do list later. Do not give in and work on them right away, unless they are true emergencies. Some adults find it helpful to utilize a small timer and set it to go off at regular short intervals, such as every ten

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minutes. When the timer rings, they mark down whether or not they are actually focusing on a task or not. If their mind has begun to wander, the timer is a reminder that helps to bring them back to the task at hand. The timer also gradually conditions them to be more aware of when and how their mind wanders, and can eventually be discontinued when this process becomes more under their conscious control.

There are many common coping techniques suggested by both experts in the field and adult workers who have a diagnosis of ADHD. The tips in the sidebar on page 17 are a compilation of these suggestions, and can be helpful as easy reminders. 🗨



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college students and adults with ADHD. This article is adapted from a chapter in her new book, coauthored with Abigail Levrini, PhD, *Succeeding with Adult ADHD: Daily Strategies to Help You Achieve Your Goals and Manage Your Life* (American Psychological Association, 2012).