



# Starting Over

## GIVING COLLEGE A SECOND CHANCE

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**H**ENRY'S FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH COLLEGE was disastrous. He was overcome by challenges and responsibilities he hadn't anticipated. At the start of the semester, he was excited and felt ready for college-level work. Soon after, however, Henry began to feel overwhelmed by the volume of work required for each class. He didn't realize how much time it would take to complete all the assignments and readings. Henry tried to keep up, but fell further and further behind. He thought he should just try harder and did not let anyone know how stressed he was.

After a few weeks, Henry began to feel hopeless. By mid-semester, he had stopped going to class altogether, feeling miserable and wondering what was wrong with him. His friends seemed to be doing well and their high school grades were not as good as his. Before the end of the semester, he dropped out of community college and decided that he just wasn't college material. It wasn't until years later that he found the confidence and courage to try again.

Henry spent the next several years working, thinking that he wasn't smart and wasn't going to make anything of himself. He progressed in his job, receiving promotions and praise for his innovative work. Just recently, as he turned twenty-seven, it dawned on him that

he must have *some* ability or he wouldn't have learned his trade so well. It occurred to him that maybe he could go to college after all.

### When ADHD gets in the way

There are many students like Henry whose ADHD gets in the way of their education. Some seek out the support they need and are willing to accept help to be successful. Others may not yet be mature enough to recognize their need for support to manage their time or keep current with their coursework. These students need to know that they have the potential to succeed in college as long as they develop their executive function skills, which for college students include being able to wake up on their own each morning, getting started on their work without prompting, finding the right balance between their academics and social life, knowing where they need to be and showing up on time, keeping a schedule, organizing and not misplacing their materials, and meeting deadlines.

Most ADHD students are academically capable and may have excellent high school grades, but the rigor of the academics is not the issue. Without improved executive function skills, an ADHD student has a poor chance of succeeding in college. Unfortunate-

ly, most ADHD students are not aware that they lack these skills; they received so much scaffolding in high school from tutors, teachers, coaches, and parents that they assume college will go just as smoothly. Often, even the parents are unaware of the skills their child should have before leaving for college.

As was the case with Henry, students who have had a failed attempt at college are often devastated and demoralized when they realize that they were not capable of managing college-level work. They might think they are not cut out to be a college student, rather than recognizing their lack of executive function skills as the fundamental problem. These are the students who are likely to give up because they don't know how to change their patterns of behavior.

### Life experience and a clear goal in mind

I met Emil along with his parents when I was working with his younger sister in preparation for college. He referred to himself as a college dropout and told me about his failed attempt to study engineering at college. He managed to stay in college for three semesters. He had been a strong student in high school; everything came easily to him. He started feeling overwhelmed by the midterm of his first semester in college, and things started going downhill from there. He was put on academic probation after his first semester and was asked to leave after his second. Emil appealed the decision with every intention of working even harder in the fall; however, rather than face a dismissal, he dropped out during that third semester when it was clear that he was once again not going to pass his classes.

For several years, Emil was depressed and worked at odd jobs to earn money, but nothing inspired him. He eventually landed a job with a tech company and immediately discovered a team of coworkers who were just like him. It wasn't long before they realized how talented Emil was in coding and programming. He started getting requests to join more team projects, which inspired him to learn on his own whatever he needed to know to contribute to the project.

By the time he was thirty, Emil had a good career, but the nagging feeling of not finishing college still hung over him. He thought about how much he had learned about himself and his natural abilities and that somewhere along the way, he learned to support himself, live independently, and manage all aspects of his life. He somewhat jokingly asked my opinion about a thirty-year-old starting college. I told him that he was much more equipped now to succeed in college than he was at eighteen. He had life experience, and if it was something he wanted to do, it would now be with a clear goal in mind.

After a few years in the working world, with their unsuccessful college experience behind them, many young adults with ADHD begin to build up their self-confidence. They might develop job skills, learn a trade, or become a leader in their field, and once they begin to see themselves as capable, resilient, independent young adults, they are more likely to give college a second chance. These young adults are much more prepared in terms of life skills, executive function skills, and social skills than their younger selves.

### Lagging in social and emotional development

During adolescence and into their early twenties, students with ADHD typically lag three to five years behind their peers in social and emotional development. Consider the effect on a student with ADHD who is chronologically eighteen years old, but has the social/emotional development of a fifteen-year-old. Not many parents would send their fifteen-year-old off to college, but that is essentially what happens to many students who have ADHD.

Sara was a very young seventeen-year-old when we first met. Although she had good grades, she was dependent on her parents for getting started on homework, helping her study for tests, and reminding her of all her activities and appointments. Sara had never been away from home overnight and was very attached to her mother.

Her parents wanted her to go to the state university and did not seem concerned about her immaturity or lack of preparedness. I strongly urged them to reconsider, recommending that Sara attend a transition or gap year program away from home to develop her independence and self-confidence. The parents decided to send Sara to the state college anyway, with devastating results. Sara was back home by Thanksgiving, absolutely crushed. She had not been ready for the college experience, and it took her seven years to even consider trying college again.

Somewhere between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, the ADHD brain matures to the point where much of the impulsivity and hyperactivity lessens and the executive functioning skills improve. Several of my older ADHD students have sailed through college in three years with strong GPAs. Others have taken longer, but their experiences were just as positive.

If there is a young adult in your life who has considered taking a second chance at going to college, encourage them to explore their college options. It is a huge boost to their self-esteem and confidence to accomplish something in life that they thought would never be theirs. **A**



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