

Pushing Past ADHD Symptoms to Successfully Support Our Clients and Their Families

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In all the cases of ADHD that I have treated, the primary symptoms most commonly associated with ADHD have rarely been responsible for the underlying problems our clients or patients encounter. Yes, these symptoms are a factor and they are present, but we must not overlook all the other areas of life that play a role by influencing who a person is, how they behave, and what decisions they make.

When a child sits down in your office, who do you see? Do you see an out of control child who is determined to cause problems? Or do you see a child who is trying to find a place in the world while figuring out who he or she is?

I don't know about you, but I choose the former... every time. I openly acknowledge, to both colleagues and clients, that I have never once sat with a client and seen "ADHD" in the flesh. No boy or girl sitting in front of me has ever led to me saying, "They must have ADHD."

What I do see however is the pain and frustration of parents who are led to believe they are to blame. I see parents who are confused by mixed messages, and children who are misunderstood. But above all else, I see a system that often takes away the innocence from young, developing minds who have just as much potential as any of their peers.

A FLAWED SYSTEM

Yes, the most common symptoms of ADHD (hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention) certainly are important factors, and they are not to be overlooked, but they do not define the individual. They do not restrict or confine what is possible, and they do not determine behavior or outcome. For me, choices and behaviors are influenced by the environment we are in and both in how an individual responds to that environment and how others in that environment respond to them.

There is no denying the power and severity of such severe impulsiveness that an individual can engage in risky and dangerous activity without logic or rationale. But, I am a firm believer that even the most impulsive person is still being influenced by the current situation they find themselves in.

If for a moment we can suspend the medical jargon and classification of the challenges an individual faces, and instead focus on who the person is, we will find that every individual faces challenges where they need guidance, support, and understanding. We will see that these "core" symptoms are only scratching the surface of a "root cause" behind the challenges each person faces.

Trained with a background in clinical psychology, I was led to believe that a combination of medication and behavior therapy was the most effective form of treatment for an individual with ADHD. And yes, I have seen

successful treatment and symptom management. But is that really enough? Does this treatment simply help or does it position someone to succeed and thrive?

As one colleague often says, “the pills don’t give you the skills.”

LOOKING PAST ADHD SYMPTOMS

Regardless of what particular challenges an individual faces, we must not overlook the power of offering support, guidance, mentoring, and the development of sound, fundamental strategies for success.

When I mentioned not seeing ADHD in our clients, it’s not that the signs aren’t there. But what often happens is our tendency to overlook the impact of what else is influencing our clients’ behavior. Where the casual observer sees a hyperactive child who struggles to complete homework, you and I have the ability (and duty) to look deeper.

We need to understand what is going on inside the child, and in their primary circles of influence (i.e., family, schools, and peer group). In my experience, ADHD is never the only factor we must consider. And I am not talking about co-existing conditions like anxiety, depression, or other identified conditions. Those are important, but again, I am asking you to put down your clinical and therapeutic hat to look at the whole individual and what else is going on.

For the child who can’t sit still in class, I want you to not just identify the symptom, but rather ask the question, “Why is the child having a difficult time sitting still?” The symptom does not explain the behavior because we know that fidgeting is often a result of being bored. The same holds true for impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattention.

In most cases, there is often an underlying “root cause” event or situation that exacerbates the symptoms and elevates them to a point of concern.

For example, one child diagnosed with ADHD had no interest in school and his teachers were concerned. But as we investigated his reasoning, it was discovered that he was lost and scared. His parents were in the midst of a very public and graphic divorce. Often times, he and his younger brother were witness to circumstances and situations that no one should be a part of, especially a child.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE AN IMMEDIATE DIFFERENCE

As treatment professionals, we are each in a unique position to change and transform the lives of the children and families we come into contact with. But to do so, to really make an impact, I am going to suggest you put down your credentials and professional training, and rely on your gut instinct and life experience outside of the professional world.

These children and their families are typically exposed to more negativity and criticism than one person should. In most cases, they receive medical support and treatment – whether good or bad. But what they tend to be lacking in is someone with patience, understanding, compassion, curiosity, and a place where they can be themselves and not be ashamed or judged.

The children and families we treat deserve to know that with positive support, encouragement, and understanding, that all things are possible. We need to reinforce that ADHD is not just an individual problem, but one that involves the family and impacts the people around the identified patient. Instead of focusing on pathology, I find that our clients benefit from the support of someone who will say “yes” and not “no” all the time. They will benefit from someone who asks, “why” instead of immediately jumping to conclusions.