Are you Experiencing Anxiety or ADHD?

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Anxiety vs. ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, better known as ADHD, is not something that only affects children. However, ADHD presents differently in adults, which is why many cases of adult ADHD are either undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Commonly, adult ADHD will disrupt the brain's executive functions, which include memory, decision-making, judgement, initiative and the ability to complete complex tasks. ADHD in adults is often misdiagnosed as depression or an anxiety disorder, due to the similarities between their symptoms. So, let's take a look at anxiety vs. ADHD and examine their similarities and differences.

Similarities and Differences Between ADHD and Anxiety

Adult ADHD is frequently accompanied by depression or anxiety disorders, as executive brain function issues can often lead to both. These disorders may exist simultaneously, or ADHD may contribute to the development of anxiety.

There are many types of anxiety disorders that may be seen alongside ADHD, including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder and panic disorder.

The Similarities

The symptoms of ADHD and anxiety can be difficult for some to distinguish, as there is some overlap including:

- Difficulty concentrating or paying attention.
- Restlessness or inability to relax.

While there is some similarity between these two conditions, there are symptoms that help to differentiate between ADHD and anxiety. The symptoms of anxiety are centered around nervousness and fear, while the symptoms of ADHD involve issues with focus and attention.

The Differences

ADHD is an ongoing condition that typically begins in childhood and may continue into adulthood. Symptoms that are specific to ADHD include:

- Forgetfulness.
- Inability to focus for long periods of time.
- Trouble completing tasks.
- Difficulty listening to and following instructions.

As opposed to ADHD, anxiety disorders are long-lasting mental illnesses that can occur at different stages of life.

Symptoms specific to anxiety include:

- Insomnia or trouble sleeping.
- Fear of trying new things.
- Chronic feelings of worry or nervousness.
- Irritability.
- Fear without an obvious cause.
- Headaches and stomach pains.

Although these conditions have their own unique symptoms, they sometimes mirror each other. This makes it difficult to determine whether you have anxiety, ADHD, or both.

How ADHD and Anxiety May Be Related

ADHD is commonly seen alongside several conditions including anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, sleep disorders, autism, dyslexia and substance abuse.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, approximately 50% of American adults with ADHD also have an anxiety disorder, while according to the National Resource Centre on ADHD, up to 30% of children with ADHD experience anxiety.

Anxiety disorders can occur independently from ADHD but in some cases, anxiety may be developed as a result of living with ADHD.

Development of Anxiety vs. ADHD

The connection between anxiety and ADHD is largely unclear. Possible causes for ADHD include genetics, premature birth, or environmental toxins.

These factors may also influence the development of anxiety disorders, but more research is needed to definitively make this correlation.

Adults with ADHD also had the condition as children, but their ADHD may have remained undiagnosed or misdiagnosed as a learning disability or conduct disorder. It is also possible that the symptoms of ADHD were mild during childhood but became more apparent once becoming an adult.

ADHD may lead to an anxiety disorder, or the two conditions may be independent of one another. In either case, anxiety disorders can present at any time and are not distinguished by childhood development.

Distinguishing ADHD From Anxiety

It is important to recognize that although this comorbidity exists, ADHD and anxiety are two different disorders.

ADHD is a developmental disorder that severely impacts your ability to concentrate and may lead to behavioral issues, like a lack of impulse control, fidgeting, hyperactivity and a lack of attention. Anxiety disorders are mental health disorders that will cause feelings of distress, fear and uneasiness in everyday situations.

The symptoms of anxiety may be so severe that they affect your ability to work, study, maintain relationships, or partake in daily activities, but anxiety disorders themselves generally do not cause behavioral problems.

It is also important to pay attention to how and where certain symptoms present. While anxiety will make it difficult for you to concentrate in situations that make you feel nervous, ADHD will make it difficult for you to concentrate most of the time, no matter what situation you are in.

Comparing Treatment Options

There are treatment options available for anxiety vs. ADHD, including cognitive behavioral therapy (or CBT), prescription medications, as well as meditation and relaxation techniques.

Treating both conditions can also be challenging, as some medications for ADHD can make the symptoms of anxiety worse. Stimulants, such as amphetamines, are commonly used to treat ADHD but can either cause symptoms of anxiety or will make current anxiety symptoms worse.

For these reasons, anxiety can drastically impact how you manage your ADHD. Treatment plans will vary between individuals and situations.

Some medical professionals may choose to treat only one of these conditions, depending on the condition that is most severely impacting your everyday life. In cases where ADHD is causing anxiety, this may be an effective treatment plan, as managing the symptoms of ADHD may reduce anxiety.

In those who have both ADHD and anxiety independent of one another, it may be necessary to treat both conditions simultaneously.

Open and honest communication with your doctors and therapists is crucial throughout the process to ensure that your treatment plan is working to reduce the symptoms of both ADHD and anxiety.