

## **Attention Deficit in Girls and Women:**

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, and hyperactivity. The symptom-related criteria for the two types which can be combined are as follows:

### **Inattentive type:**

- Fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes.
  - Has difficulty sustaining attention.
    - Does not appear to listen.
  - Struggles to follow through on instructions.
    - Has difficulty with organization.
- Avoids or dislikes tasks requiring sustained mental effort.
  - Loses things.
  - Is easily distracted.
  - Is forgetful in daily activities.

### **Hyperactive-impulsive type:**

- Fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in chair.
  - Has difficulty remaining seated.
  - Runs about or climbs excessively.
  - Difficulty engaging in activities quietly.
    - Acts as if driven by a motor.
    - Talks excessively.
- Blurts out answers before questions have been completed.
  - Difficulty waiting or taking turns.
  - Interrupts or intrudes upon others.

Most people tend to think that attention deficit disorder affects only boys or men. In fact it is uncanny when you talk to fathers about their problem sons to find out that many of them had similar problems in their childhood. Well, what about girls? The professional consensus was that the ratio between boys and girls was about 8 ADD boys to 1 ADD girl.

The theory that ADD is primarily a male disorder has taken several hits lately. In an excellent book for ADD kids, "You Mean I Am Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?," Kelley and Ramundo claim that there are as many girls with ADD as there are boys with ADD. Experts are beginning to realize that most girls have a "silent and quiet" type of attention deficit disorder. This means that they do have a significant problem with attention, but they are not hyperactive. It is estimated that only one in eight ADD girls are hyperactive.

Since the "squeaky wheel gets the attention," a child who is hyperactive, aggressive, or impulsive forces attention of parents and teachers to try to do something about it. ADD may be too quickly and often too hastily diagnosed if a child is hyperactive, aggressive, or impulsive. Significant others start demanding to put such a child on medication for ADD, while the real problem may be of poor parenting, traumatic event, or a dysfunctional family.

Some experts say that girls are often overlooked and under-diagnosed because they do not pose a significant "management" problem for caregivers and teachers. ADD girls who are inattentive but not hyperactive are likely to be seen as withdrawn, shy, or depressed. It is difficult to diagnose ADD when a child is not hyperactive, be they boys or girls. Such children get wrongly labelled as disinterested, withdrawn, or depressed. Considering the tendency for under-diagnosis in girls and over-diagnosis in boys, however, there may be as many ADD girls as are boys. We just didn't know it.

To draw a parallel, until medical scientists began to specifically study the incidence and nature of heart disease in women, it was thought that only males had this problem. Historically, males were the breadwinners, so they got to see a doctor when they had a problem. As researchers and heads of funding projects were males, they felt at home to focus on heart problems of their brethren. However, since the National Institute of Health launched the women project, a lot of information and understanding developed about women's heart problems. Likewise, now the attention is drawn to attention deficit disorder in females. In the coming years we expect to learn a lot about the problems that are unique to ADD women.

When it comes to women, our culture has much less tolerance for any deviation from the norm. Let's face it, we want women to look perfect and behave perfectly at all times. They have more pressure to tightly fit into the image that our society defines for them. To fit that image, untold numbers of women go on dieting or purging, and in some cases simply stop eating. As for boys, well, "Boys will be boys." So men will be men. When men are messy, moody, distant, disorganized, or forgetful, we are more likely to "understand" that as a male behaviour.

What about women? Can they expect the same understanding when they are messy, moody, distant, disorganized, or forgetful? Afraid not. We tolerate less and criticize more when we see such behaviours in women. Perhaps the reason for that is that society places more responsibility on women. They have joined the work force but they are still the "official" homemakers. If visitors come to a home and find the house in a state of disarray, they perceive the wife as neglectful and lazy. The wife is still responsible even though both spouses may be working equal hours.

Silent ADD is a disorder of inattention and difficulty in organizing one's actions. A woman who has a full time job and a husband and children to take care of, needs super organizational and time management skills. She must take care of several different chores all at one time requiring super attention, particularly if she is without help. It is difficult enough for men with ADD, but for women with ADD, it is like having arm "buds" instead of arms, and made to perform as a circus juggler in front of a very picky audience.