

Disruptive influence



Degree of difficulty . . . ADHD sufferer Ross Leonard struggled to complete his studies.
Picture: *Domino Postiglione*

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By Paula Goodyer
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ADHD can be as much a problem for adults as children.

Ross Leonard doesn't fit the stereotype of someone with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. For one thing, he's a 48-year-old psychologist with a master's degree in forensic psychology. For another, he was diagnosed with the disorder not as a child, but when he was 45.

Leonard is one of about 3500 adult men and women in NSW having treatment for ADHD - thought to be caused by a disruption to the part of the brain that controls impulses, concentration, memory and organisational skills. While one third of adults with the disorder were diagnosed as children, most, like Leonard, are first diagnosed as adults.

"Having a master's degree might not go with the image of someone with ADHD," he says. "But getting the degree was a struggle - I'd be up until 3am trying to finish assignments."

Chronically disorganised, forgetful and always losing things, he'd often leave home in the mornings and have to turn back, not once, but three or four times because he'd forgotten something. "It makes you very afraid of responsibility," he says.

Although the cause of ADHD is only a subtle change in brain function, its effect on people's lives can be significant, says Dr Caroline Stevenson, a clinical psychologist with the NSW Institute of Psychiatry's Adult ADHD Clinic. The clinic provides assessment and treatment for adults with the disorder.

To anyone who is unconvinced the problem exists - or likes to point out that being disorganised is normal - Stevenson says that while ADHD symptoms are characteristic of normal behaviour, the difference with ADHD is that they're extreme, and affect people all the time, sometimes to the point of derailing people's lives.

By the time some adults come for treatment, she says, they've left a trail of lost jobs and broken relationships behind them.

"Employment can be a problem because people with ADHD are disorganised and often late - and with less impulse control, they're likely to tell the boss what they think," she explains.

"I get wives on the phone saying, 'If he doesn't get help soon, I'm leaving,'" says Joy Toll of ADDults with ADHD (NSW), a voluntary organisation. Toll works on the organisation's helpline.

"Men with ADHD can be attractive because they're often fun loving, but when kids come along, life gets more complex, and that's often when the problems start. Women realise they're living with someone who can't organise a bunfight - it's like having another kid."

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Although medication doesn't work for everyone, many people say its effect is like a fog lifting and they feel calmer, says Stevenson. Besides stimulant medication (dexamphetamine and methylphenidate) to treat ADHD, there's also a non-stimulant drug called atomoxetine, although it's not available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

To understand how dexamphetamine helps, says Ross Leonard, imagine that all your life you've been driving a car with a fogged windscreen - and suddenly someone demists it.

"It's not that you couldn't drive the car - just that it's very hard. But once the windscreen is cleared, everything gets easier. But while medication helps, other strategies are important, such as setting alarms to remind you to do things and having checklists," says Leonard, who now treats people with the disorder himself. He echoes Stevenson, who stresses the importance of psychological treatment. The Adult ADHD clinic teaches skills like keeping diaries, setting routines, keeping things in the same place, time management and anger control.

"It's especially important for people with ADHD to try and learn these skills before having children - not only do they manage parenting better, but the children are less likely to replicate the same patterns of behaviour," she says.

But for many people, the first inkling they have ADHD is when their own children are diagnosed with the disorder - and a parent sees their own childhood behaviour mirrored in their sons or daughters, explains Dr Julian Trollor, a neuropsychiatrist with the Neuropsychiatric Institute at the Prince of Wales Hospital.

ADDults with ADHD (NSW) 9806 9960; <http://www.add.org.au>.
The Adult ADHD Clinic, NSW Institute of Psychiatry: 9840 3833.

TREATMENT AND RISK

Stimulants prescribed for ADHD can increase blood pressure and heart rate, so they are contraindicated in people with hypertension and heart disease, explains Professor Phil Harris, head of the department of cardiology at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

"It's good clinical practice to assess people for cardiovascular disease before prescribing these drugs," he says. However, some people with underlying heart disease have no symptoms, and use of this medication may cause symptoms to appear for the first time, he adds.

"While a medical assessment will reduce the risk of giving medication to somebody with asymptomatic heart disease, it will not completely eliminate the risk," he says.