

Adult ADHD and Stress: How to 'Treat' Your Worry

Why every ADHD treatment plan should include stress-management techniques, and how 'treating my worry' helped me.

by Jennifer Koretsky

In my early 20s, I lived and worked in New York City. One morning, I was riding a crowded subway. I was late to work, as usual. I had an early meeting that I hadn't prepared for. I also felt guilty, because I had to leave my brand-new, whimpering puppy home alone for several hours.

If all this weren't bad enough, a nearby passenger kept stepping on my toes. The first time he did it, I huffed. After the third time, I yelled at him, unleashing a string of epithets. I nearly had a breakdown.

My Life, Pre-ADHD Diagnosis

From the outside looking in, I seemed to have a great life: I was a superstar in my company. I had a nice apartment, good friends, and a supportive family. Yet I was overwhelmed by everyday life. I felt as if I always ran behind. My apartment was never neat enough or clean enough. I didn't go to the grocery store often enough. I looked around and saw a city full of people who seemed to juggle it all. I judged myself harshly.

So I pushed harder to keep up with everyone else. It didn't work. Pushing harder only led to more stress and, eventually, to burnout. Thinking about all the things I should be doing was so taxing that I fell apart regularly. It was a cycle I went through many times.

Stress and Adult ADHD

The day of my subway rant, I knew that something had to change. I saw a therapist and was eventually diagnosed with adult ADHD. As I educated myself about the condition, I discovered that the feeling of being overwhelmed was common among adults with ADHD. When I was stressed out, I had less control over my ADHD symptoms. I was more likely to get distracted, and I lost track of time more easily. On the other hand, when I was calm and centered, I could pay attention in boring meetings and keep the fridge stocked with something more nutritious than Crystal Light. I decided I would break the cycle of self-imposed stress, once and for all, so that I could enjoy the happiness and success that I deserved.

Slowing Down

I gave myself permission to slow down. Sometimes it was easy: I'd listen to music, take a long walk with my dog, or meet a friend for lunch. Other times, I had to force myself to turn off my chaotic brain by attending a yoga class or going to a concert. I soon learned that a little bit of relaxation went a long way in helping me meet the challenges that my ADHD symptoms threw at me. It was only when I slowed down that I realized that my unhealthy lifestyle was increasing my stress levels. I ate takeout food at mealtimes, barely got by on five hours of sleep each night, and used my free time to camp out in front of the TV.

I started small, by making dinner for myself a few nights a week. When I became comfortable with that adjustment, I worked on getting more sleep, forcing myself to turn off the TV at 11 p.m. and reading a book until bedtime instead. I hit the gym after work, as well as before a meeting -- exercise always cleared my head.

Accepting ADHD as a Part of Myself

Most important, I stopped comparing myself to others. My ADHD made me different from other people. When I accepted that truth, I didn't care whether my desk was as neat as my coworkers' desks. If I could find what I needed, I was in good shape. When I stopped worrying about what others thought of me, the pressure and the stress lifted. I could handle pretty much anything -- even having my toes stepped on by a wobbly passenger in a crowded subway.



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