

Welcome to the first episode of The Podcast of ADHD! This week we're talking about the Basics of ADHD.

That's right, we're setting a foundation for everything else we're going to talk about here on the podcast. Before we can start diving too deeply into ADHD, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder as it's also known, we need to know what it is, what it looks like, as well as the symptoms and how those symptoms can present themselves. This is going to be one of the longer episodes, and it's also going to be a vocabulary-heavy episode, but don't worry too much. You'll get the hang of it fairly quickly.

In the US, the APA, or the American Psychiatric Association, publishes the DSM. The DSM, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, is the principal authority for psychiatric diagnoses- basically it's the manual on mental disorders and illnesses that you can be diagnosed with by clinical professionals. In 2013, they updated the DSM to the 5th edition, updating the title to the DSM-5. This is an important term, as it's where we get our official list of ADHD symptoms used to diagnose ADHD.

In the DSM-5, it lists the symptoms for ADHD as inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. These are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ADHD, as they lead to a wide array of other symptoms that people with ADHD will recognize right off the bat. Outside of the DSM-5 but in the category of things that a therapist or general practitioner doctor would look for includes: attention dysregulation, dopamine deficiency, emotional dysregulation, and executive dysfunction, among others. If these sound complicated and even scary, don't worry! We're going to talk through each of them and break them down so they make sense and aren't as intimidating.

One of the biggest things for ADHDers is difficulty in regulating attention. The "Attention Deficit" portion of the ADHD name isn't quite accurate to what's really happening inside of our brains. The real problem is that we're unable to regulate where and when and on what that attention and focus is applied. This ends up with the ADHDer being unable to focus and work on one thing and yet able to hyperfocus on something else for hours at a time. Hyperfocus is defined as highly focused attention for a long period of time- and most often occurs for several hours at the expense of taking care of our health and wellbeing such as legitimately forgetting to eat, drink, shower, use the bathroom, or handle other pressing needs and responsibilities. While slipping into hyperfocus is often one of the only ways we can get anything done on particularly difficult days, it can also be quite scary to sort of "wake up" from an activity and hours have passed without you even realizing.

Another part of ADHD that explains nearly all behaviors is that at its core, ADHD is a dopamine deficiency in the brain. The brain doesn't make enough dopamine to keep itself running at optimum capacity- which is an issue because of the role dopamine plays in our brains. We've probably all heard of dopamine as the "happy chemical" that is released when you experience something pleasant. However, dopamine is also the neurotransmitter responsible for reward-motivated behavior- in other words, motivation. Having the correct amount of dopamine

means that you generally have the motivation to stick with a dull and boring task long enough to complete it and get the dopamine reward of having completed it- which then produces more dopamine and you can proceed on to the next task you need to do. For those of us with ADHD, the brain is constantly craving and seeking dopamine to fill the deficiency- that's going to be important later, so I'll repeat it: The brain is constantly craving and seeking dopamine to fill the deficiency. If you don't have the dopamine to motivate you through the unpleasant task so you can get the dopamine at the end of it, you never get the reinforcement of the reward-motivated behavior and you end up giving up, not getting started, or circumventing the boring nature of the task so that your brain will catalogue the task as interesting and novel, and therefore produces more dopamine as you perform the task. However, quite frequently this looks like procrastination, since urgency is the easiest way to make a boring, unthinkable task interesting and full of dopamine. We'll talk more about this in future episodes, but suffice to say for now that not having enough dopamine has an effect on everything we do, and not having enough leads to a lot of the symptoms and behaviors observed in those with ADHD.

The next thing I want to mention is emotional dysregulation. ADHD brains have an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. This lobe of the brain is responsible for many things, and as such its underdevelopment can be pointed to as the reason for pretty much every symptom of ADHD. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for: setting and achieving goals, receiving and processing sensory input, and most executive functions. Executive functions of the brain include things like decision-making, focusing attention, predicting consequences and anticipating events, impulse control, managing emotional reactions, planning for the future, and coordinating or adjusting complex behaviors- things that have to happen in sequence or behaviors that have an effect on one another. Emotional dysregulation occurs because the prefrontal cortex cannot correctly manage emotional reactions, which results in getting angry or upset faster and over smaller events, intense mood swings, feeling emotions to a much higher degree than is usual and appropriate, and even a lack of introspective awareness about your own emotions. These things all together lead to a confusing and even a painful experience with emotions and trying to understand all of what is going on in your head. It tends to look like someone being irritable or snappish, being overly dramatic or overly sensitive, sometimes even being assumed to be attention-seeking and blowing things out of proportion on purpose. One of the most important and helpful things you can do for the people in your life that you care about that have ADHD is to remember that we aren't the way we are on purpose, and the majority of us are trying to manage our symptoms and behaviors in ways that don't hurt the people that we care about, and emotional dysregulation is a big one that can hurt other people. However, sensory processing issues can also have the same visible effect as emotional dysregulation sometimes- which we'll again talk about in a later episode.

The last thing I want to bring up is executive dysfunctioning. We've touched on this briefly up until now, but I want to talk about it specifically. Some things that are tied to executive dysfunction are things like time blindness, prioritizing tasks, task and time management, distractibility, and low frustration tolerance. Let's go through these one by one and explain what I mean by them.

Time blindness is a lack of awareness of the passage of time and an inability to track that passing. This is why we're so often late to things, and why we can spend hours on a task or activity and not realize that time has been passing- this is sometimes part of hyperfocusing, but sometimes, and arguably worse, is to be in the middle of hyperfocus, utterly unable to pull yourself away from the task- and to still notice that time keeps passing. Time blindness also manifests itself in difficulty in estimating how long a task will take. This leads to overcommitting ourselves or expecting too much of ourselves in a given time frame because we don't have a solid concept of how long something is going to take us or how long it took us last time. Time blindness is a big reason why ADHDers use a lot of timers and alarms- externalizing the sense of time passing is the only way to make certain that we'll notice that passage of time, since we can't depend on our internal tracking to be accurate or even running.

Prioritizing tasks is another big difficulty for people with ADHD. The issue lies in being able to subconsciously categorize what is and is not actually important in a list of tasks, and subsequently being motivated to do the most important and logical task first. This leads to a lot of frustration and overwhelm and sometimes means that nothing gets done simply because we couldn't make a decision about where to start.

Task and time management go hand in hand with prioritization. Not being able to organize your list of things to do by what should be first and what can wait leads to trying to do everything at once or nothing at all, neither of which is very productive. This can look like procrastinating or multitasking, depending. At this point, I would like to clarify a point that a lot of people don't understand. Executive dysfunction is not the same thing as being lazy or procrastinating. To procrastinate is to purposefully put off a task or activity because you know or perceive the task to be painful in some way and would rather do anything besides said task. Executive dysfunction is an inability to start and stick with a task, and here's the kicker: even tasks and activities we enjoy. This even applies to things that we certainly want to do, like eating and going to the bathroom, showering, getting dressed in the morning. Basic functioning is impaired by executive dysfunction, and while it may look like doing nothing from outside, there's a war going on inside our heads, and a lot of us learn an unhealthy dose of self-loathing and being unkind to ourselves because of it.

Distractibility is a well-known but very poorly represented feature of ADHD. The "shiny" and "squirrel" stereotype plays on this symptom but in a painful and damaging way. Distractibility is something we are intimately familiar with and it means that we miss out on a lot of things going on around us. Since the brain is constantly seeking dopamine, it means that if the current task or activity isn't producing enough stimulation, the brain starts to look for it elsewhere. This can be literally anything, from homework to reading to a conversation, that isn't producing enough dopamine and is therefore catalogued as uninteresting- and so your brain seeks out the dopamine elsewhere in any sounds or sights in the environment around you.

The last thing related to executive function I want to mention is low frustration tolerance. This means that when things aren't going smoothly we're more likely to get frustrated and get frustrated more quickly. This is related to emotional dysregulation, but is also a compounded result of the other executive dysfunctions making tasks harder than they should be and leaving us frustrated and ultimately exhausted.

And you know what, that seems like a pretty good foundation so we'll stop here for now. That's it for this week on The Podcast of ADHD! Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next week when we'll be talking about The Buy-One-Get-One of ADHD. Bye!