

ADHD Generalization

By Louise Levin

“To Do” lists, calendars, post-its, and clocks set 10 minutes fast are not only ways that we remember appointments and keep our lives organized, but also methods to improve our relationships with other people. Running late for a meeting, lunch date or lecture are all considered rude behaviors; when we are reprimanded for being late to one, we tend to recognize that we should not be late to the others. When we translate our behaviors, from one situation to the next, we are practicing “generalization.” In this case, we are generalizing our errant behavior, tardiness, to a variety of social situations. Long and short-term memory are both important factors to all of the above examples. In the ADHD population, both mental faculties are diminished, and generalization becomes more of an effort to achieve.

The failure to generalize can be the product of one’s environment; for example, a lack of proper discipline in childhood to instill “good social skills.” However one’s failure to generalize began, their failure to “nip it in the bud,” or to manage it efficiently, will only lead to severe problems down the line. We have all been called to account for our actions, to apologize for our “thoughtlessness,” “lack of compassion,” or “laziness.” Nine times out of ten, we feel that we acted wrongly and at the expense of another. We tend to make the grandiose promises “never to do it again.” Of course, “never” is a strong word; just because we feel both our offence and its effect on those we love and respect acutely, we cannot realistically change our behavioral patterns with a simple word or phrase. As one would achieve fluency in a foreign language, sport or a musical instrument, generalization skills must be practiced and techniques employed to ensure that we *really will* alter our actions over the long-term, leaving a little wiggle room for “slip ups” along the way.

ADHD individuals are similarly able to recognize their failures and shortcomings, though they struggle more than most to carry “lessons learned,” and to make good on their promises of “never again” for a prolonged period of time. As humans, we are infallible creatures, and the idea of “never” should be completely wiped away when considering rude or untoward actions—it only sets us up for failure, stigmatizing those with neurobiological incapacities to a more severe degree than is either warranted or healthy. The regions of the brain affected by ADHD not only compromise an individual’s attention and impulse control, but also short and long-term memory. An ADHD individual’s social offences are not necessarily proof of a manipulative personality or simple stupidity, laziness, craziness, or malice, though it may appear as such to their colleagues, classmates, coworkers, children or spouses. This often misdiagnosed and misunderstood Achilles Heel in the ADHD community renders relationships difficult, if not impossible, to maintain—at home, in school and, eventually, at the office.

In school, an ADHD student is often ill equipped to immediately reform his or her behaviors to suit disciplinary and educational expectations. Where students are

generally allied against the teacher, in the common cause of youthful resistance to adult control (the hallmark of forthcoming adolescence), the presence of an ADHD student in the classroom may shift the normal route of malcontent, from the teacher to him or her self. As teachers isolate the student as a “troublemaker” or, even worse, as “lazy or stupid,” they will—consciously or not—be setting the tone by which others are meant to interact with the ADHD individual.

Exasperation when confronted with a student’s failure to generalize will undoubtedly occur: *“Why can’t you remember to bring the correct books to class? I told you, time and time again, to raise your hand before you speak! Why can’t you remember to sit still? Why couldn’t you remember that the Birthday Party was a surprise—why did you tell everyone about it!”* All of these questions are aimed at a student with little understanding of their specific educational and social needs; for an ADHD-er, the answer may be quite simple, however complex the remedy—they simply *can’t* remember or are *unable* to realize, without assisted and consistent effort, that chronic tardiness to class is fundamentally the same as always handing in assignments past due date, or forgetting to keep a secret.

An ADHD individual always runs the risk of becoming a “repeat offender”, chronically “late,” “messy,” “rude” and/or “unreliable.” In the professional field, missed meetings, inappropriate behaviors and comments, late work and trouble with colleagues can become commonplace. At home, forgotten dry cleaning, missed soccer games and forgotten wedding anniversaries can throw a wrench in both household and marital harmony. In each of these situations, the guilt and shame felt when one simply cannot “get it,” in child or adulthood—despite constant warnings, reprimand and unsavory consequences—is demoralizing.

As adults, we are all able to remember, with uncommon clarity, difficult moments in our youth. Because of the social stigmas against ADHD, it is safe to assume that a large number of ADHD adolescents and adults have memories of a past rife with social slights from peers and searing criticism from our teachers and/or parents. They were hopeless cases, unable to pay attention, apply themselves and, ultimately, to succeed in the fast-paced and unforgiving world that awaited them. Under such anxieties and social pressures—resulting in anger/shame/guilt/and blame of the future, the present and the past— it is no wonder that the modern ADHD population, or the ADHD generation, has found little assistance in understanding the challenges with generalization inherent to their disorder.

Where a basic failure to generalize in childhood led to rather benign social and educational difficulties, the failure to do so in adulthood can lead to more severe consequences. As their unchecked actions continue to alienate peers, employers and significant others, ADHD individuals will find it difficult to maintain any kind of “normal” relationship. Their innate need for constant stimulations, or lack of impulse control, generally tends to overshadow more basic considerations, that others would consider to be the basic framework of life—respect for the feelings of others and the capacity to act unselfishly. Without understanding the core reasons

at the center of their difficulties to generalize, ADHD individuals will, more likely than not, fail to see a link between their penchants to overindulgence. Drink ,drugs, gambling, sex and/or shopping addiction may be employed as coping mechanisms in a life that is simply spiraling out of control.

When an ADHD individual begins this downward spiral, it is easily kept a secret from loved ones. Though generalization appears to be a benign concept—remember to be on time, take care of your daily “to do list,” remember your child/spouse/significant other’s birthday, and pay attention when spoken to, the ramifications are often severe. Remember, this is not a death sentence, but a challenge inherent to ADHD. One must recognize, respect and, most importantly, take responsibility for his or her difficulties with generalization, and seek assistance. ADHD individuals often need help drawing parallels between situations that, for some, are glaringly obvious. The assistance of a professional coach or therapist can be invaluable, as an ADHD individual can learn basic methods and techniques, not unlike those named at the beginning of this article, to achieve long term, positive change. Eventually, practice will begin to make perfect.