

ADHD Muck, Muddle, Mess

By Louise Levin

Everyone understands what it is or was like to be in the middle of the “muck, muddle and mess” of adolescence. A rush of hormones arrives unexpectedly, wreaking havoc on emotions, leading to a drastic alteration of personality. All of this tends to happen without preparation or warning. Where we once were satisfied to play outside with friends, get ice cream with our brothers and sisters and dirty our knees climbing trees in the backyard, we are now, inexplicably, obsessed with being like everyone else; we become preoccupied with fitting in, wearing the right clothes and being “asked out” by our “crush.” We may begin to rethink our friendships according to this new perception of what it is to be “cool,” and all of the rules that come with it. When you are ADHD, the challenges associated with the disorder can augment these common adolescent troubles, often diagnosed as “teen angst.”

ADHD adolescents are subject to more extreme fluctuations of mood and sensitivity to new impulses. Because ADHD adolescents emotionally mature between 5 and 8 years behind their peers until their late 20s, the transition from one rule-set to another, from parental regulations to peer license and licentiousness will be more difficult to manage. While ADHD teens do not emotionally mature at the same rate as their peers, they experience the same physical changes that come with adolescence, and “getting older.” The difference lies in their ability to cope with these changes. ADHD teens will look like their peers on a physical level, but because of their developmental lag they will respond on an emotional level, and use the judgment of, an eight to ten year old.

Imagine an eight year old trying to make sense of high school, to answer questions they are now, along with everyone else, held accountable for—Am I fat, ugly or stupid, am I a part of, or as good as, the universal “cool group?” As an ADHD teen strives to answer these questions, to assess themselves according to this new subset of social “rules of engagement,” they will quickly become aware of their developmental shortcomings. They will approach the need to “fit in” with ferocity, and will utilize their innate penchant to risk taking, spontaneous action and high energy levels to achieve the degree of social status that is no longer a simple need, but a necessity.

Everyone remembers the “cool group.” Every classroom has one, and every teen feels their impact, from whatever vantage point, on a social level. If one is lucky enough to be a member of this infallible gaggle of teens, who appear to have it all, then one is also constantly on the watch that they don’t “slip.” Whether this “slip” means gaining five pounds, losing a boyfriend or girlfriend to another, or being the “best”—in school, sport or, on a more visceral level, sexual pleasures and/or drug use—the failure to maintain one’s reputation in any number of categories will constitute a demoralizing fall from grace.

Reputation and “the visual” is everything in adolescence, and though some are satisfied with merely being the best in their grade, on the field or in a meaningful, long-term relationship, these qualities do not generally comprise the overarching concept of “cool.”

If these were the only components of “peer pressure,” it would be a wonderful thing. Adolescents, however, are seldom compelled by their peers to simply study harder and get into a great college. Instead, they are often challenged to “test” their independence, to “keep up.”

For ADHD teens, the fickleness of peer and personal acceptance is magnified to no uncommon degree. Extremism will undoubtedly bring consequences; where an ADHDer was once valued for his or her spontaneity, love of adventure, or mysterious personality, they are more prone to take one or all of these traits a bit too far in adolescence. The status quo of relationships, class schedules, friendships and/or extracurricular responsibilities may become too tiresome for the ADHD teen, who, by general disposition, is always looking for the “next thing,” the newest route towards instant gratification and stimulation.

As a teen becomes socially rewarded for his or her errant behaviors (perhaps they are invited to come back next time as a new member of the desired social group) their actions may become increasingly erratic and ill-reasoned. Minor deviations from social norms will soon become major, and consistent rule-breaking can soon lead a teen down the “wrong path,” or to the point when good judgment becomes completely overshadowed by unreasoned impulse. The need for reward may soon surpass the need for restraint, and overindulgences—drinking, drug/diet pill, sex, gambling or shopping— can lead to addiction and a complete loss of reputation and social status.

We have come to associate ADHD as an imaginary ailment, a grand excuse for teens who are chronic rule breakers and perhaps just “stupid, lazy and crazy.” Excessive energy levels, “flighty” attention spans, sexual and physical impulsivity, disorganization and repeatedly offensive behavioral patterns (despite reprimand) are the common M.O.’s of ADHD-ers. Although medical professionals have come closer than ever to pinpointing the areas of the brain most affected by ADHD, and educators and parents have come to accept the neurobiological roots and realities of the disorder, there are still many who continue to write off this demographic as a community of hopeless cases.

ADHD teens are expected to cope with life’s changes alongside their emotionally forward peers, and are often only offered help when disaster strikes, when serious addiction or complete loss of reputations threatens mental stability and reaches point of no return, or complete rock bottom. If ADHD teens continue to navigate adolescence without help, without a firm understanding of their disorder and its unique challenges, they will undoubtedly feel the ill effects of emotional mismanagement. They will find themselves completely alone.

Though ADHD teens may feel caught in the muck, muddle and mess, they need to understand that there *is* a way out of their emotional quagmire. Parents and educators need to realize the need for tools rather than crutches in ADHD management. Below is a step-by-step guide to recommended treatment methods. The aid of a professional therapist and/or life coach can facilitate both parents and teens in necessary recognition,

understanding and resolve to effectively manage the challenges of ADHD over the long-term.

SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES:

- The family business advisor should assist in educating, normalizing and demystifying this very real neurobiological condition
- A first session should be held with the entire family to assess the levels of anger, blame and areas impacted by the disorder
- A second session, alone with the affected individual should take place to get that individual to own and to take responsibility for their disorder and to agree to be coached in much the same way that one is coached to learn a new language, instrument or sport
- A third session should be held for all family members, without the affected individual, so that they feel “heard;” discussion of appropriate coping, managing techniques should be forwarded, with a focus on minimizing residual anger or tensions. Professionals may also raise the possibility of the presence of ADHD in one or more family members, as yet undiagnosed
- The following sessions should include the entire family unit in order to keep an ongoing, productive dialogue and to continue to set and meet both existing and future goals.
- An ADHD individual can be further assisted in meeting family business goals with the aid of a professional career coach specializing in the disorder.

Unfortunately, an ADHD teen cannot always rely on others to broach the subject of professional assistance, or the need for help, first. It is undoubtedly difficult to put newfound independence aside in the face of unforeseen challenges, and teens often need help in determining the best courses of action to manage ADHD. By providing them with the proper social and self-management tools, parents, educators and concerned loved ones can insure that ADHD teens are adequately prepared for the legal independence that a teen’s 18th year brings, and the radical life changes that come with it. The “muck, muddle and mess” is navigable, and the transitions from adolescence to young-adulthood, and young-adulthood to professional life, can prove to be not only possible but also enjoyable.