

ADHD and High IQ

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Intellectual ability varies widely, and our society goes to great lengths to compare people along this continuum. When a gifted few are identified, it is a mantle bestowed upon them as indelible fact. Children internalize this message and it quickly becomes one of the earliest standards by which they judge themselves. They tend to misunderstand it as an achievement rather than a lucky roll of the evolutionary dice, which increases their pride.

All indications are that ADHD is distributed across individuals of all intellectual abilities. Many people assume that those with superior intellectual skills have an easier time with their ADHD, but that's not really the case. In fact, those with high IQs face many unique challenges. It is tempting to rely on predictable developmental patterns to guide our expectations, but the truth is that development is notoriously uneven. For example, a common sight is a precocious child, preternaturally sophisticated in vocabulary and content, who doesn't yet get jokes and is a bit clumsy. Other budding abilities may demand too much to power other functional abilities at the same rate. It will all come together, but you really have to wait it out—and that's much easier said than done.

Are You Smart Even When You Don't Feel Smart?

When smart children make poor decisions, their behavior invites attempts to explain them. However, the immediate dismay of others is the first, palpable appraisal that a child internalizes. Since no one doubts their ability, it is suddenly their motivation and commitment that is called into question. The first few falls from grace can sting as if they were actual slaps in the face, and it is cause for confusion and panic. Lacking other data points, children blame themselves for being "stupid" and feel ashamed. When these creative, out-of-the-box risk-takers succeed, they are embraced as our visionaries on whom we depend to challenge norms and move our society in new directions. But when they don't succeed, they are just smart kids who are maybe not as smart as everyone thinks. They might even meet the old-school definition of disrupter in the classroom setting.

Due to the developmental delays characteristic of ADHD, many of these children lag about 3 or more years behind their chronological peers in terms of

their social/emotional functioning. However, children with high IQs can simultaneously function 3 or more years beyond their peers intellectually. Take a minute to think about a 6-year difference in functional abilities in a child who is only 11 years old. While acknowledging that development is uneven, such a stark discrepancy is baffling to the child as well as for those around them. When high IQ children have ADHD, they become outliers on two dimensions—and that is a lot of being different.

Reared on society's belief that superior intellects carry the expectation of success, these children are rightfully confused by the inconsistencies in their performance. How can they understand that their own brain sometimes betrays them? The world no longer feels as safe if they don't know when or if they can trust their own responses. Believing in their absolute power over their brains, they judge these 'transgressions' harshly. Too ashamed to ask for help, their mounting frustrations can ultimately incite despair—and it is this despair that is incorporated into their blossoming identity.

When Potential Becomes Cringe-worthy

The good news—and the bad news--is that many of these amazing young people have an assortment of capabilities that allows them to compensate for their executive functioning challenges. However, this success comes at a high emotional cost. Lest they be branded different from their peers, they invest tremendous time and energy in hiding their struggles. In fact, maintaining their mask becomes an obsession that is ultimately physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually depleting. The unforgiving black and white world of perfectionism becomes the code they live by. Nonetheless, with constant hypervigilance, some manage to portray a near flawless façade.

But is this truly a win? They tend to feel like impostors, dreading the moment that they will be revealed as frauds. It tends to be a constant challenge for these children to find a context in which they're comfortable and accepted. In other words, who is their peer group? They may thrive in spirited conversation with appreciative adults, who may be charmed by their intellectual passions. They feel more comfortable with younger children, with whom they are the clear authority. When they align themselves with other intellectually sophisticated peers in class, they can thrive in the high stimulation of a challenging environment; however, it is usually a matter of time until they miss social cues, speak too much and too often, and are too literal or too gullible. They may serve as entertaining oddities for a while but, as friends, they are more likely to be ignored, shunned, or bullied.

This stark difference has implications that shape the path of childhood and persist into adulthood. These discrepant abilities pose monumental social and emotional challenges that are difficult to master at any age. It is a relentless conundrum for those who live it, for those who live with those who live it, and even for those who observe it from a distance. Ultimately, the core sense of self is shaped and colored by how this discrepancy is understood, labeled, and addressed. Parents, teachers, peers, and the self all weigh in.

The Cost/Benefit Analysis

This is a frustrating and demoralizing experience for very smart students who are trying as hard as they can. For example, they arrive at the correct math solutions in a non-linear fashion. When asked to show their work, it is difficult to even verbalize the lightning-quick connections that led them to their answer. Even when students use creative alternative solutions to reach the answers, teachers still must require them to show the work to demonstrate understanding. It takes an invested teacher to engage with the sometimes unchanneled psychic energy that comes at them as relentless interruptions.

Interestingly, many bright diagnosed adults tend to deny the impact that ADHD has on their performance. They focus instead on their frustration with their challenges. In essence, they invalidate their own experience by ‘forgetting’ the complexity that ADHD adds to any task. Even those with a working understanding of executive dysfunction tend to attribute their own struggles to characterological flaws like laziness or carelessness, berating themselves that “I can’t believe I was so stupid!” They feel ashamed that they can’t process faster, engage more, be less reactive, be more flexible, remember more, follow through more. Many stay up late, finishing and double-checking work that their peers completed effortlessly. When they wonder “Why do I have to work twice as hard for twice as long to achieve half as much?”, the demoralization and anxiety are already entrenched. There’s an earworm saying, “Who am I kidding? If I were really smart, I could so crush this...”

These individuals are often the last to be recognized as requiring support or intervention. The reality is that addressing the cognitive needs of the gifted is no less important than addressing the needs of those with learning disabilities. Yes, it is likely that their brains will function best when adequately stimulated with creative problem-solving challenges, and they likely won’t struggle to understand the material. However, they can run into difficulty when they have to demonstrate what they know. When they cannot organize their thoughts for a discussion, overexplain their thinking, or hand in a

correct but crumpled paper from the bottom of their backpack, their behaviors may be misinterpreted. It could easily be assumed that, since they are obviously smart, they're just not trying. In adulthood, the stakes are higher but the misattributions persist.

The high IQ ADHD population is amongst those least likely to be diagnosed. The literature suggests that those with undiagnosed ADHD struggle with chronic underachievement and demoralization, and the comorbid fallout of coping with those experiences. The scars from this history are ingrained by adulthood. The shame grows, as do the self-recriminations, the tendency to withdraw from social situations, the fear of being outed as a fraud, the relentless self-doubt, the fears of humiliation. Ironically, the result of compensating so well is that their plight remains secret but no less damaging.

Their distress remains internalized, rendering it invisible to others. They feel most successful when their performance does not reflect the challenges over which they triumphed that day. Since they are not overtly suffering, nor do they want to appear in need, it is unlikely that they will get the support they deserve. Unfortunately, by hiding their true selves, they remain alone with their burdens and can never be fully known, even by a parent or a spouse. They blame their lifetime of frustration and disappointment on their own character flaws when, in fact, neurobiology offers an alternative reality that they are not yet able to see.