

ADHD and Risky Behavior in Adults

By Camille Noe Pagán

If someone you care about has ADHD, you might have noticed her acting in certain ways that upset you, other people, or even herself. Her actions could be linked to ADHD. Not every adult with ADHD has risky behavior, but many do.

Why? Research shows that people with ADHD often have lower levels of certain brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. Dopamine is one of those.

“Risky behaviors can increase dopamine levels, which may be part of the reason some individuals with ADHD are drawn to them,” says Stephanie Sarkis, PhD, a mental health counselor and author of *Adult ADD: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*. Taking risks can give them a little rush of that dopamine that they are missing.

People with ADHD may also have certain genetic traits that make them prone to risky or impulsive actions.

For some people with ADHD, problems may be as minor as showing up late to meetings. Others may do things that are dangerous, like driving at unsafe speeds or abusing alcohol. Understanding the connection between ADHD and risky behavior can help you and your loved one with ADHD.

Common ADHD-Related Problems

Some of the difficult or risky behaviors related to ADHD include:

- Trouble getting motivated or finishing tasks (either at work or at home)
- Being late or not following through on commitments, appointments, or responsibilities
- Impulsive spending or overspending
- Starting fights or arguing
- Trouble maintaining friendships and romantic relationships
- Speeding and dangerous driving
- Substance abuse (ADHD makes you up to six times more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol.)
- Risky sexual behaviors, such as having unprotected sex

Other things can also play a role in whether someone with ADHD acts in risky or dangerous ways. Family environment, the friends she spends time with, and health

problems like depression or a head injury can make a difference.

How to Help

If someone you know has ADHD and is acting in ways that concern you, there are things you can do to help.

Don't place blame. "The most important thing to remember is that ADHD is a biological, neurological, and genetic disorder. It's real, and it can have real consequences for the people who have it," Sarkis says.

WebMD Feature | Reviewed by Smitha Bhandari, MD on April 22, 2015

Sources

SOURCES:

Jon Belford, PsyD, clinical psychologist specializing in ADHD, New York.

Berwid, O. *Current Psychology Reports*, October 2012.

Chang, Z. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2014.

Hoza, B. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, September 2014.

Schoenberg, P. *Clinical Neurophysiology*, July 2014.

Stephanie Sarkis, PhD, adjunct assistant professor, Florida Atlantic University; sub-investigator, Clinical Research Studies, Florida Atlantic University Schmidt College of Medicine, Boca Raton; author, *Adult ADD: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed*.

Children and Adults With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD.org): "Adult ADHD and Substance Abuse Disorders."

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Being kind and understanding (rather than angry or critical) ups the odds your loved one will trust you and come to you when she's having trouble.

Be a partner in planning. "ADHD affects the brain's frontal lobes, which are responsible for organizing and planning ahead," Sarkis says.

Work with her to set and stick to a routine. For example, you could create a calendar and schedule certain activities at the same time each day or day of the week.

That can reduce the chances she'll be late and help her follow through on commitments.

Be active together. Recent research shows that exercise seems to reduce some symptoms of ADHD. One reason: Even short bursts of physical activity can raise levels of brain chemicals like dopamine. Raising those levels in healthy ways like through exercise may lower the likelihood that someone with ADHD does other risky things like alcohol abuse or speeding.

Encourage her to seek treatment and stick with it. ADHD medication helps some people. One study found that men with ADHD who stayed on their ADHD medication lowered their risk of traffic accidents by more than 50%. Consulting with a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of ADHD can help your loved one decide if medication is the right treatment.

New research shows that cognitive behavioral therapy reduces ADHD symptoms. This

type of therapy focuses on changing negative thoughts in order to change behavior.

“Medication and counseling work better together than alone, so if your loved one isn’t seeing a psychologist or therapist, you may want to recommend that she do so,” Sarkis says. “There’s no cure for ADHD, but treatment can make a big difference by improving quality of life for people with the disorder.”

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