

What's Wrong with that Kid?

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Abstract

The author explains the importance of recognizing and assisting students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) so that they can succeed in college.

Imagine that you are halfway through the semester and your classes are going well – except for that one student who seems to be self-destructing before your very eyes. In the beginning of the semester, he was always in class, seemed prepared, acted eager to learn, was bright, verbal, and likable. Suddenly, he has started missing classes, not meeting deadlines, stringing excuse after excuse together like paper lanterns over your head.

You talk with him. He agrees that he is “a bit behind” but is sure he can catch up this weekend. Could he please be allowed to turn in his work the first thing next week? You grant the extension.

Next week brings no work, no attendance, no word at all. The semester winds down, and all that potential has evaporated into thin air. Sound familiar?

Identifying the Problem

Chances are that this student was not “blowing off” the course, not genetically lazy, not independently wealthy, and definitely not stupid or masochistic. Chances are that the student has attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and that he may or may not be aware of it. If you're like me, you have seen this type of student every semester, and you have puzzled over his false starts and lack of productivity. You know he has the potential to do well in the class, but work never seems to materialize, even when he has attended classes, participated fully and seems engaged in learning!

We hear a lot about ADHD these days. It is in the news, on television, in the bookstores, on talk shows, and even on AOL. It seems like everyone knows someone with ADHD, or suspects he himself may have it! “Where are these students coming from?” my colleagues wail. “Why the sudden influx of ADHD-ers?” they ask me.

The truth is that there is no “sudden influx”; the students have always been there. The difference is that we now have so much more scientific knowledge about how the brain functions (with PET and SPECT scans making it possible to see how the brain works) that we are able to name a set of characteristics that heretofore had not been connected. Before, we attributed them to character flaws or laziness. We noted that there have always been students who did not do their work. There have always been students who seemed chronically disorganized. There have always been “underachievers,” students who did not achieve what they seemed capable of achieving. We attributed their lack of success to a failure of will.

The assumption that if he isn't producing, he isn't trying is probably the most damaging assumption we can make as educators and parents. That's not to say that some students may simply not be trying. However, it is my contention that we should hold that conclusion in reserve and, instead, look elsewhere for understanding the situation and solving problems. Today we know why Einstein failed math and Churchill was a D student!

Effects of ADHD

The truth is that current brain research shows that there are observable differences in the brain functions of people with ADHD and those without it. The ADHD brain demonstrates impaired functioning in certain specific areas (executive functions) that control memory, time awareness, motivation, and attention. No amount of “willpower” can overcome this sort of brain functioning.

So the unsuccessful ADHD student becomes caught up in the terribly destructive cycle of exerting effort, falling short of the goal, giving up, and feeling defeated and powerless to break out of the cycle. As a student, he may flunk out of school; as a working professional, he may lose his job, miss promotions, or lack other opportunities because of his perceived “lack of organization” or failure to deliver on commitments.

These students deserve our understanding. They also deserve our help. But how can we help them?

Chances are you've been doing your darnedest for years. You may have offered extra help, given extensions on deadlines, allowed alternatives to completing assignments and demonstrating subject/skill competence. I know I have! Yet, these strategies didn't help. That is because the ADHD student often doesn't need help understanding the material or even to be given extra time on tests. Rather, that student needs to remember to study for the test, to wake up on time to get to class, to keep course materials organized, to manage to concentrate long enough to read the chapter you assigned, and/or to be able to turn in a paper even if it isn't “perfect” in his mind.

What We Can Do

How can we educators help this group of capable, deserving students? Clearly, we can't call students to remind them to study for a test; we can't go to their homes and wake them up in the morning; we can't buy them binders and file their papers; we can't read their textbooks aloud to them so they stay focused; and we can't force work to be turned in. There are, however, many things we can do – some very simple (requiring minimal effort) and some more elaborate, ongoing procedures.

For starters, we can educate ourselves about the nature of ADHD. We can read about it, perhaps by visiting the major ADHD organizations' websites (www.add.org and www.chadd.org). We can also talk with our students who disclose to us.

In addition, we can stop assuming that if a student is not producing, he is lazy; we can stop assuming that if a student talks too much in class that he has no manners; we can stop assuming that if a paper or project doesn't get turned in that the student just doesn't care. If we do only that, we will have made a considerable positive difference in the lives of these struggling students. And, if we can go a little further, I believe we can save an increasing student population from giving up and dropping out.

What else can be done? Part of that answer falls outside the scope of education. Most of these students need an accurate diagnosis, and most of them need medication. As educators, we cannot do anything about that except perhaps to offer the suggestion for diagnosis to a receptive student.

A New Solution

Most importantly, colleges and universities can do more for their ADHD students by offering a very specific service to them: ADHD Coaching. Presently this type of coaching is offered at a very few institutions of higher education in the country. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a leader in this area. They offer extensive coaching with a trained, experienced staff of professional coaches. Of course, Landmark College in Putney, Vermont – a college specifically for students with diagnosed learning differences – offers ADHD coaching. Other colleges contract with coaches in the community (UVA, for instance). Some others are experimenting with peer ADHD coaching. But the big picture is that more and more schools are looking to ADHD coaching as an effective way to both attract and retain students.

How does it work? Students desiring coaching are assigned to a coach with whom they meet on a regular basis – sometimes once a week, others twice a week, in some cases every other week. These meetings can be held in an office or over the phone. Many arrangements are possible.

At these regular sessions of 30 minutes, coach and client work out a plan to make practical changes in the client's life. If, for instance, a student is chronically late for class and his teachers are penalizing him for that lateness, then, as a client-priority, he and the coach create systems the client can use to increase his punctuality. The key here

is to teach skills the client can use after he has completed coaching, or graduates or transfers to another school.

The difference between this service and the traditional way we handle these problems (such as with workshops on time management) is that the client not only gains information and is made aware of systems, but also is “supervised” in actually using those systems and applying the new information. Furthermore, he has someone to whom he must be accountable – someone who is neither his teacher nor his parent, someone who will not judge him, nag him, or make him feel worse about his missteps.

Instead, the coach provides a safe, trusting relationship based on mutual understanding and positive reinforcement. The operating principle is that the client is the boss; the client has, within himself, all the answers to his problems. He is not broken; he doesn't need to be fixed. He just needs the opportunity to discover his own answers in a completely non-threatening environment.

As students progress in this relationship and learn how to manage their ADHD challenges, they also learn how to apply solutions that work in one area of their lives to other areas in need of improvement. One small change in habit can truly transform a life. And coaching has that potential power. It works. We know it works in sports and the business world. It's about time that academia kept pace with successful strategies commonplace in those worlds.

Putting the Coach in the Community College

Coaching should be offered to all students, not only to those with ADHD, because all students can benefit from such structure while in college, especially those in community colleges.

As we know, community colleges attract a large population of non-traditional learners. Often we are their last hope for a college education, and often they come to us from extremely negative school experiences. Coaching can provide that missing piece, especially during the first semester, to ensure their retention and development as adult learners.

I propose that we all help those students who struggle with the skills that most of us in the non-ADHD world take for granted. We all should read articles on this student population and share what we learn. Perhaps, too, we can stifle any unkind remarks or sarcastic comments when that “lazy” kid in the back row comes late to class one more time. Instead, we can help that student to find the kind of help he can really use.

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