3 Essential (and 4 Frivolous) Components of an ADHD Diagnosis

From the ADHD Experts at ADDITUDE
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD
ADHD is a relatively common diagnosis, but that doesn’t mean it should be ever pronounced lightly. An accurate and well-rounded ADHD diagnosis is a complex, multi-step process, including a clinical interview, a medical history review, and the completion of normed rating scales by loved ones, educators, and/or colleagues. Read on to better understand the standard diagnostic steps — as well as some other “tools” that just aren’t worth your time or money.

What a Diagnosis Should Comprise
An in-depth, well-rounded ADHD evaluation comprises several components:

Clinical interview: The provider should first talk extensively with the patient about his or her symptoms in an effort to pinpoint their root causes. The underlying question here is: “Why do you think you (or your child) may have ADHD?” — but in practice, this phase of the evaluation is far more complex than that.

If the person says, “I have a hard time focusing,” for example, the clinician needs to delve deeper — asking, “When? How do you notice it? When is this difficulty most pronounced? Has this pattern existed most of your life, or is it something that started occurring recently?” If focus troubles are new, for instance, they could point to another condi-
tion — depression or learning disabilities are both potential culprits. The clinician’s job is to identify patterns that may point to ADHD, or recognize that symptoms actually stem from something else.

The clinical interview helps the clinician understand the individual’s biggest pain points — whether that’s at work, in school, or in personal relationships — and why they’re happening. It should cover:

- Challenges, symptoms
- Strengths, skills
- Family life, day-to-day stressors
- For children: school performance — grades, tests, homework, etc.
- For adults: work performance — deadlines, productivity, etc.
- General health — including sleep and eating habits
- Family medical history, including other possible instances of ADHD
- Drug use (both prescribed and illicit)
- Previous evaluations (if any) and their results
- Related and comorbid conditions — depression, anxiety, and learning disabilities are common in people with ADHD

Very young kids may not participate in a clinical interview because they often can’t fully articulate how they’re feeling or acting, but that is the exception to the rule. Most children can answer a clinician’s questions, and their parents should be interviewed as well — all the way through college, if possible. Adult patients may invite a spouse or close friend to paint a more complete picture of their symptoms and struggles.

A good clinical interview may take 2 to 3 hours, which includes time explaining to the patient what we now understand about ADHD and what it means for them. Many clinicians don’t have the luxury of that time — particularly pediatricians, who only have about 15 minutes for each patient interview. In those cases, a patient may need to return 2 or 3 times in order to convey an adequate amount of information.

**Normed rating scales:** Practitioners next use rating scales that have been used on a large number of subjects, some with ADHD.
and some without. These rating scales ask patients (or their parents) to rate their symptoms in various situations, and help the clinician get a sense of how a person’s symptoms compare to those of other people their age. Respected rating scales include the Connors Scales, BASC, the Brown ADD Scales, or the Barkley scales. Parents and teachers should fill them out for children; adults can fill out their own scales.

**Physical exam:** Sometimes, ADHD-like symptoms are caused by internal medical problems such as thyroid conditions or pinworms. A pediatrician or primary care doctor should do a complete physical exam to make sure a medical problem has not been overlooked. A physical exam can also assess whether an individual can safely take ADHD medication.

All these puzzle pieces, taken together, help the clinician determine whether an ADHD diagnosis is appropriate. If ADHD is diagnosed, the clinician will follow up with the patient often — particularly if medication is prescribed — in order to assess the efficacy of treatment and to determine if the initial evaluation missed anything.

**What Doesn’t Help**

You may have heard about one or more of the following diagnostic “fads,” which are generally not reliably accurate or comprehensive tools for an accurate diagnosis.

**Brain imaging:** Medical literature is ripe with news of interesting studies on brain scans — including MRIs, PETs, FMRI,s, and DTIs — and their provocative results. But people who really know about brain imaging and ADHD will tell you that brain imaging is not a useful diagnostic tool — yet. We are lacking the large number of normative pictures needed to paint an accurate representation of what “normal” looks like at different ages — making the tool’s diagnostic utility a thing of the future, not the present.

**Neuropsychological tests:** Some patients get referred for expensive — $2,000 to $4,000, usually — packages of neuropsychological tests as part of the ADHD diagnosis process. Unfortunately, I can tell you these tests are generally useless for making an adequate assessment of ADHD. The reason? These tests are usually given in an office setting over a period ranging from 20 minutes to two hours. They give the tester a snapshot of how that person’s brain might be functioning on that given day, but they don’t communicate a thing about how that person functions in day-to-day life. Neuropsychological tests are a good way to evaluate brain damage after a traumatic brain injury or a
stroke, but they’re not particularly useful for being able to assess and treat ADHD.

**Online “reaction” tests:** A wide variety of computerized “attention tests” are available for a fee online. The tests’ creators claim they can determine whether a user has ADHD based on his or her ability to hit a certain key every time a particular target comes on screen — and refrain from hitting it when a different target is shown. In reality, however, these tests are basically boredom tests — and they can be easily manipulated by people who are naturally adept at video games (which many with ADHD are). They very rarely produce false positives, but they often return false negatives, and can miss ADHD in people with quick reaction times or hand-eye coordination.

**Genetic testing:** Many researchers are studying the genetics of ADHD, and some companies are jumping on the bandwagon by creating “genetic tests.” In return for a mailed-in sample of saliva or blood, patients receive a summary of their genetics — including possible vulnerabilities to certain disorders. Unfortunately, these tests focus on just a few genes, whereas a very large number of genes are implicated in the genetic makeup of ADHD. And the fact is: you can’t say if a certain person does or doesn’t have ADHD based on any genetic testing — it simply does not work.

---

**Read more** from Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D.
[additu.de/tbrown](http://additu.de/tbrown)
ADHD Medication and Treatment
The latest information on managing medication, starting therapy, evaluating alternative treatments, and more.

You’re relieved to know, finally, that your lifelong symptoms are due to ADHD. But now, you have questions — on everything from which medications are available to how to tell if they’re working properly. In this comprehensive special report, you’ll learn how to seek an accurate diagnosis and map out a treatment plan that’s right for you.

>> Learn More About This Special Report: [http://additu.de/treatment](http://additu.de/treatment)

ADHD 101
A complete overview of ADHD, outlining every step from diagnosis to treatment — all the way to living successfully with attention deficit.

From the moment you suspect ADHD in yourself or your child, you have hundreds of questions. Which doctors can evaluate symptoms? What medication side effects should you be prepared for? Can diet help? This comprehensive eBook has over 100 pages of expert advice, personal stories, and more to help you become an ADHD expert.

>> Learn More About This Special Report: [http://additu.de/adhd-101](http://additu.de/adhd-101)

Mindfulness and Other Natural Treatments
The best non-medical treatments for ADHD, including exercise, green time, and mindful meditation.

Learn how mindfulness works on ADHD brains, and how to begin practicing it today. Plus, research the benefits of other alternative treatments like yoga and deep breathing exercises — including some designed especially for kids — as well as the science behind each natural therapy.

>> Learn More About This Special Report: [http://additu.de/mindful](http://additu.de/mindful)
ADHD Webinar Replays from ADDitude:

The ADHD-Executive Function Connection
>> http://additu.de/efunction
We’ve all heard of executive functions — the brain-based skills that affect how we plan, organize, and carry out tasks. But how do executive functions relate to ADHD — and how can children and adults with the condition compensate for natural deficiencies in these critical skills? Thomas Brown, Ph.D., explains the ins and outs of executive functions and how they affect your focus in this expert webinar.

Healing the ADHD Brain: Interventions and Strategies that Work
>> http://additu.de/healing
There’s no one-size-fits-all approach for treating ADHD. Here, Daniel G. Amen, M.D., explains treatment options ranging from medication and supplements to diet and exercise.

Why People with ADHD Can’t Sleep
>> http://additu.de/adhd-sleep
Not only is skimping on sleep bad for your overall health and well-being, it can also exacerbate ADHD symptoms. Rest assured — there are numerous ways to improve your sleep hygiene! In this audio and slide presentation, hosted by Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D., learn the science behind ADHD sleep problems and get tips for revamping your circadian rhythm.

Neurofeedback and Cognitive Training for Kids
>> http://additu.de/neuro
Is brain training — including neurofeedback and cognitive training (CT) — really all it’s cracked up to be? Is it safe for kids? Is it worth the money? Naomi Steiner, M.D., shares the research behind some computer-based alternative therapies so you can make an informed decision before treating your child.

Sound Medicine for Your Child’s ADHD Brain
>> http://additu.de/sound
Music can be a powerful catalyst for learning in children with ADHD or LD — but most parents aren’t sure how to harness it. In this expert webinar, with Sharlene Habermeyer, M.A., learn how music develops three key areas of the brain, how music can improve your child’s reading and math skills, and which songs work best.