Clearing the Chaos of Adult ADHD with Mindfulness
By Ellen J. Schwartz, PhD

Lost keys? Late? Forgotten errands? Missed what was just said? Reacted too quickly? Think you’re crazy, lazy, or stupid?

Life for ADHD adults can be tough. The inattention and difficulty staying with one thought or activity are among the challenges of this brain-based disorder, and it can have serious consequences on the job or in relationships.

Mindfulness can help. Neuroscientists have shown that practicing mindfulness affects areas of the brain associated with self-regulation that is the ability to purposefully direct attention and behavior, suppress inappropriate knee-jerk responses, and to switch strategies. The power to self-regulate the nervous system and to re-pattern our neurological pathways is measurable and teachable.

With mindfulness practice you can:

- improve attention
- better manage emotions and stress
- learn to resist distractions
- improve your overall sense of well-being

Research on Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has found that mindfulness meditation practice can also help ease psychological stresses such as anxiety, depression, and pain. Adults with ADHD are likely to struggle with anxiety and/or depression.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, without judgment. That is not easy, since the mind generates thousands of thoughts per day. Everyone faces distraction and the flooding of thoughts. Research shows that people spend 46.9% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing, actually operating on automatic pilot. Focusing attention can be even more challenging if you have ADHD.

Practicing mindfulness actually teaches the brain to pay attention to what you are doing and experiencing right now, in this moment. It also means noticing how we are responding to moments in life; to feelings with attention to how they feel in the body at this moment rather than getting caught up in the associated thoughts.
Two key ways to practice mindfulness are:
1. bringing mindful moments into everyday life
2. through a formal meditation practice.

Making it Work for You: Mindful Moments

Start with Moments

Take baby steps. Mindful moments are when we bring conscious awareness to whatever we are doing. For example, by taking a moment to focus on one of the five senses, you can notice the:

- breath as it goes in and goes out
- sounds you hear while sitting on the porch
- sensations in your feet and body as you walk down the hall
- smell in the air as you walk past a bakery (or the garbage)
- color of the sky as you leave your office
- sensations in your body as you adjust yourself in your seat.

Attending to one aspect of sense experience in the body, posture, thoughts, or mood brings you closer the aliveness of the present moment.

The STOP Practice

The S.T.O.P practice is a basic formula that you can try any time of day to bring a mindful moment into your life. It can also be used when feeling stress or strong emotions.

- Stop what you’re doing; put things down for a minute
- Take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling
- Observe the details and body sensations associated with each breath
- Proceed – You’ve just slowed yourself down, observed the breath and sensations in the moment. Check in with yourself. Are you now are ready to proceed?

For folks with ADHD, it might be helpful to do the STOP practice at set times or as part of a regular routine. Try it at a stop light, during your shower, before beginning to eat a meal, or before turning toward your computer, or use STOP before responding to a text. Just stop, take a few deep breaths, observe and, when ready, proceed.

Mindfulness throughout the Day

You can do most any activity in a mindful way. For example, as you wash dishes with the intention to do so mindfully, you might notice details about the temperature of the water, the posture of your body, the sounds, your reactions, etc. Or, set a timer to go off at random times during the day to check in with your breath and body.

Formal Practice: Mindfulness Meditation
If you want to commit to a more formal practice, consider taking a mindfulness meditation course or listening to a mindfulness meditation recording (see below).

The program I know best and teach is Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction or MBSR. This program is based on over 30 years of research and development by Jon Kabat-Zinn and others at the University of Massachusetts.

During this 8-week course participants learn mindful awareness through in-class and at home practices. Included are formal mindfulness meditation practices such as:

- sitting meditation
- walking meditation
- mindful movements
- body scan, with focus on body awareness
- breath awareness

Formal meditation practices can be adapted for adults with ADHD. Lidia Zylowska, MD modified the traditional eight-week MBSR course for adults with ADHD by having participants gradually increase the amount of time they meditated beginning with five minutes. Participants in her classes reported improved attention and reduced hyperactivity.

**Thought Gremlins**
How do you deal with the thoughts that inevitably will intrude? Acknowledge them without getting swept away by them, (“hello thought, thank you thought, good bye thought”).

Another way to understand this idea is to imagine sitting on a riverbank, watching the flow of the water, leaves, and debris floating by. Though you might have the urge, you don’t need to jump in. Just sit and watch, notice what the mind does, leaving self-criticism, judgment, or planning behind, and go back to watching. When you recognize the mind was adrift, you have just had a mindful moment – bravo! That awareness is as much the practice of mindfulness as is focusing on the present moment experience.

How does this change the brain? The repeated action of noticing you’ve lost focus and bringing your attention back to this moment is what “builds the muscle of attention.” This repetition teaches the brain self-regulation by helping to develop new neural pathways, thus changing the relationship to how you perceive and experience things in life.

**Start Small or Dive In**

Mindfulness and mindfulness meditation are of great benefit to all brains, and particularly for people with ADHD. This practice gives you the opportunity to slow down and pay attention to how the body, mind, and emotions are operating in real time, in this moment.

Begin with mindful moments, use guided meditations or you can dive right into a formal program, like an MBSR class. Just training yourself to catch the mind as it inevitably wanders and learning to bring it back is the beginning of serious brain training.

**Getting Started**
Try the STOP practice.
Pick an activity to do mindfully.
Stop for a mindful moment with focus on one of the senses.
There are several sources for mindfulness meditation (see below).
Need Structure: Use post-its or your phone to remind you to take a moment, a breath, to STOP or listen to a CD. Set up a contract with a friend to meditate together, or to check in with one another to be accountable, or sign up for a mindful yoga or mindful meditation class like MBSR.

Just a few additional resources:


Try a free guided meditation by Dr. Ronald Siegel at: www.mindfulness-solutions.com

Apps:
- **Headspace** - Listen to guided mindfulness meditations. The first 10 sessions of 10 minutes each are free. Available on both Android and Apple phones.
- **Stop, Breathe & Think** – Includes cute graphics and colloquial voice, self-meditation timer, plus mood-based meditations, if you’d like.
- **The Mindfulness App** – Includes many options for the newbie and the experienced, plus meditations by leading teachers, also, the option for mindfulness-notices or reminders throughout the day.
- **Mindbell** – Available on Android phones. Sets a timer to remind you to take a moment during the day to pause and notice the breath and body sensations.

**Ellen J. Schwartz, PhD,** is a licensed psychologist with a private psychotherapy practice, for over 25 years, in Englewood, New Jersey. Of particular interest is integrating psychotherapy and mindfulness techniques with children and adults who struggle with ADHD, learning issues, and/or anxiety and depression. To contact Ellen please email: mbsr.nj@gmail.com