Psychosocial Interventions for ADHD in Adults:
A Guide for Primary Care Providers

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Learning Objectives

• After completing this module, participants will be able to:
  – identify psychosocial treatments for adults diagnosed with ADHD
  – make referral suggestions for appropriate psychosocial treatments for adults with ADHD based on their presenting complaints
• Commonly encountered questions

  – “The medications are helping me but I’m still having problems. What else can I do?”

  – “I’ve tried ADHD medications. Is there something else that can help me with my ADHD?”
What are psychosocial interventions for adult ADHD?¹

• Psychosocial interventions are nonmedication treatments and related support services designed to reduce impairment and improve coping skills in adults with ADHD

What are psychosocial interventions for adult ADHD?¹

- Psychoeducation
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Educational accommodations
- Employment accommodations
- Treatments for relationship difficulties (e.g., couples of family therapy)
- Financial management

When are psychosocial treatments appropriate for adults with ADHD?¹

- Ongoing coping difficulties despite an otherwise effective medication regimen
- Medical profile (e.g., cardiac) or adverse side effects obviates the use of medications
- Patient refuses medications despite adequate education that addresses concerns

How can psychosocial treatments help my adult patients who have ADHD?

- Psychosocial treatments are helpful when patients face:
  - Residual ADHD symptoms and impairments
    - Educational difficulties
    - Occupational difficulties
    - Relationship difficulties
    - Financial difficulties
  - Co-existing psychiatric diagnosis (e.g., mood, anxiety, substance use)
  - Any major impairment in adult role functioning associated with incompletely treated ADHD

References:
Psychoeducation\textsuperscript{1,2}

- Teach patient and family about ADHD
- Overview nature, course of ADHD
- Overview of treatment options and potential effects/side effects
- Instill hope and optimism

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (1)

• What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)?

  – Model of psychotherapy emphasizing the role of distorted information processing (i.e., distorted thoughts) on the development and maintenance of depression and anxiety
  – Focus on the interplay of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions and their influence on current functioning
  – Strong empirical support as a psychological treatment or adjunct for a variety of psychiatric disorders

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (2)\textsuperscript{1,2}

• Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been modified to address adult ADHD
  – Structured sessions and treatment goals
    • Organization and planning
    • Time management
    • Procrastination
    • Coping with distractibility
  – Delivered in either group or individual format
  – Interventions target functional impairments associated with ADHD as well as co-existing problems
    • Behavioral (e.g., modify self-defeating behaviors)
    • Cognitive (e.g., cognitive modification of distorted thoughts)
    • Emotional management (e.g., frustration, anger, anxiety, depression)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (3)\textsuperscript{1,2}

- CBT approaches for adult ADHD target:
  - the development and maintenance of coping skills to address the areas of impairment associated with symptoms of ADHD (e.g., disorganization, time management, procrastination), thereby improving overall well-being.
  - dysfunctional thought patterns that lead to excessive self-criticism, pessimism, or a maladaptive positive bias, all of which may interfere with motivation and follow through on the use of coping skills.
  - co-existing problems that may further interfere with coping with ADHD, such as anxiety, depression, or substance use problems.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (4)

• CBT approaches, in both individual and group formats, have produced consistently positive results in several clinical outcome studies of the treatment of adults with ADHD\textsuperscript{1,2,3,4}, including randomized control studies.\textsuperscript{5,6}

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (5)

• Commonly encountered question:

  – “How is cognitive behavioral therapy going to help me? I know what I need to do but just cannot do it.”
Educational Accommodations (1)\textsuperscript{1,2,3}

- College students with ADHD may be eligible for academic accommodations

- Requirements for documentation:
  - Recent psychoeducational evaluation performed by qualified professional
  - Documented signs of significant impairment that interferes with learning in an otherwise qualified student

Educational Accommodations (2)$^{1,2,3}$

- A diagnosis of ADHD alone is not sufficient for accommodations – there must be evidence of impairment that affects learning
- Common academic accommodations for ADHD include:
  - Extended time on exams
  - Alternate exam format
  - Testing in reduced-distraction room
  - Access to lecture materials/slides prior to class
  - Note-taking service
  - Course substitution (e.g., foreign language)
  - Texts in audio format
  - Reduced course load, extended graduation time line

Educational Accommodations (3)\textsuperscript{1}

- Students with ADHD may benefit from specialized learning support or “academic coaching”
- Learning support services help ADHD students:
  - Develop and implement effective learning strategies
  - Use coping skills to address time management and organization problems that may affect academics
  - Use assistive technologies (e.g., consistent use of organizational features of cell phone, computer, PDA, voice-activated software for writing, etc.)

\textsuperscript{1} Ramsay (2010). \textit{Nonmedication treatments for adult ADHD}. Washington, DC: APA.
Educational Accommodations (4)

- There is promising pilot research that “academic coaching” is helpful for college students with ADHD\(^1,2,3,4\)
- Common features of programs studied:
  - Identification of ADHD and coping skill deficits
  - Specialized support that targets
    - Individualized learning support related to current courses
    - Use of coping skills emphasizing implementation of study skills, organization, and time management strategies
  - Independent use of coping skills and positive alliance with coach strongest predictors of improvements\(^3,4\)

Educational Accommodations (5)

• Commonly encountered question:
  – “Should I disclose my diagnosis to my school?”
Employment Accommodations (1) ¹

- Otherwise qualified workers with ADHD may be eligible for workplace accommodations if significant functional impairments affecting work performance can be documented ¹
- There are many “informal” accommodations and coping strategies that can be implemented without disclosure of the ADHD diagnosis
- “What else can I do?”

Employment Accommodations (2)¹,²

- “ADHD Coaching” is an emerging psychosocial support service that may be helpful in workplace functioning¹
- ADHD coaches focus on helping adults with ADHD to develop and implement coping skills that can be used to improve work efficiency
- ADHD coaching is still defining itself as a field and there is one efficacy study with positive results for adults with ADHD²

Employment Accommodations (3)¹

• Employment accommodations include:¹
  – Computer software (e.g., voice-activated software)
  – Books and manuals in audio format
  – Dictation service
  – Frequent meetings with boss to track project tasks
  – Break down large projects into individual tasks
  – Modification of job demands
  – Quiet work space
  – Written reminders of task assignments

Employment Accommodations (4)

• Commonly encountered question:

  – “Should I tell my employer that I have ADHD?”

  • During interview process?

  • After being hired?
Employment Accommodations (5)

- Vocational rehabilitation and vocational counseling
  - Indicated in cases of severe, chronic employment problems
  - Targets job finding and job maintenance skills
  - Often provides ongoing support and communication with employer during employment
Treatments for Relationship Difficulties (1)\(^1,2\)

- Adult ADHD may create problems in relationships:\(^1\)
  - Marriages / committed relationships
  - Parenting
  - Co-workers
  - Friendships
- There have been no outcome studies of marital/couples or family treatments that focus on the role of adult ADHD\(^2\)
- It is helpful to find a clinician experienced with adult ADHD

Treatments for Relationship Difficulties (2) $^{1,2,3}$

- Common interventions for relationship difficulties involving an adult with ADHD include:$^{1,2,3}$
  - Accurate diagnosis and treatment for adult ADHD
  - Communication skills training
    - Increase positive communication
    - Decrease negative communication
  - Problem-solving skills training
  - Cognitive modification of unrealistic expectations
  - Relationship enhancing activities

Strategies for Financial and Money Management\textsuperscript{1,2}

- Outsource financial matters
  - Set up electronic systems for finances
    - Paying bills
    - Automatic deposit in retirement plan or savings account
  - Tracking income and spending
    - Use “consultant” before spending (e.g., spouse)
- Coping skills for financial behaviors
  - CBT for cognitive and emotional issues around money
  - Coping strategies for spending problems (e.g., 24 hour delay)
  - Set up weekly time for budgeting, paying bills, etc.

\textsuperscript{1} Robin (in press). Lifestyle and family problems of older adolescents and adults with AD/HD. In Goldstein & Naglieri (Eds.), Learning and Attention Disorders in Adolescence and Adulthood. New York: Wiley.
Treatment options for severe emotional and functional comorbidities

- In cases of persistent emotional problems (e.g., anxiety and/or depression, anger management, self-esteem issues), individuals may be referred for either group or individual psychotherapy (including CBT) targeting the relevant emotional issues.

- In cases of persistent executive control deficits, in addition to reappraisal of pharmacotherapy options, individuals may be referred for more in depth neurological testing, possible cognitive rehabilitation, and family treatment.¹

Psychosocial Treatments for Adult ADHD: Summary (1)

- Useful adjunct to medications
- Available outcome studies of cognitive behavioral therapy and academic coaching for adult ADHD have provided evidence of their efficacy
- Can be used in cases in which medication treatment is ineffective or contraindicated
- Are relevant in various settings (e.g., school, work, social)
Psychosocial Treatments for Adult ADHD: Summary (2)

- Psychosocial treatments for adult ADHD may be provided by:
  - psychologists and other mental health professionals
  - ADHD coaches
  - university disability and learning support specialists
  - family and couples therapists
  - vocational rehabilitation counselors
Thank You