



ADHD: What It Is, How It Works, & How to Manage it Effectively



LILY MENTAL HEALTH

www.lilymentalhealth.com

What is ADHD?

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition, not a character flaw or a lack of willpower. ADHD affects how the brain regulates attention, motivation, executive functioning, and emotional responses.

People with ADHD often describe feeling:

- overwhelmed by small tasks
- flooded with ideas but unable to execute them
- inconsistent (highly capable but unable to perform reliably)
- frustrated by “why can I do it some days, but not others?”
- constantly “behind” despite trying hard
- mentally exhausted from simple decisions or everyday responsibilities

ADHD is often described in patterns of:

- difficulty initiating tasks
- difficulty sustaining attention
- inconsistent focus
- emotional sensitivity
- impulsivity or restlessness
- challenges with planning, structure, and follow-through
- difficulty managing time and losing track of how long tasks actually take
- Difficulty prioritizing tasks

ADHD is also highly treatable.

With the right tools, medication when appropriate, and daily structure, most people experience dramatic improvements in functioning and well-being.

The Brain & ADHD: A Brief Overview

ADHD is associated with differences in multiple brain circuits, including:

- attention
- motivation
- reward processing
- working memory
- impulse control
- emotional regulation
- executive functioning
- cognitive flexibility

Key neurochemical differences include:

Dopamine dysregulation- Lower tonic dopamine in the prefrontal cortex and striatum contributes to difficulty sustaining attention, low motivation, and inconsistent focus.

Norepinephrine (NE) dysregulation- Reduced NE activity affects alertness, focus, and the ability to transition between tasks.

Risk factors include:

- genetic predisposition (strongest factor)
- prenatal exposures (stress, tobacco, alcohol)
- premature birth
- childhood adversity or chronic stress
- family history of ADHD, anxiety, or mood disorders

ADHD is not caused by poor parenting, diet, or “bad habits.” However, lifestyle choices strongly impact symptom severity, which means you have a meaningful role in managing your brain health.

What Is (and Isn't) ADHD

Fatigue, stress, and feeling overwhelmed can mimic ADHD. True ADHD involves ongoing difficulties with attention, motivation, organization, working memory, time management, and impulse control that begin in childhood and appear across multiple settings. It is not occasional procrastination but a consistent neurodevelopmental pattern.

Normal Struggles vs. ADHD Symptoms- Everyone loses focus or feels unmotivated at times. ADHD becomes more likely when challenges are persistent, impairing, and disproportionate to the situation. Understanding this distinction helps clarify what is ADHD versus what may be related to burnout, anxiety, sleep issues, hormones, high stress, or life demands.

The Importance of Accurate Diagnosis- Because ADHD shares symptoms with many other conditions, a thoughtful, comprehensive evaluation is essential. Self-diagnosing or relying on informal advice can overlook underlying medical, psychological, or environmental factors. A trained clinician will consider the full context, not just surface-level symptoms.

Medication and Misuse Considerations- Stimulants can improve focus for many people, even those without ADHD. While this may feel helpful in the moment, research shows that inappropriate stimulant use can negatively affect sleep, anxiety, and long-term cognitive functioning. This is why accurate diagnosis, medical oversight, and proper monitoring are so important.

Why Careful Evaluation Matters- ADHD is real, common, and treatable. At the same time, symptoms of everyday life stress or emotional overwhelm do not automatically mean ADHD is present. A careful assessment ensures that people receive the right support.

Treatment Overview

The most effective ADHD treatment is a comprehensive, layered plan.

Medication can dramatically improve symptoms, but skills, routines, and lifestyle changes create lasting improvement. Evidence-based treatments include:

Medication (stimulants + non-stimulants)

Medications can help manage symptoms when used thoughtfully

Behavioral Skills & Executive Function Coaching

Practical strategies for task management, routines, planning.

Lifestyle Optimization

Sleep, nutrition, exercise, and screen time all influence symptoms.

Psychotherapy (CBT-based ADHD focus)

Focuses on structure, perfectionism, emotional regulation, and productivity skills.

Environment & Habits

Small changes in structure dramatically change outcomes.

Medication alone is not the full answer.

Skills alone are not the full answer.

Together, they create real transformation.

Medication Overview- Stimulants

Stimulant medications can be highly effective tools for managing ADHD by improving attention, motivation, and follow-through. They are powerful medications that work best when prescribed intentionally, monitored thoughtfully, and paired with supportive lifestyle habits.

Methylphenidate-based (Ritalin, Concerta, Focalin)

- Tends to have a more subtle, steady effect compared to amphetamines
- Often preferred for sensitive or anxious individuals
- Smoother onset for many patients
- Often a good first option

Amphetamine-based (Adderall, Vyvanse, Mydayis)

- Work on both dopamine and norepinephrine release
- Sometimes more potent for attention + motivation
- Vyvanse is the most tamper-resistant and smoother-acting option
- Sometimes associated with a stronger “activation” effect

The different stimulant classes vary in several important ways, including their half-life, overall duration of action, smoothness of onset and clearance, their side-effect profiles, and the delivery systems used, such as capsules, tablets, bead-release mechanisms, or prodrugs. Finding the right dose is equally important, as higher doses are not always better—too much dopamine or norepinephrine can be just as problematic as too little. When prescribed thoughtfully and monitored appropriately, both stimulant categories are considered safe & effective options.

Medication Overview- Non-Stimulants

Nonstimulant medications offer additional, evidence-based options for treating ADHD, especially for individuals who cannot tolerate stimulants or prefer a steadier, more gradual effect. Nonstimulants can meaningfully improve attention, emotional regulation, and impulse control.

Atomoxetine (Strattera)

- Selective NE reuptake inhibitor
- Helpful for anxiety + ADHD combination
- Not a controlled substance & no abuse potential

Qelbree

- Selective NE reuptake inhibitor
- Often shows benefit sooner than Strattera
- May offer additional support for emotional regulation & irritability

Guanfacine (Intuniv)

- May improve emotional regulation, reactivity, and sleep
- Helpful for hyperactivity or impulsivity
- Can be used along stimulants to smooth out rebound symptoms

Bupropion (Wellbutrin)

- Dopamine/NE modulation
- Helpful for ADHD + depression
- May improve motivation
- Often a good option for patients who prefer a non-stimulant option

Nonstimulants differ in how they work, how quickly they take effect, and which symptoms they target, and each has its own dosing schedule and side-effect profile. When taken consistently and monitored appropriately, they are safe and effective options that can support ADHD treatment.

Medication Risks & Monitoring

Common side effects include appetite suppression, mild increases in heart rate or blood pressure, difficulty falling asleep, irritability or “wear-off” anxiety as the medication fades, and symptoms such as dry mouth or headaches.

Important Monitoring Parameters:

You should monitor:

- Blood pressure
- Heart rate
- Weight

When to notify your clinician:

- Sustained BP > 140/90
- Resting heart rate consistently above 100–110
- New chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Severe headaches

Staying informed about side effects, knowing what to monitor, and reaching out promptly with any concerns are key parts of safe and effective ADHD treatment. Regular blood pressure and heart rate checks, along with consistent follow-up, help ensure your medication continues to support your health and well-being.

Making Your Medication Work for YOU!

Medications can make a meaningful difference in ADHD symptoms, but their effectiveness is strongly influenced by daily habits, timing, and overall health. Understanding what helps medication work better—and what can interfere with it—allows you to get the most benefit from your treatment.

What can make medication less effective?

- Taking stimulant at inconsistent times
- Caffeine overload
- High vitamin C right when taking medication (can affect absorption)
- Poor sleep
- Low protein intake
- Alcohol or cannabis use
- Irregular eating patterns

What can make medications more effective?

- Consistent schedule
- High-protein breakfast
- Hydration
- Sleep optimization
- Reducing multitasking
- Clear routines
- Skill-based ADHD strategies
- Regular physical activity
- Limiting alcohol & cannabis
- Adequate omega-3 and Magnesium intake

Medication is one tool – your daily habits amplify or diminish its impact.

ADHD Symptoms: Inattentive

Below are the most common inattentive symptoms with targeted strategies that work.

Difficulty starting tasks: Trouble initiating tasks often stems from low dopamine and executive overload. Helpful strategies include using the 5-minute rule, breaking tasks into tiny steps, using body doubling, setting timers, trying the Pomodoro method, and reducing friction by preparing materials ahead of time.

Difficulty sustaining focus: To improve sustained focus, work in timed focus blocks, use noise-cancelling headphones or brown noise, remove visual clutter, keep only one task visible at a time, and use website blockers to limit digital distractions.

Poor organization: Organization improves when everything has a designated home, you rely on one planning system, complete a brief weekly reset, and use color-coded calendars to keep work, personal tasks, and appointments clear.

Forgetfulness / working memory issues: Working memory challenges improve when you externalize information by using calendars, reminders, and whiteboards, writing tasks down immediately, and using cue-based routines to anchor important habits.

Losing track of time (time blindness): Time blindness can be managed with visual timers, alarms for transitions, block scheduling, and starting tasks earlier than expected to create more predictable structure.

ADHD Symptoms: Hyperactive

Even if you primarily identify as inattentive, many adults also experience subtle hyperactive symptoms.

Restlessness or inability to relax: Restlessness can improve with structured movement such as walking, stretching, or gym sessions, and by using fidget tools or a standing desk to channel excess energy in a controlled way.

Interrupting and impulsivity: Impulsivity may be reduced by practicing a brief pause before responding, using journaling to process emotional reactions, and applying CBT techniques to reframe automatic thoughts.

Emotional sensitivity / rejection sensitivity (RSD): RSD can be managed by naming the experience (“This is RSD, not reality”), slowing your physiological response with deep breathing, limiting social media exposure, and creating predictable routines that support grounding.



Lifestyle Medicine for ADHD

Lifestyle interventions significantly reduce symptom severity.

Sleep Optimization: Sleep improves with a consistent bedtime and wake time, turning screens off an hour before bed, taking magnesium glycinate if appropriate, keeping the bedroom dark and cool, and avoiding stimulants after early afternoon.

Nutrition: Nutrition habits that support ADHD include eating high protein in the morning, choosing balanced meals with protein, healthy fats, and complex carbs, reducing ultra-processed foods, supplementing with omega-3s when appropriate, and staying well hydrated.

Movement: Regular movement boosts focus and mood; cardio increases dopamine and norepinephrine, strength training supports executive functioning, and even 10 minutes of activity can meaningfully improve symptoms.

Digital Hygiene: Digital hygiene strategies include limiting social media, turning off nonessential notifications, using Focus Mode on your phone, and creating tech-free morning or evening routines to reduce overstimulation.

Using ADHD to Your Advantage

ADHD IS NOT FAILURE!

It is evidence of a brain wired for creativity, energy, intuition, and unconventional thinking.

Individuals with ADHD often excel in:

- ✔ entrepreneurship
- ✔ crisis response
- ✔ innovation
- ✔ leadership
- ✔ empathy
- ✔ high-energy environments

You do not need to “fix” your brain — you need to support it, understand it, and work with it.

With insight, medication when needed, structure, and the right tools, ADHD becomes manageable — and often, a source of strength.

You are not behind.

You are not broken.

You are learning your brain.

And that changes everything.

How Lily Mental Health Can Help

At Lily Mental Health, ADHD care is thoughtful, personalized, and grounded in evidence—not rushed or one-size-fits-all. My goal is to help you understand your brain, feel supported, and learn practical tools that make daily life easier.

Personalized Care: I take the time to understand your unique symptoms, strengths, and goals so we can create a treatment plan that actually fits your life.

Medication Support: If medication is appropriate, you'll receive clear guidance on how each option works, what to expect, and how we'll monitor for safety. All decisions are collaborative and tailored to your needs.

Integrative Support: ADHD is influenced by sleep, nutrition, stress, hormones, and daily habits. I help you understand how these factors affect your symptoms and provide simple, realistic strategies to improve focus, energy, and emotional regulation.

A Supportive Space: My goal is to help you build confidence, reduce shame, and create systems that support who you are—not who you think you “should” be.



BONUS TOOL: The Pomodoro Method

A simple structure to help your brain work with you, not against you.

What It Is: The Pomodoro Technique is a time-management method that breaks work into short, focused intervals with intentional, restorative breaks. Instead of pushing your brain for long stretches (which often leads to overwhelm or avoidance), Pomodoro helps you work in manageable bursts that support dopamine, attention, and momentum.

How to Try It

1. **Choose one task to focus on.**
2. **Clear distractions: silence your phone, close unused tabs, turn off notifications.**
3. **Keep a notepad handy to jot down intrusive or off-task thoughts.**
4. **Set a 25-minute timer — this is one “Pomodoro.”**
5. **Work without stopping until the timer rings.**
6. **Take a 5-minute break: stretch, breathe, hydrate, step outside.**
7. **Repeat this cycle.**
8. **After four Pomodoros, take a longer break (15–30 minutes).**
9. **Optional: use an app (Focus Keeper, Pomofocus, Forest) to guide your sessions.**

Why It Works

- **Helps the ADHD brain stay focused in short, manageable bursts.**
- **Breaks large, overwhelming tasks into approachable pieces.**
- **Builds momentum with tasks that are hard to start.**
- **Prevents burnout and overstimulation.**
- **Increases motivation through quick wins.**
- **Encourages regular movement, hydration, and rest.**