

## **Neurocognitive Psychotherapy for AD/HD**

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The therapeutic approach I outline in this article is based on my many years of experience in working with children, adolescents and adults with ADHD. This approach focuses on a broad range of issues which are designed to help you create an ADD (ADHD) friendly lifestyle, to help you develop daily habits that will reduce ADHD challenges and help you function at your full potential, to understand your strengths and talents, and to make life choices that will support you in reaching your goals. I call my treatment approach Neuro-cognitive Psychotherapy to emphasize that ADHD (ADD) has a very definite neurological basis that must be addressed if treatment is going to be successful.

My therapeutic approach emphasizes the need for structure and goals. In each psychotherapy session, my client and I set an agenda for the session, to be sure that critical issues are dealt with. This approach is very different from many psychotherapeutic approaches that are loose and unstructured and may never directly address the ADHD challenges that you are experiencing. Typically, specific goals are set to be accomplished between therapy sessions and progress is reviewed at the beginning of each session. I work with you to help you move beyond self-defeating self-blame toward a more constructive, problem-solving approach to the challenges of ADHD. Developing better life-management tools, building a lifestyle that is more ADHD-friendly, and learning how to set and reach realistic long-term life goals are all part of the process.

### **Addressing the Neurobiological Aspects of AD/HD**

Too often, therapists focus on the psychological “baggage” of AD/HD (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem) – while never addressing the AD/HD issues that generate these feelings. Neurocognitive

psychotherapy addresses both psychological distress and concrete problems in daily living in an integrated fashion, moving back and forth between the practical and the emotional, between the present and the past, between ADHD and related or coexisting conditions. Neuro-cognitive psychotherapy involves a dynamic interweaving of focus—attending to the emotional and the cognitive, to the inner world of feelings and the outer world of life challenges.

### **Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques**

The beginning steps of the therapeutic journey start with learning to understand AD/HD, what it is and how you are specifically affected by it. I work with my clients to better understand AD/HD, but to “reframe” AD/HD in a more balanced, constructive way that helps them comfortably accept their ADHD (ADD) and begin to engage in constructive problem-solving. With a growing understanding of ADHD, you can develop a more positive self-concept as well as a realistic sense of your potential. While there is so much emphasis on the difficulties and challenges of ADHD, I am a firm believer that ADHD is also accompanied by positive traits including energy, curiosity, creativity and out-of-the-box thinking that leads many with ADHD to become successful entrepreneurs. Many traits related to AD/HD may be detrimental in some environments, but may actually be beneficial in others. I work to help my clients move from asking “what’s wrong with me” to asking “what are my strengths and weaknesses.” Then, we can begin to find a good match between his interests, abilities, and traits that can help him reach his real potential at school or at work.

### **Improving Your Cognitive Functioning**

Stimulant medication, at present, is the perhaps best known approach to improving cognitive functioning for those with AD/HD. However, whether or not a client chooses to take stimulant

medication, there are many other approaches that are also critical to good cognitive functioning. Neurocognitive psychotherapy teaches the individual to take responsibility for daily habits and patterns that can play important roles in optimal brain functioning. These include daily aerobic exercise, a balanced diet low in processed starch and sugar; good sleep habits, reduced stress levels, learning stress-reducing self-calming techniques; and taking B vitamins and fish oil, both of which are well-documented to support good brain function. I work together with my clients on many levels to identify and change factors that interfere with good cognitive functioning. Cognitive functioning is strongly affected by stress levels, hormonal fluctuations, sleep, exercise, health habits, and many other environmental factors. The therapist can work closely with her client to help identify healthy daily habits – such as improved diet, exercise, sleep patterns that can all help to improve cognitive functioning.

### **Self-management Strategies**

Even if medication is part of the treatment program, stimulant medication cannot magically solve all AD/HD-related challenges. Adults with AD/HD need to develop techniques to compensate for some of their difficulties –by developing new habits, using visual reminders, and using a range of electronic tools (programmable watches, time management software, etc.) Although many of these things will be discussed in our therapy sessions, I may also refer you to an ADHD (ADD) coach if it seems that more regular contact would be helpful as you learn to manage the flow of your daily life and to accomplish the many tasks that are part of your work, school or personal life. In many cases, I also recommend that you work for a period of time with a professional organizer to help you take charge of clutter and disorder in your home or work environment.

### **Creating an Environment that Reduces ADHD Challenges**

Helping you to make your environment more ADD-friendly is an essential part of my therapeutic approach. Together with my clients I help them identify factors that increase stress and ADHD symptoms and then work with him to change them. These include a focus on social environments (choosing to associate with those that appreciate and support you rather than being negative or critical); improving and decluttering the home environment; and making constructive choices or changes at work or at school. As a part of this process, it is often helpful to engage significant others in your treatment – so that they can better understand ADHD and how it affects both them and their loved one.

### **Co-existing conditions**

AD/HD rarely exists in a vacuum. As a clinical psychologist, I treat the whole individual, not their ADHD. If I am going to be helpful in treating you, I need to carefully assess whether common coexisting conditions such as anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, bi-polar disorder, or eating disorders are part of the picture. If this is the case, treatment of these conditions will be interwoven with approaches that address your AD/HD challenges.

### **Structuring the Psychotherapy Session**

Structure is important in the therapy session, just as structure is helpful in other parts of your life as you learn to better manage your ADHD challenges. Just as unfocused activity rarely helps an individual with ADHD reach a goal, unfocused, rambling therapy sessions are rarely productive. Neuro-cognitive therapy sessions are structured to help you review issues discussed in earlier sessions, review issues related to other treating professionals (medication issues, coaching issues, etc.), set priorities for the focus of the current session, and set goals or tasks to work on between sessions.

Memory difficulties are very common in adults with AD/HD. Because many of my clients have difficulty clearly recalling things from session to session, I encourage my clients to take notes in a spiral

notebook specifically set aside for this purpose which they keep with them most of the time. This allows them to jot down issues that they want to remember to discuss the next time they see me, and also allows them to review the “homework” they have been assigned to accomplish before the next session. I also encourage clients to email me when they have accomplished a specific task, to help them stay on track in working toward their goals. Some clients also find it helpful to audiotape their sessions so that they can listen to them again following the session. Each session involves setting goals and priorities and then establishing realistic steps to work toward those goals.

### **Care coordination**

In many cases, good ADHD (ADD) treatment involves more than one professional. Because I do not prescribe medication, clear, open communication is important between me and the prescribing physician, who, in many cases, relies on my input to assess your response to medication. If ADD coaches or psychotherapists are also working with you, communication between us from time to time is important to coordinate your treatment.

### **Bringing it all together**

AD/HD is a complex, but highly treatable disorder. After many years of clinical work, I am frequently reminded that each client is unique and complex, an individual who is challenged by, but not defined by his AD/HD. My treatment approach is always developed in collaboration with my client, setting goals and priorities to respond to the particular issues and challenges of his life.