

ADHD: It's All a Matter of Interest

By NANCY GANIARD SMITH, Staff Writer

The first thing Susan Stiffelman, MFT, challenges about ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) is its label as a disorder.

"People with ADHD are very bright, creative, out-of-the-box thinkers," she says. "I don't see it as a disorder or deficit, since they can concentrate just fine when interested in something. It's the ability to concentrate when not interested that's the issue."

Stiffelman is an educational therapist and family counselor who specializes in working with children, teens and adults with ADHD. Her long-time Malibu practice attracts patients from distant points throughout Southern California, including many Palisadians.

ADHD used to be known simply as ADD (attention deficit disorder). In 1994, it was renamed ADHD and broken down into three subtypes: an inattentive type, a hyperactive-impulsive type and a combined type.

"ADHD kids are the class clowns, the ones bouncing off the walls," Stiffelman says. "ADD children are very quiet and spend most of the time daydreaming, especially in the classroom. Both brains have trouble being alert when not interested."

Defined in the most general sense as an inability to focus, ADHD affects an estimated 8 to 10 percent of school-age children, and boys are about three times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with it. Scientists now know the condition is biological and genetic—it is not caused by poor parenting, too much sugar or vaccines.

It was once believed that kids could grow out of the symptoms of ADHD, but that theory is now disputed as many adults—currently about 8 million in the U.S.—seek treatment for it.

"Adults with ADHD often tap their feet, bite their nails, pace and have hyperactivity of the mouth," Stiffelman continues. "They can't let you finish a sentence."

Anxiety and depression are often factors with

adult ADHD, so the assessment and treatment are made more complicated.

What every age group with ADHD shares is a tendency to put things off—especially things that hold no interest—until the last minute.

Procrastination leads to panic, bringing a needed sense of drama to the task. "Panic releases adrenaline. It's like Ritalin; it naturally wakes up the brain," Stiffelman says. "It serves as the fuel for fast-minute projects."

Since people with ADHD have difficulty doing things that aren't stimulating, organizing and accomplishing life's routine tasks are often a major problem. "The entertainment industry is filled with people who have ADD and ADHD," she adds. "They have people working for them to manage all those details."

Stiffelman sees medication as being only part of the solution, and advocates behavioral therapies as effective tools to help shift the brain.

"Taking a pill doesn't help kids motivate themselves when they're not interested," she explains.

According to Stiffelman, there are many strategies ADHD sufferers can weave into their lives, things as simple as establishing new routines and carrying an organizer. Dietary factors loom large, too, with adequate protein needed throughout the day. Sleep is a big component, and those with ADHD who are running on low levels are at an extreme disadvantage.

The various behaviors associated with ADHD—being easily distracted, not being averse to risk, acting impulsively—are traits Stiffelman views as analogous to being a good hunter or having a "hunter brain." By contrast, she sees schools as a "farmer's world," where steady, predictable behavior—planting seeds in nice tidy rows six inches apart—is rewarded.

"There's nothing wrong with being either a hunter or a farmer," she says. "The truth is their brains are simply wired differently."

For links, books and more information, visit www.susanstiffelman.com.



Fish Schmitt/Staff Photographer

Susan Stiffelman