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The Negative Effect of ADHD on Emotional Intelligence

by Gary Thompson, Ph.D.

The Challenge of ADHD in Adulthood

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurobiological disorder that usually presents in early childhood characterized by various combinations of problems with attention deployment, heightened physical activity level and lack of emotional or behavior self-control. Recent estimates suggest a prevalence of about 8.4 percent in children.

The manifestations of ADHD, occurring in 4.4 percent of adults,

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can vary over time. For example, the rambunctious, high energy, overactive child may become an outwardly calm and quiet, but internally restless adult. The disorder can be easily misdiagnosed in adults. Several of its symptoms occur in non-ADHD individuals, although at relatively lower levels of intensity and duration. Also, certain psychiatric and medical disorders have symptoms similar to ADHD, including major depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, autism spectrum disorder, learning disorder, sleep apnea, hypothyroidism

and hypoglycemia. To further complicate matters, ADHD has a higher than average rate of co-occurring with anxiety/depression or undiagnosed sleep apnea. Although not included among the ADHD diagnostic criteria in the most recent revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual published by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5), problems with identifying and regulating emotions occur more frequently in ADHD populations than in people who do not have ADHD. Examples of these would include mood swings, poor frustration tolerance, and difficulty censoring strong reactions. Research studies have shown that individuals with ADHD are at greater risk of having low emotional intelligence (EI) than non-ADHD individuals.

Emotional Intelligence

Though the concept of emotional intelligence dates back to the early 1960s, it was only popularized with the 1995 publication of the Daniel Goleman book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*. John Mayer and Peter Salovey played a primary role in developing EI as a psychological theory with their 1990 article, "Emotional Intelligence," published in the journal, *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*. Mayer and Salovey defined EI as "the ability to perceive emotions, to access

and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth." Emotional intelligence is comprised of various abilities present at birth, and acquired skills learned through experience and practice. Acquired EI skills appear to have nearly unlimited potential for growth throughout an individual's lifetime. Thus, being born with low emotional intelligence is not a life sentence. One's EI can be transformed in ways that markedly enhance success in interacting with one's self or with other human beings.

The Importance of Emotional Intelligence for Healthy Relationships

Individuals with low emotional intelligence tend to experience stress easily, hold grudges, lack empathy, feel misunderstood and think that other people are overly sensitive. They do not understand how other people feel, refuse to listen to other points of view, and encounter more than usual difficulty coping with emotionally-charged situations. They make assumptions quickly and defend them vehemently. By contrast, individuals with high EI have great social skills, are highly motivated, understand

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Father Toellner *continued*

they can attend to them in a healthy manner. His therapist also encouraged him to adjust to the life changes that come along every day, such as thinking before acting, or resisting the urge to take unnecessary risks; using skills from his Life Skills class.

Tools for Living with ADHD

Father Toellner's therapist helped him learn how to organize his life with various tools. While at Saint Luke Institute, he learned the importance of keeping to a healthy routine and using a calendar for scheduling events and a to-do list to track tasks. He began to use reminder notes on his mirror and in his wallet. He expanded on this habit by setting alarms on his cell phone to remind him to take medication and about important events throughout the

day. While in treatment, he practiced assigning a special place to keep his keys, bills, and paperwork. With the help of his therapeutic team he learned how to break down tasks into more manageable, smaller steps so that completing each part of the task provided a sense of accomplishment.

Post Therapy Support

ADHD affects both the diagnosed individual and the people in their life. Recognizing this reality, a "reentry" meeting is a critical step in successful transition from residential treatment to home. Father Toellner's Continuing Care liaison helped educate members of his support team about ADHD and its effects. The liaison encouraged the support team members and contact person to develop new skills, attitudes,

and ways of relating to each other and Father Toellner. He continued working with a licensed clinical psychologist for about a year following treatment. Together they built off the skills from CBT, Mindfulness, and Life Skills. He continued to process the cues that he was now more aware of through his EI training and learning about his own feelings, reactions and healthy ways of responding and attending to his environment. Today, Father Toellner understands himself better, has the tools to navigate his ADHD, and his staff and those on his support team also have better insight and skills in working with him.

For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

The Importance of the ADHD/Emotional Intelligence Connection

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how people feel, and pay attention to what they are feeling. They are able to regulate their emotions, willing and able to discuss their feelings with others, and able to correctly identify their underlying causes of their emotions.

The Essential Contribution of Attention Abilities to Emotional Intelligence

ADHD symptoms negatively impact emotional clarity. In general, people with ADHD tend to have difficulty with social skills. When hyperactive/impulsive ADHD symptoms are predominant, the ability to actively improve negative emotions suffers. As is evident with ADHD, people who have low emotional intelligence encounter

difficulty reading and responding to nonverbal cues that guide acceptable behavior in social or novel situations. Self-awareness and the capacity for empathy are foundational components of EI. Both abilities are compromised in individuals with ADHD. Thus, treating ADHD while ignoring the potential negative impact of low emotional intelligence significantly limits an individual's ability to realize their full potential. In similar fashion, failing to identify and remediate low EI in the absence of ADHD is associated with similar risks.

The Importance of Diagnosing Adult ADHD

The aim of the Caritas ADHD Clinic is

to provide comprehensive assessment of ADHD in a manner that improves diagnostic accuracy. Evaluation of EI is a primary component of the comprehensive ADHD assessment because of the strong connection between the two. Efficient diagnosis and treatment of ADHD requires determination of, and if needed, counseling specifically focused on improving EI. Additional information regarding ADHD/EI Assessment Program, ongoing treatment of ADHD, and counseling specifically focused on improving EI, can be found at www.sli.org.

Gary Thompson, Ph.D. is director of the Caritas Counseling Center's ADHD Clinic, part of Saint Luke Institute's outpatient program.

Together We Rise

A good shepherd counts each of his sheep and knows them by name. Each is valued and unique. When a sheep is missing, it is the shepherd who initiates the search for the lost, leaving behind the flock to seek the one. In Luke's Gospel (15: 3-7), Jesus teaches about a primary attribute of his Father, that of compassion.

In relaying the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus draws attention to God's action in seeking us when we are lost. As with sheep when scared, sometimes we hide or seek shelter apart from the group. But the Father in his mercy and generosity reaches out to us—seeks to reconnect—while assuring us that we are loved and valued. Though we may have wandered, we are forgiven, cradled gently, and brought home.

On October 18, we celebrated the Feast of Saint Luke. A physician in the early church, Luke sought those wounded and provided healing. As the namesake of our institution, Saint Luke provides the narrative for our care: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Brother, and the Curing of Peter's Mother-in-Law (LK 4:38-39).

But perhaps more compelling is the Raising of the Widow's Son at Nain (LK 7:11-17). In response to the widow—in the midst of her sorrow—Jesus tells her, "Do not weep" (LK 7:13). Then he touches

the bier (again God initiates the action) and commands, "young man, I say to you rise!" (7:14). The story concludes with the dead man sitting up and speaking while those gathered glorified God and exclaimed that God had "looked favorably upon his people." (LK 7:16)

The Annual Benefit to Support Saint Luke Institute was Monday, October 21, 2019. On this night we did not weep; but instead gave gratitude to God for his

saving action in the lives of those who seek treatment for mental illness and addiction. In this moment, as a Catholic community, we celebrated the new life that has sprung forth in our Catholic clergy and religious, and the new life the Catholic Church is called to be in the world.

Thank you for your generous support; together we rise!



Pictured from left: Mr. David Brown (SLI Board chair), Archbishop Christophe Pierre (Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America), Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory (Archbishop of Washington, D.C. and 2019 SLI Saint Luke awardee), Rev. David Songy, OFM Cap. (SLI President and CEO) and Mrs. Christine Gill (SLI Board Co-Chair). Photograph by Silver Orchard Creative

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