

Tips on managing ADHD for teens: An interview with Ali Breen, millennials career coach

By Jen Hill

FICTION: ADHD is something you grow out of.

FACT: An increasing number of teens and adults are being diagnosed with ADHD. In a study of people with employer medical insurance, between 2002 and 2007 the number of US adults who were diagnosed with ADHD tripled (Montejano, Sasane, Hodgkins, Russo, & Huse, 2011). Over 40% of these diagnoses were in young adults ages 18-24.

FICTION: Medication is the only route to treatment.

FACT: Complementary treatments, from lifestyle to diet to behaviour, can significantly change the way ADHD or similar conditions affect daily life.

I sat down with Millennials Career Coach Ali Breen to talk about the gifts of ADHD, proven strategies used by her clients and what teens can start doing today to help prepare for their post high-school lives. Bonus: these tips are excellent strategies for nurturing good mental health in everyone!

Q: Your late teens are full of change. In particular, transitioning to postsecondary education from high school means more freedom, but more individual responsibility. How can young adults with ADHD prepare to take this step?

A: I think the keyword in your question is “prepare”. I work with millennials, which are people in their late teens, twenties and early thirties. You’re right, there is so much growth that happens in these years, and really the only constant is change. Preparation for your challenges is key to beating “overwhelm” and getting what you want out of your school and life. The three main areas that my younger clients focus on are organization, focus, and balance. I have people coming to me at 33 that have been struggling with these things for 10 years or more, and it’s holding them back. Getting clear about your strategies in your teens sets you up for success.

Q: Let’s take the non-linear, ADHD-approach and talk about the last area you mentioned: balance.

A: This means balancing your newfound freedom with all of your added responsibilities. Teens transition into doing more “adulting”, with all of the new commitments that come with that, combined with a newly autonomous approach to learning. In high school, you are disciplined for not doing your daily homework. People with ADHD need that pressure. I use the metaphor of a bear chasing you. The bear, in high school, is your grumpy math teacher. At college, and in adult life in general, you have to create your own bears. The consequences for not following through on your assigned readings or paying your bills are not immediate, but you’ll definitely feel them during mid-terms or when your internet gets shut off. One of the best strategies is to

trick your ADHD brain into thinking there is a bear, even when you know there is no immediate consequence.

There are two strategies that work well here, create a bear or find relief. For example, a simple way to create a bear is using your smartphone. Set a timer, and race with yourself to beat your best time at an assigned task. Finding relief, as a strategy, is creating the feeling of relief that you feel when you've escaped the bear. For example, choose a reward, which can be anything that lights you up, from a favourite show to a tasty treat. The trick is to look forward to completing your assigned task in order to get the reward. You don't get the reward unless you live up to your responsibility.

Q: I like the idea of rewards. Are there any specific ones that you recommend?

I'm glad you asked that! Yes! I encourage my clients to think beyond Netflix and food and choose rewards that make them feel good and are good for them. The ADHD brain responds so well to unplugging - getting off the screen - and getting out into nature. It's proven to reduce cortisol levels and to help with focus. Mindfulness, yoga or meditation practice all help with



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dopamine levels, and they give you a chance to just settle into yourself and calm the anxiety that often goes hand-in-hand with ADHD. Any kind of exercise helps too. There are tons of resources that outline ideas for healthy, pro-active rewards. These offer both a feel-good vibe and are good for your brain. It's like a double dose of awesome.

Q: What if you really love Netflix though?

A: It goes back to balance. There is nothing inherently wrong or unhealthy about Netflix. If it becomes an addiction that you use to avoid your responsibilities, that's obviously something you'd need to address. If all you do is yoga, and you ignore pop culture all together, it might be hard to strike up a conversation at a party. Finding a balance of a wide variety of rewards and activities is the best way to create that relief feeling. If you don't change it up, then you get bored with the reward of watching Netflix over and over and then the strategy isn't as effective. Having a big grab bag of good habits is a great defense against overusing not-so-healthy ones.

I think it's really important when we talk about balance to also talk about honouring how we cope. All coping is good, because it allows us to get through the day. As we get older, and as we learn more about ourselves and our mental health, from what our triggers are to what makes us healthy, we can be really judgy. We judge what we did in the past to cope. I invite anyone doing any reflection to be really kind and gentle with themselves, and to move forward knowing that your past choices are helping you make better, different choices now.

Q: You mentioned the importance of focus. Can you tell me about that?

A: Focus is a big one. On the one hand, it can be hard to stay focused on one task. On the other, one of the gifts of ADHD is that you can get hyper-focused on a task.

There are two strategies that my clients love for focus. The first is transition time. People with ADHD notoriously “take forever” to get ready. The reason is that it takes energy and time to shift focus with an ADHD brain. Building transition time between tasks or events into your schedule can make all the difference between focused and engaged versus overwhelmed and anxious. This is about more than giving yourself a buffer for traffic. Time management won’t work without allowing for this transition time.

The second tip is called “state change”. Sometimes, you just can’t stop thinking about something, or feeling a certain way, and you need to move on. The mind-body link in people with ADHD is strong. A state change is where you change the state your body is in. For example, by having a shower or going from somewhere hot to cold, like stepping out onto your patio in the winter. When you change the environment around your body, you can more easily change your mental environment. Sometimes you need this extra push. That’s why exercise is a great double-dose of awesome reward. It usually involves a state change.

Q: Let’s talk more about the “gifts” of ADHD. Often, as it’s recognized as a mental illness, the aim is on how to manage it, versus how to use it to your advantage. It can be scary to be given this diagnosis and you can lose confidence in yourself.

A: Exactly. ADD Expert Bryan Hutchinson explains it well. Using the word “gifts” encourages a shift in perspective (Hutchinson, 2012). You go from “I have a disorder and my brain is broken, which limits me” to “I am unique and my brain works differently, which gives me diverse talents”. Things like creativity, empathy and leadership abilities are inherent in people with ADHD. These are just some of the gifts. The flip side of impulsivity, commonly referred to as a negative trait, actually leads to great coping skills and reaction time to chaos and challenge. That’s why so many ER doctors have ADHD. Learning about yourself and recognizing your gifts and your challenges is part of that preparation for change that we talked about at the beginning.

Q: The third thing you mentioned was organization. Do you have any tips you can share?

A: I have tons! It really depends on what will work best for you. Making your organization as easy as possible is a great place to start. A one or two-step process is much better than 5 steps. I had a client that kept a journal and took notes all day. He used the notebook at work and at school, for reminders or ideas or grocery lists. Then, he’d try and go back and look at his notes but they were jumbled and mixed together. He’d spend time re-organizing his thoughts with coloured highlighters and searching for the lists or reminders that he needed, but he kept missing things. My simple solution: a 4-coloured click pen. He chose one colour for reminders, another for ideas, etc. and he was able to use the ADHD trick of colour-coding to his advantage from the start, as soon as pen hit paper. This is a one-step process and that’s why it worked for him. Two more quick tips: mute all notifications from your apps except those that you set

yourself to remind you to change tasks or get to a class, etc. The other tip? Stop saying yes to everything. Say maybe, sleep on it, and then say yes once you've thought it through. If you less to manage, managing is easier.

The last thing about organization is to work with what you have and who you have. Great ER doctors that have ADHD often recognize that paperwork is not their strong suit, so they have support staff to help with the administration. You can play to your strengths too. Let's say, you hyper-focus on cleaning the bathroom and trade-off with your roommate who takes care of the shared finances in your apartment.

Q: That sounds like a disability accommodation. How can students advocate for accommodations that they might need at work or at school?

A: The short answer is to learn. Conditions and illnesses can affect any given person differently. There is no one size fits all accommodation for ADHD, or anxiety or depression, etc. Learn what your rights are. Learn what grants might be out there to help you finance the support you need. When asking for an accommodation, a lot of people just disclose their conditions and leave it up to the employer to decide what can or should be done. As you learn more about how your condition affects you, you get familiar with what supports work best for you. Then, you disclose your disability to your employer and can ask for what you need in your particular job. This makes it so much easier for employers to accommodate you, and see the benefits of doing so. In school, talking to the disability support team as you start your program is great, but don't hesitate to reach out to them later in the school year if you are starting to struggle. This goes for employment too. You can legally ask for an accommodation at any time, not only at the beginning of a job. Reach out to a coach or someone in your support network that has experience with this as you navigate it. It's great to have someone in your corner.

Q: So many great tips! If there was one thing that you'd want teens to start doing today to help them prepare, what would it be?

A: Build your tribe! Get a health care team together, from your doctor, to a counsellor to a massage therapist. Join Facebook groups and read blogs written by young adults with ADHD. Check in with your librarian for online resources and books. Don't limit yourself to books that talk about your condition in medical terms. Read some memoirs about people living with ADHD and mental illness. People are talking and writing about mental health more and more as a way to fight stigma and share resources. This allows you to learn from experts and from your peers, and it makes you feel less isolated. Talk to your trusted family and friends about your drive to prepare, and remember to trade-off when you need to. Having a support network, instead of just one of two people to lean on, means you'll always have someone to go to and you won't wear anyone out. Start building your tribe now and you'll thank yourself for years to come!

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