

Is There an App for That?

Social Skills for Young Adults with ADHD

A chat with Michele Novotni, PhD



“I ENJOY HELPING FOLKS WHO COLOR OUTSIDE THE LINES unlock their potential,” says Michele Novotni, PhD. “I have been surrounded with folks with ADHD for my entire life.” An internationally recognized expert and thought leader in the field, Novotni is a psychologist and ADHD coach in Wayne, Pennsylvania. She is a past president of the Attention Deficit Disorder Association and the author of *What Does Everybody Else Know That I Don’t?* (Specialty Press, 1999), *Adult ADHD* (NavPress, 2003), and the Novotni Social Skills Checklist.

Growing up, Novotni watched her father struggle with underemployment. Despite his high intelligence, difficulties with focus and follow-through affected him in college and in the workplace. His ADHD diagnosis at age sixty explained his lifetime of untapped potential and frustration.

The younger of Novotni’s two sons has the disorder, too. She jokes that he has AD/RRRHD—Attention Deficit Really, Really, Really Hyperactivity Disorder. “It was through his eyes that I came to know and understand ADHD,” she says. “Because of his struggles, I have directed my career path to helping individuals with ADHD to be successful in school, in interpersonal relationships, and in the workplace.”

Do teens with ADHD who are “socially challenged” ever improve socially and become more accepted by peers who don’t have the disorder?

That depends. As young adults mature, many do develop a wider range of acceptance. Over time, many of the disruptive symptoms of ADHD do tend to lessen. As young adults mature, they also begin to better see the need to smooth some of their rough edges. This also helps improve social relationships. Unfortunately, workplace demands are often very tough, with little room for social challenges.

How can we help our college-age children prepare for the working world and the varying personalities they will encounter? Many of these personalities will clash with an individual who has ADHD. I want to help my daughter to learn to work with challenging and obstinate coworkers without losing her cool or her job due to ADHD-related impulsive reactions.

This is a critical area. Many people lose their jobs not because they can’t do the work, but rather because they don’t get along with others. It would be good to work on social relationships in their everyday world. It helps to do a “social autopsy” and examine what worked well and where the challenges are. You may be

able to use TV shows to spark discussions.

There are a number of helpful books on navigating relationships that are not specific to those with ADHD. The book I wrote, *What*

Does Everyone Else Know That I Don’t? could also be helpful and is designed for young adults and adults with ADHD.

How do people with ADHD work in the workforce, when they are used to the accommodations they receive in school?

Workers can get accommodations for ADHD through their human resources office. However, most, if not all, are not relevant for social skills. It is usually up to the individual to work on their social skills outside of the workplace. Coaches or psychologists may be helpful.

If ADHD traits are getting in the way, it might be helpful to identify yourself as having ADHD or at least describe your challenge. For example, you might say, “I sometimes interrupt and am trying not to.”

My daughter just started college. Her first roommate also had ADHD,



and it was a bad situation. They were constantly annoying each other. My daughter was moved to a new room. Any suggestions about how she can be more successful this time?

Living with someone can be very difficult, especially with ADHD in the mix. It helps to start off sharing your strengths and challenges. Both roommates must respect time to sleep and time to work. If there are difficulties, the dormitory's resident assistant can often be helpful in reaching a compromise.

It's always good to remember that many of the things that frustrate us aren't all that important. Help them keep things in perspective so they can only worry about the important issues like drugs, sex, alcohol, and the quiet time needed to study.

It may also be good to start off with a positive experience. Your daughter could ask her new roommate what she'd like to do and plan an enjoyable activity together quickly.

What can a young adult do to improve his social skills that will enable him to succeed in the workplace and in friendships?

The first step is to recognize that it is possible to improve relationships. Next would be to get honest, accurate feedback regarding the specific areas that could be improved. It is usually good to focus on one behavior at a time. He (or you) can send himself a reminder to work on this skill using a reminder app.

Re-coaching also may be helpful where they preview the situation and rehearse the skill needed. Visualization can be a very helpful way to practice a social skill in a safe setting. It could also be helpful to ask a peer for feedback in certain situations. Young adults often value peer feedback more than that of adults.

I recently had an acquaintance get quite verbally angry with me in a public place, criticizing me in front of the kids about something about me that had probably been eating at her for quite some time. I was stunned, open-mouthed, and couldn't say much. As someone who has ADHD, I had no idea it had been eating at her. Was I supposed to read her mind? It was quite

rude and embarrassing. We've not spoken since. What, if anything, is my responsibility for righting this situation?

It sounds like there might be some issues on the other end here. However, one of the most important things you can discover is what other people know but aren't telling you. Since this relationship may not be a keeper anyway, you might want to ask the person to meet in a calm setting and share her concerns with you. This way you can see if she has a valid concern that might be frustrating others also.

If she does have a concern that you feel is valid, you have something to work with. Most people don't tell others about social-skill violations, which is what makes learning and fixing social skills so hard. In this case you might also want to share your social insight about her behavior. If it doesn't work out well you haven't lost anything.

From the time I was young, I've had a tendency to find a good friend or two, then burn them out. I have trouble maintaining friendships because I rely so much on the one or two I have at the time. What can I do to fix this?

The good news is that you are aware of your behavior. Relationships need to be in some sort of balance, with each getting and giving in somewhat even fashion. If you wear someone out, perhaps you can pre-talk with someone else before going out with them, or try for larger group settings so you can share your energy.

You also might want to be on the lookout for signs you are wearing someone out, and then start giving them a break. You could also give them permission to let you know when you are too much and they need a break.

I actually have to do this with my very-ADHD son when he is wearing me out too. I love him, but sometimes I just can't listen anymore or I need some quiet time. This way we can both enjoy being together.

Do you believe social cue skills training works for young people with ADHD? I've been given conflicting opinions by different doctors.

I do think that social skills or social cue training can make a significant difference if the person wants to learn the skills. If parents are sending children or young adults who don't think they have a problem, it can be very difficult for someone to help them.

The biggest challenge is helping them remember to use the skills outside of the learning environment. This is why it is important to work with someone who really understands ADHD.

Unlike other disorders, with ADHD, many times they know what to do; they just don't remember to do it at the appropriate time. This is where impulsivity, inattention, or hyperactivity gets in the way. So if someone is only using regular social skills training, that may not be as effective.

There are a number of psychologists and coaches with expertise in this area. Fortunately, this training can be done long distance through Skype or by phone, so location should not be an issue. Many young adults prefer coaching to attending a social skills group or even counseling.

Again, the most important part for those with ADHD would be helping them prepare for situations in advance and setting up a system of prompts or reminders to use the skills.

Thinking about the title of this session, are there any particular phone applications that are helpful for young adults with ADHD?

There are a number of apps that can be very helpful to them for managing their ADHD symptoms. This can in some indirect ways be of help in relationships, too. Some of my favorite apps include:



FOR MORE INFO

See the information sheet published by CHADD's National Resource Center on ADHD, *What We Know # 15: Interacting With Others: Tips for Adults with ADHD*.



THINKSTOCK

- **Honk** guides you back to your car and tells you how much time is left on your parking meter.
- **ShopSavvy** lets you do a price check on any item. Some stores will instantly sell the item for that price.
- **e-Reminder Plus, To Do Checklist, Bugger, Astrid, LifeReminders,** and **Notify Me** let you send or get reminders to cue you to do things you want to remember to do.
- **Mint** can help keep track of money.
- **Dragon Dictation** turns voice to text and is great for reminding yourself.
- **Noise Level** lets you know how loud something is, including your voice, and is great for those who speak too loudly.

There are tons of apps for taking notes and a number to help track assignments.

How does one balance social skills and interaction with medication? It feels like I'm more socially outgoing when my ADHD medication has worn off.

If you are feeling too dull or blunted on your medication, you may want to talk with your

doctor and consider a dose change or perhaps even a medication change. You may not have to give up on feeling outgoing. If what you are feeling is that ADHD energy and random thinking, you may want to balance out the potential negative consequences of untreated ADHD with the decrease in spunk.

You may also have to focus on bringing that outgoing you out even if you don't feel like it. Usually once you get started, you may find it easier to be outgoing again. Hopefully you will find the right balance and be able to focus, manage your ADHD, and still feel like yourself. 🗣️

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The apps mentioned in this article have been updated to reflect current availability.