

I'M OFTEN ASKED BY CLIENTS AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS at presentations about whether someone should tell family, friends, coworkers, or bosses about having ADHD. There are no right or wrong answers, since it depends on the circumstances, the ADHD person's openness, and the other person's trustworthiness. My hope is just that the decision to tell someone is well thought out, rather than impulsive or based in what turn out to be shaky assumptions.

Generally speaking, there are more potential complications from telling someone at work about your ADHD, especially a boss. This is because people at work may jump to conclusions about how your ADHD affects your ability to carry out your job duties. It then creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where they start looking for certain things and predictably start to see them, even though nothing about your performance has changed or is any different from what anyone else is doing. For example, this could lead to being passed over for promotions or plum assignments or even to disciplinary actions. It's highly unlikely that anyone would ever be callous enough to come out and say that it was because you have ADHD, but it may still affect their behavior toward you. You may have a great boss or coworker who would handle this information well and work with you, but otherwise it's generally safer to not disclose at work unless absolutely necessary. For information on legal rights and seeking accommodations at work, including when it's best (and worst) to disclose, see the section titled "Formal Accommodations Through the Americans with Disabilities Act" in *More Attention, Less Deficit*.

Although these same kinds of problems are less likely with family and friends, there are three potential reasons to hold back on telling someone you have ADHD (or whatever):

- **You can't get the cat back in the bag.** Once you tell someone, you can't untell them if you change your mind or they handle it badly.
- **Myths and misinformation abound.** Before saying anything, you may want to dig a little to find out what the person thinks about ADHD. If he says something overly

negative or dismissive, you may want to seriously consider how likely he is to take a more balanced view of the condition. (More on this education below.)

- **People talk.** If you reveal this personal information with this person, will he respect your privacy, or will he tell others? There's nothing to be ashamed of, but it's your personal information and therefore your request for privacy should be respected. It should be your choice about who gets told what, when, and how.

I don't want to give the impression that you should never tell anyone about your ADHD or that there is anything so sinister about it that you need to keep it to yourself. Rather, it's about making a good decision. As a way of avoiding having to make this weighty decision, I often recommend that people talk symptoms before diagnoses. That is, talk about the specific symptoms that the other person sees, without getting into formal diagnoses. For example, you could say, "I sometimes get really caught up in an idea and stop hearing what someone else is saying, so just give me a poke if it seems like I'm not listening." This addresses the problem of distractibility and offers a potential solution without getting into explanations of why it happens. Spend some time and come up with concise ways of explaining your ADHD symptoms so that you don't need to make them up on the spot. Maybe even practice saying them out loud or run them by someone who knows about your ADHD.

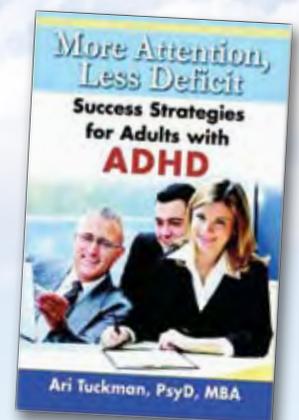
There may be times when talking about symptoms isn't enough or you feel that you want to tell someone about your ADHD. Let's go through the three potential problems just mentioned and consider ways of overcoming them.

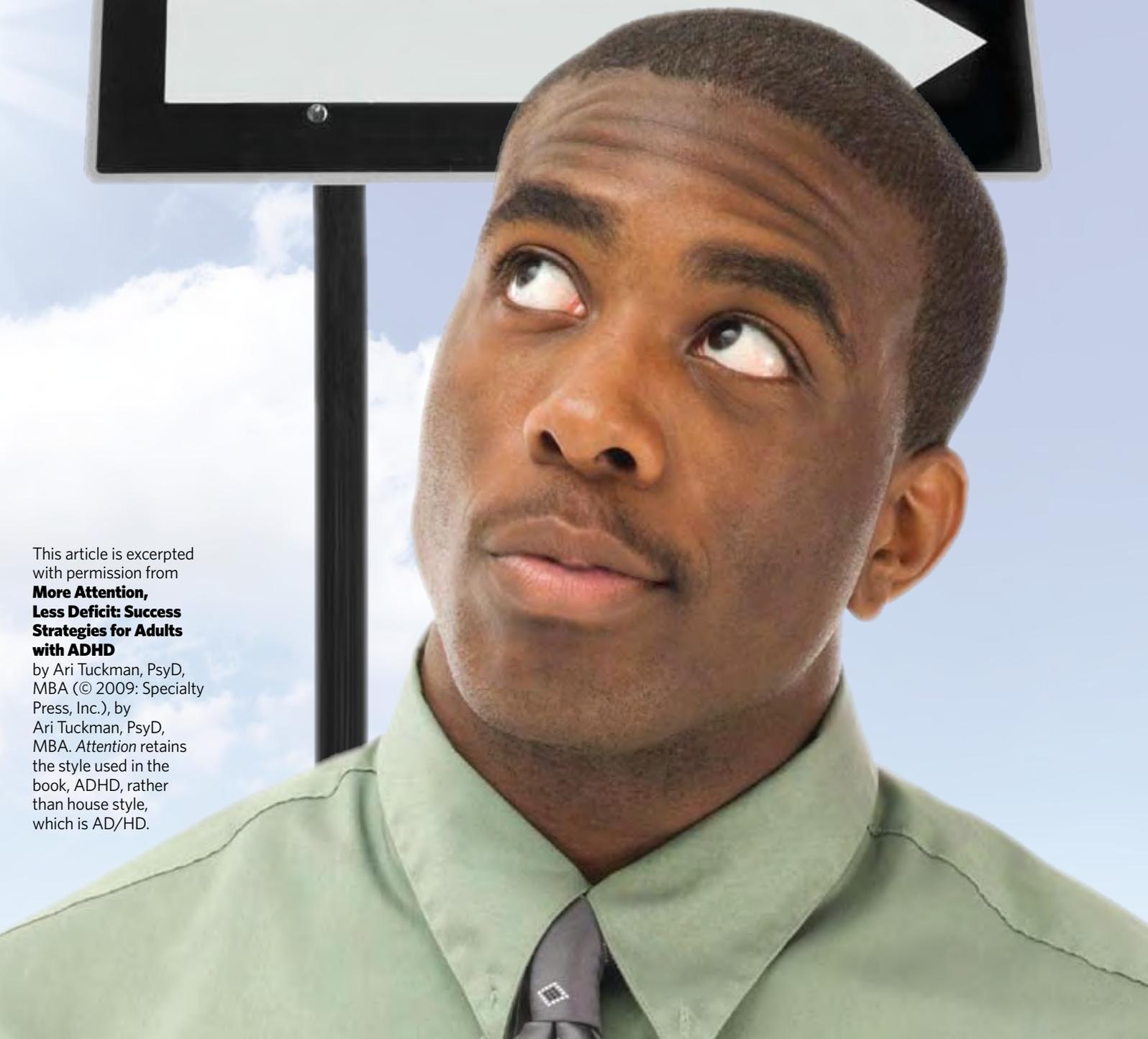
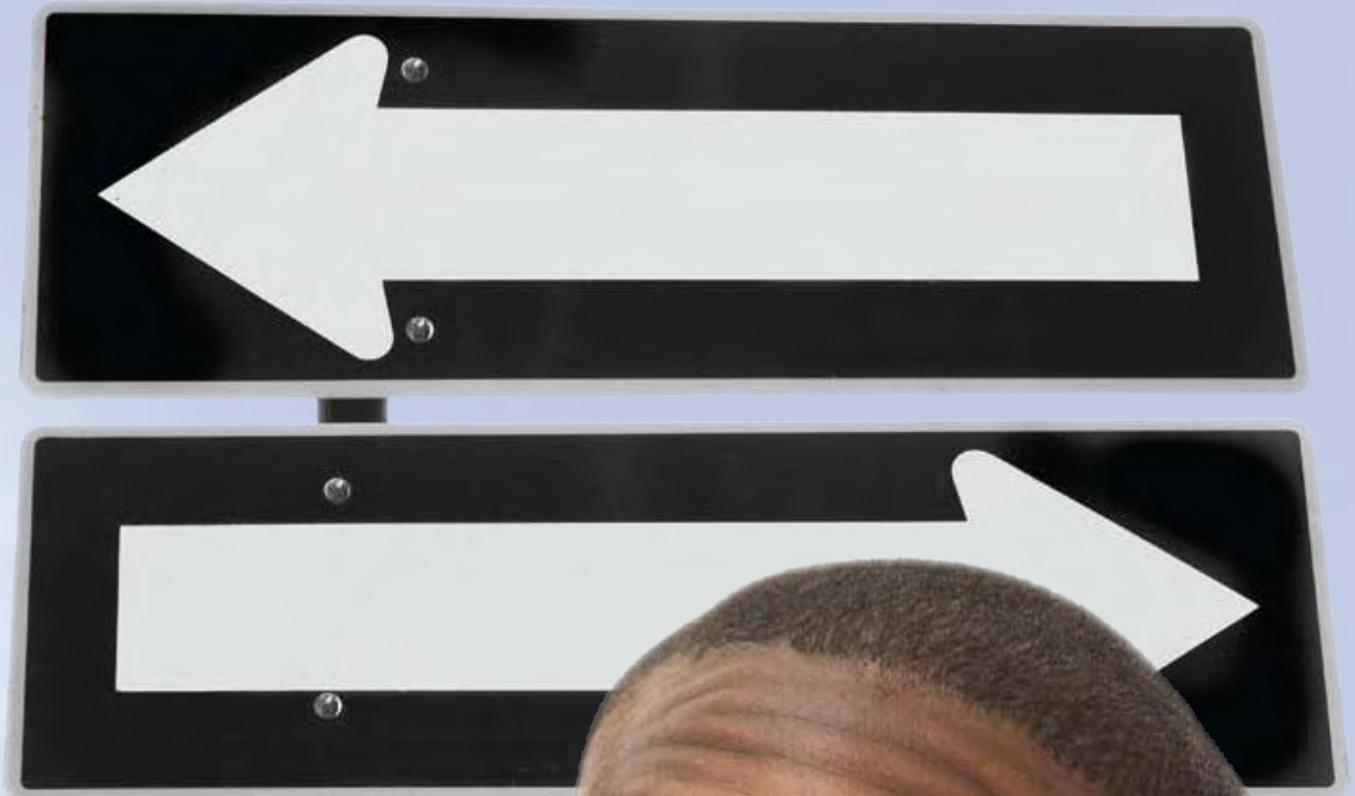
Are you sure you want to say it?

Intimacy and connection in relationships are built by sharing personal information. This is then maintained by treating that

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA, is a clinical psychologist who specializes in diagnosing and treating children, teens, and adults with AD/HD. His new book, More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD, was published this month by Specialty Press.

To Tell or Not to Tell?





This article is excerpted with permission from **More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD**

by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA (© 2009: Specialty Press, Inc.), by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA. *Attention* retains the style used in the book, ADHD, rather than house style, which is AD/HD.

information respectfully. So you want to make sure that the person you're contemplating telling will be able to hold up her end of the bargain. This means stopping and thinking about it long enough to really make a good choice.

This topic came up often in an adult ADHD support group I ran. One attendee described how he knew that

he had a tendency to get caught up in the moment and blurt things out. So he came up with two rules for himself about telling people about his ADHD: "1. Never tell anyone you have ADHD. 2. Even if you forget rule number one, never tell anyone you have ADHD." Obviously, this got a good laugh, perhaps from the recognition that good intentions beforehand sometimes get lost in the moment.

On the other hand, I had a client who had been dating a woman for a few months but hadn't told her about his ADHD. Even though he hadn't said anything about it, his troubles with time management, paying attention, and interrupting her were frequent sources of frustration for her. We discussed whether he should tell her. Ultimately he decided that he needed to, because



she was coming to her own conclusions about him on account of his actions. This helped her better understand why he did certain things and gave them less to argue about.

You may need to educate the person

Even though there is a lot more good information available about ADHD in adults, there's still a lot of misunderstanding and misinformation. As a result, you may want to educate the person about ADHD. Probably the best way to do this is to provide the information in your own words and to speak from your own experience, but some stubborn ones may need to see something more official, like an article, Web site, or book. This may also be helpful if the person is genuinely interested but is asking questions you can't answer.

It can be helpful to create a thirty-second soundbite of how

ADHD affects you in the context that you're talking about, such as at work or with friends. Ideally the conversation will go for more than half a minute, but it can be a good way to start things off on the right foot. You may also want to be prepared to answer some

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common questions or address common myths, such as:

- *ADHD is just an excuse.* ADHD has been the subject of thousands of research studies, including at the National Institutes of Health. People with ADHD often need to work harder to achieve the same successes.
- *Everyone has some ADHD.* Everyone has their moments of distractibility, but people with ADHD have suffered for it, consistently and across all parts of their lives.
- *Adults grow out of their ADHD.* Some people grow out of some of their symptoms, but most adults still have significant troubles.
- *ADHD medication is addictive.* When properly prescribed and taken, the medications are safe and nonaddictive.

Someone may throw you a curveball and ask a question you don't know how to answer. No problem—tell him you will look it up and get back to him.

Truth is earned

Some people in your life deserve to be given personal information; others don't. The difference is how comfortable you are about how they

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will treat that information. Those who treat it with respect, by keeping it confidential and not using it against you later, tend to be told more. Those who misuse your information tend to be told less. So when contemplating telling someone about your ADHD, ask yourself whether that person has earned that information. If so, then go for it.

Of course, someone's response to your disclosure also tells you something about him. There may be times, especially with a new relationship, that you want to find out quickly where someone stands on these matters before investing too much time in the relationship. As an example, I was recently on a panel that was shown online with a young man who had been diagnosed with ADHD. While we were talking beforehand, he told me about friends who told him not to do the panel for fear that a potential employer would find out about it. His feeling was that he didn't care if they did. In a way, any employer that would screen him out on account of his having ADHD is probably not a good place for him to work anyway. Better to find this out before being hired than afterward. The same may go for potential friendships and romantic relationships. ●



Tips for Disclosing Your AD/HD Effectively

You've weighed your options, considered the advantages and disadvantages, and decided to disclose that you have AD/HD to your employer, your professor, or your friend. How much information do you reveal? What do you say?

In 2005, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth published **The 411 on Disability Disclosure**, a workbook designed to help young people transitioning to the workforce make informed decisions about disclosing their disability. Through various assignments and activities, the workbook helps users understand how their decision about disclosure could impact their lives. **The 411 on Disability Disclosure** provides advice that adults as well as transitioning youth will find extremely helpful. Among its tidbits:

- "Effective disclosure occurs when you are knowledgeable about your disability and are able to describe both your disability-related needs and your skills and abilities clearly."
- "Research shows that having a disclosure 'script' and practicing it with friends, teachers, relatives, and mentors can be of great benefit to you when the time actually comes to disclose."
- "Most people find that it is easier to talk about the impact of having a disability rather than offering a formal or clinical definition."



The following are just a few tips based on content in the workbook:

- You control how much information you disclose.
- Keep in mind the purpose behind your decision to disclose, such as obtaining helpful accommodations.
- It's not necessary to divulge specific personal information about your AD/HD or medications.
- Prepare a "script" and practice it with people you trust.
- Keep your script and the disclosure conversation focused on your abilities, not your limitations.
- When disclosing, follow your script. Avoid impulsively revealing sensitive personal information.
- Select a place to have the conversation that will allow your disclosure to remain private and confidential.
- Allow enough time to talk about the impact of your AD/HD. The person to whom you are disclosing may ask questions, offer suggestions, or express concerns.

The 411 on Disability Disclosure is available at transcen.org and ncwd-youth.info. Visit dol.gov/odep for information about the Office of Disability Employment Policy, or disabilityinfo.gov for a comprehensive federal website of disability-related government resources.

—Susan Buningh, MRE