

## Cope with Communication "Misses"

If you have ADHD, you can help yourself with the "misses" by doing the following:

- Avoid beating yourself up for continuing to have these "misses." Being hard on yourself only compounds the problem by leaving you filled with shame.
- Avoid giving yourself labels such as liar, undependable, or manipulative. Remember that while ADHD is primarily a neurological problem, it can also become a major psychological one if you give yourself such negative labels. This is because giving yourself negative labels can influence you to live up to them.
- Show enthusiasm for doing your best and doing the right thing wherever you can.
- Share, where appropriate, with others those situations in which you may be prone to becoming more easily overwhelmed or confusing and misperceiving things at times.
- Educate others in the circles you travel by informing or reminding them about the hardwiring differences of having ADHD versus not having it.
- Share CHADD-related and other informative ADHD information and materials to help educate others.
- Stress your sincere desire to be open and willingness to work through inevitable misunderstandings.
- Encourage written documentation of exchanges but in a collaborative versus adversarial manner.
- Supportively tune in to the limitations of others so you stay empathic to those people who try to similarly tolerate and understand you.
- If you feel the urge to lie, ask yourself how you will truly feel afterwards. This will help you to bypass your impulsive instincts.

**YEARS AGO** a large audio/video tape manufacturer ran a popular ad campaign with the slogan, "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" The gist of this provocative marketing message was that the tapes were so good at replicating images, voices, and sounds that they were indistinguishable from real, live sounds and images.

Many people affected by ADHD find it similarly difficult to know what is real and what is not when they communicate with others. This applies not only to what those with ADHD say but to what others around them hear. Due to their executive functioning and processing challenges, people affected by ADHD can be prone to problematic processing and communication. This often leaves them having questionable authenticity in the eyes of others, and at times, even in their view of themselves.

Tragically, such miscommunications and misunderstandings can be quite unfairly labeled *lying, untrustworthy, manipulative*, or with other equally negative terms throughout their lives. For while people with ADHD can indeed be untruthful, manipulative, and intentionally misleading, various processing issues can often be at the heart of their communication problems instead.

### Complication and confusion

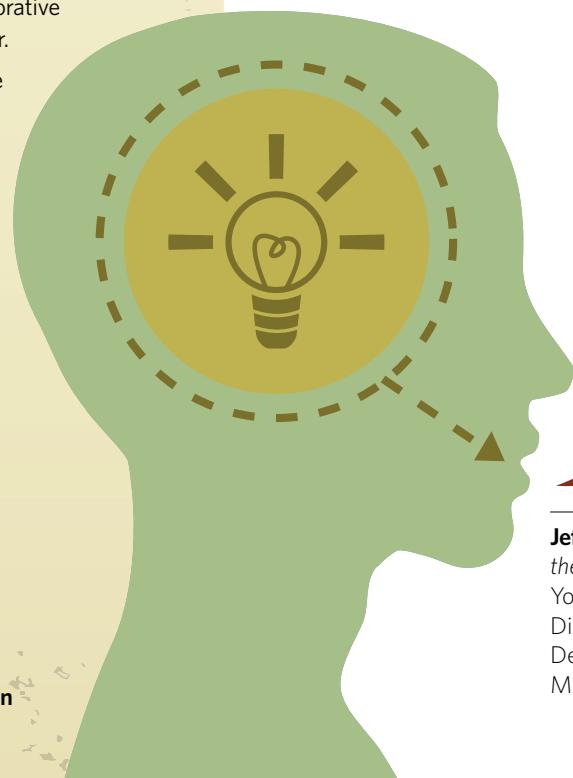
When someone with ADHD "zones out," for example, valuable communication is lost. Even after the person resumes paying attention, he or she still may pay a price for the initial zone-out. Added consequences often result from trying to recall what information was

actually missed or exchanged while dealing with the associated anxiety and frustration. Complicating matters, it becomes hard for the person to know where exactly to attribute his or her communication problems. Was it misunderstanding information in the first place, seeing the negative reactions of others, feeling added communication insecurities, or having the original memory lapses and distortions? Sadly, there are usually no easy answers.

People with ADHD may think what they are saying is true when it is not. They also may not actually remember what they said in the first place and then try to guess what they actually said after the fact. They may know they are not telling the truth because of the shame of being caught in a lie, so they try to spin their way out of the whole situation. They may even be trying to protect themselves or others even though it just makes everything even more problematic and confusing. In short, those with ADHD may have a tough time expressing themselves and being perceived in a consistent, accurate, and believable manner.

To say the least, if you don't have ADHD, communicating with someone who does can often be similarly frustrating and confusing. The resulting is-it-live-or-is-it-Memorex feeling usually does not end up being too warm and fuzzy. So, unfortunately, those with ADHD have the burden of having to overcome the crossed signals of poorly processed perceptions and unclear verbalizations. Those who don't have the disorder, but are involved in the life of someone who does,

**ADHD and  
(mis) perception  
of the truth,  
(mis) interpretation,**



**Jeffrey Bernstein, PhD**, is a child and family psychologist in the greater Philadelphia area. He is the author of *Liking the Child You Love* (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009), *10 Days to a Less Distracted Child* (Da Capo Press, 2007) and *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child* (Da Capo Press, 2006) and *Why Can't You Read My Mind?* (Da Capo Press, 2003).



have the challenge of being on the receiving end of those confusing interactions. It is confusing for people with ADHD to relate to others. It is also confusing to relate to those who have ADHD when you don't.

### Challenge and convolution

We all know that these communication processing problems impact children with ADHD academically and in how they interact with those who try to help. The child with ADHD who forgets his or her homework and concocts a colorful account (such as "my dog ate it") is a classic example. Or, how about a child telling herself, and you, that a new marking period will magically take away this quarter's bad habits? Consider as well the all-too-common scenario of the justifiably frustrated teacher demanding an explanation for the missing homework and refusing to accept "I don't know" as an answer. For kids with ADHD, this type of adversarial reaction may be a green light to make something up as a means to protect themselves. So, while what may seem like lying in these examples may actually have a deceptive element, there are neurological processing challenges associated with ADHD that are often written off as solely a character issue.

Similarly, I have met with many impulsive or distractible teens who genuinely agree, at least in theory, to let their parents know their whereabouts. All chaos breaks loose when these teens become preoccupied and fall off their parents' "reachability radar" for hours. While these children may also be evasive, it is often in part because they are busy covering up their tracks from managing time that they may have generally not been able to keep track of.

Marriage is often replete with communication problems when ADHD is involved. Consider the burnt-out spouse of the ADHD adult who gets tired of hearing, "That's not what I said or meant," when, in fact, it *was* what was said or even meant. Again, the issue may not really be about lying but how such spouses with ADHD genuinely process information. In response

to such crossed messages, some couples may become hypervigilant and write down and sign any agreement they make. While this can help if it is done in a calm and supportive manner, it can backfire by creating a heightened atmosphere of distrust if done in an accusatory and adversarial way.

In the world of work, there are bosses and employees whose communication patterns may also be negatively impacted by ADHD. How about the face saving or magical thinking that occurs when an employee with ADHD, noting an impending project deadline, tells her boss that she has almost completed it when in fact she had barely started it? Or what about the boss challenged by ADHD who is a charismatic, big-picture leader—but avoids making specific, detail-laden policy decisions about anything to which she did not truly pay attention?

ADHD-related communication "misses" can be thorny problems that sabotage relationships. Coping strategies can prevent these problems and provide damage control for when they do. Over the past twenty years as a psychologist specializing in ADHD-related concerns, I have not yet met anyone with the disorder who feels good about his or her communication challenges. The "misses" can be upsetting and even downright demoralizing. The good news for those who have ADHD and those who connect with them is that becoming cognizant of these challenges and addressing them can lead to increased trust. ☐

### Improve Your Relationship with Someone with ADHD

If you don't have ADHD but know someone who does, you can help improve your relationship by considering the following:

- Remain patient and calm. This will help you bypass your own frustrations and the emotional reactivity of the person with ADHD.
- Stay away from a punishment mentality. It will just fuel more defensiveness and lying.
- Be internally and outwardly empathic about the realities of the "cognitive slippage" unique to the ADHD mind.
- Remember that the person struggling with ADHD truly does not feel good about his or her confusion and setbacks. Avoid falling into the trap of perceiving that he or she enjoys confusing or conning others.
- Reinforce the courage of the person with ADHD to be real and to own his or her mistakes.
- Encourage written agreements but make sure both parties participate in developing and deciding upon them.
- Positively reinforce the person with ADHD for making the effort to ask for information to be repeated and clarified.
- Remind yourself of the overlooked competencies of the person with ADHD.
- Speak from your heart and share how much you admire those competencies.
- Remember that even those who do not have ADHD can become confusing or confused when interacting with others.
- Be open to continuing to learn new and effective/innovative ways to communicate.

• Remember that no one chooses to have ADHD and the associated communication challenges. Choosing to be tolerant and understanding will go a long way in helping improve communication.

**... and other  
"honest lying"  
behaviors"**