

TODAY WE ARE FORTUNATE that strategies to help manage ADHD are more numerous and varied than ever. And while some require a physician's prescription, an increasing number do not. My intent here is not to position any treatment approach as an alternative. ADHD medication makes a huge difference in the lives of many individuals, including myself. Whether you take medication or not, certain lifestyle changes can greatly enhance the effectiveness of an overall ADHD treatment strategy.

The subject of ADHD medication triggers reactions that range from water-into-wine-like parables to conspiracy theories that rival Area 51. Just mentioning the topic can elicit quotes from long-term research studies and neurobiological factoids along with competing anecdotes of dire consequence and transformational success. Since my ADHD diagnosis in my early forties, I don't believe I've encountered another single issue that can both polarize and unite the ADHD community in quite the same manner.

There is, however, another conversation to be had with respect to ADHD, one often overshadowed by its more controversial sibling. For this discussion I will use the acronym MEDS, and the components are outlined below. Far from being polarizing catalysts for conspiracy theories, these are some of the most accepted, natural, easily accessible, and effective strategies available for managing ADHD.

So, let's take some time to talk about another kind of "prescription" for ADHD:

- Mindfulness
- Exercise
- Diet
- Sleep

The first component, **Mindfulness**, can be most easily described as "thinking about what it is that you're thinking about." A more sophisticated term is *metacognition*, but just like the term itself, the practice of mindfulness can be much simpler than most people think.

Although derived in some respects from meditation, achieving enlightenment at the top of a mountain is not a prerequisite for practicing mindfulness. It can be as simple as taking the time to pay close attention to your thoughts, sensations and emotions at any point in your day and allowing them to become a lead character in the story you are living in that moment, as opposed to merely set dressing.

For those of us with ADHD, the benefits of mindfulness can be invaluable. The primary benefit is that mindfulness can enhance our ability to pause as we consider our actions and their possible outcomes, something often challenging due to the impulsivity and inattention that accompany ADHD. Being mindful does not require us to banish all but one solitary thought as we



by Brett Thornhill, AAC, CAAP

strive to achieve a meditative state. Instead it can provide a conduit for our wandering mind through which we return to a consciousness of the here and now. Mindfulness is something that we can actively create rather than something that has to be achieved.

Exercise is the second element of our MEDS model. The benefits of exercise in managing ADHD symptoms have long been accepted. There is more than ample evidence to suggest that physical activity results in a boost of dopamine and norepinephrine levels in the brain, both of which are closely associated with the regulation of attention. But with more research comes more evidence that the impact of regular exercise can



Kind of DS"

be even more far-reaching, including research-based claims by the American Academy of Pediatrics that increased physical activity has a positive effect on cognitive performance and brain function during tasks requiring greater executive control. (See “Effects of the FITKids randomized controlled trial on executive control and brain function,” in *Pediatrics*, October 2014; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25266425>).

The well-documented added benefits of exercise on a person’s overall physical wellbeing, not to mention the potential social and emotional implications, makes the inclusion of physical exercise into a multifaceted ADHD treatment strategy a no-brainer.

The third part of MEDS is **Diet**. The type of diet we consume can affect everything from our production of neurotransmitters and hormones, to our overall health, level of energy, and quality of our synaptic connections. In other words, how we eat impacts virtually every aspect of how we live. So it’s no surprise that diet can play a key role in managing ADHD symptoms.

Foods rich in proteins and complex carbohydrates provide sustained energy to help our body (and brain) make it through the increasingly diverse demands of modern living. When we grab that yummy danish on the way out the door, we are fueling up on simple carbohydrates that our body quickly converts to sugar. We are also setting ourselves up for a mid-morning crash that results in an increased release of stress hormones, lower energy levels, and irritability. These factors can impede executive functioning even in an individual who does not have ADHD.

The fourth and final piece of our MEDS formula is **Sleep**. There is still quite a bit of mystery regarding the precise reasons our bodies need sleep along with exactly what it is that occurs when we sleep. One thing is clear, however: Even though we often experience exhaustion in our physical body, it is primarily our brain that requires sleep in order to function properly. It is believed that the relationship between sleep and cognitive impairment can be tied to three crucial functions:

- **Acquisition** of new information
- **Consolidating** or stabilizing memory
- **Recalling** or accessing information after it has been stored

While acquisition and recall are for the most part wakeful activities, experts claim that memory consolidation, the vital connection between the two, and takes place during sleep through the strengthening of the neural connections that form our memories.

It has been shown, even in people without ADHD, that insufficient and broken sleep affects levels of neurotransmitters and stress hormones and can significantly impair various cognitive processes involved in executive functioning as well as emotional regulation—the very processes that are primarily impacted by ADHD.

So there you have it: another kind of MEDS “prescription” for ADHD. For most adults with ADHD, these four crucial elements are not new. Anyone who has studied or researched effective ADHD management strategies will have encountered them on numerous occasions. When you make an effort to combine all four elements to form your own MEDS strategy, however, the additional benefits can be amazing. 🧠

Diagnosed at the age of 43, Brett Thornhill left a career in marketing to become a professional ADHD coach. He is based in Newfoundland, Canada. Learn more at <http://embraceyouradhd.ca>.