

# Spontaneous

by Sandy Maynard, MS



# or Impulsive?

## HOW TO KNOW, WHAT TO DO

**M**OST OF US CRINGE WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD IMPULSIVITY, as it brings to mind what our impulsive decisions or behaviors have resulted in. Impulsivity can cause accidents, inefficiency, poor performance reviews at work, and adversely affect treasured relationships.

What is impulsivity and how does it differ from spontaneity? Most of us like being spontaneous, yet we often end up acting or speaking impulsively, regretting the results. Impulsive behavior is always characterized by little or no forethought. We are too quick to jump the gun on what we think in the moment is a very good idea. Yet in reality the actions we take are poorly conceived, *prematurely* expressed, unduly risky or inappropriate, and result in undesirable consequences.

Simply put, we act on a whim.

Spontaneity, on the other hand, is pausing to “play the movie forward” to think about any possible consequences for others or for ourselves. Before making a spontaneous decision, we check our calendar or to-do list to see if there is something else that needs to take priority. A spontaneous decision gives some thought to the outcome.



Aside from having ADHD and being hotwired to act impulsively, what factors contribute to impulsivity? And what can we do to reduce our natural tendency to lose restraint of pen and tongue or act too quickly?

### **Contributing factors**

**Stress** is the number one factor that I see exacerbate any ADHD symptom. I know from personal experience that on a stressful day I will spin in circles, lose something, and often make terribly impulsive decisions if I don't pause and do what is needed to take care of my stress.

There are many good books and courses on stress management and I would recommend that everyone with ADHD get some solid stress management tools in their toolbox. I find that hitting the pause button and remembering to breathe and calm down is always a good start. Exercise has long been recommended as an excellent way to de-stress, and in my opinion is one of the best for alleviating worry and regulating mood swings. Meditation is another excellent stress-buster. For those of you who think that you can't meditate because it's just too hard to sit still, try walking on a treadmill and simply focus on your breathing, letting thoughts come and go, but always bringing your mind back to your breath. One of my favorite tips for stress management is learning how to say no. Taking on more than we can handle is a recipe for disaster and can skyrocket our stress level.

**Insufficient sleep** is another factor that contributes to impulsivity. A tired, foggy brain has a harder time "playing the movie forward" and making a clear, conscious choice. Many of my clients say that when they are tired they are more likely to impulsively do what they feel like doing instead of what they know they should be doing.

Developing healthy sleep hygiene habits is no easy task for many of us, but has its rewards in the long run. Having a consistent evening routine with which to wind down is a good idea. Watching Netflix is enjoyable in the evening for many, but is not recommended to do just before bed as the blue light from the screen reduces melatonin levels and adversely affects the quality of our sleep. Try reading or listen to relaxing music instead.

Medication management and caffeine intake are also issues to be concerned with if poor sleep is affecting your performance the next day. Design your own way to wind down, stick to the time you choose to start winding down and you'll be pleased with the results.

**Emotions** also play a role in our inability to modulate impulsive behavior. When we are angry, frustrated, or even overly joyful the likelihood increases that our response to situations will be impulsive. Restraint of pen and tongue can be especially difficult if we are caught off guard or triggered by a critical email or comment.

Fear is a very strong emotion that can drive our behav-

iors before we take time to think things through. It can be fear of success or fear of failure that will drive an impulsive decision to do something other than what we intend to do resulting in procrastination and missed deadlines. Recognizing when we are becoming overemotional, pausing, and not always acting on our emotions can save regrets later.

**Skipping meals** and feeling “starved” can drive impulsive and less healthy food choices. I know that if I skip meals because I’m just too busy to eat, I will go right for the Five Guys later on and overeat for sure. Having healthy snacks available in your desk drawer or backpack can curb impulsive and unhealthy choices.

**Impatience** is like Miracle-Grow for impulsivity. The more we work at being patient, the less likely we are to be impulsive. My clients groan when I ask them to practice patience by getting in the longest grocery line and observing how they feel. I tell them to breathe, relax, and experience just being in the moment. When I can be “where my feet are” and not in my mind and five steps ahead of myself, I’m more focused, relaxed, and less likely to impulsively self-distract and get off track.

### Decisions, decisions...

Some of us have just never learned or been taught good decision-making skills. Our busy ADHD minds can think of way too many choices and even more permutations regarding each possibility. It’s just too hard to decide so we make an impulsive choice, procrastinate, or avoid making any decision at all. Bad decision-making skills include quick decisions, not seeking advice, not weighing the pros and cons and overanalyzing.

For a big and important decision, my best advice is to talk it over with family, friends, coworkers, and/or someone who is knowledgeable about the issue involved. Then I get out a legal pad and draw a line down the center to list the pros and cons. It’s important to get it out of your head and on paper. All those pros and cons left in our ADHD brain will just keep spinning around if they’re not nailed down in black and white. Be sure to star the three most important criteria you would like to base your decision on. Write your objective at the top of the page so you can see how each pro and con affects your desired outcome.

When faced with smaller day-to-day decisions, the worst thing I can do is to ask myself what I feel like doing. Nine out of ten times what I feel like doing is not a priority, and if I think about doing what I want to do, my impulsivity will get the best of me. I’ve been like this since I was five years old. I’ve always wanted to take one cookie now instead of picking up my toys and getting two cookies later. That is how sneaky impulsivity can be!

Discipline is another word most of us cringe when we hear, but being disciplined enough to pick up my toys and wait for the two cookies later gives me a sense of accomplishment. For me, checking off something on my to-do list that I really didn’t want

to do gives me a great deal of satisfaction knowing that that it’s over and done with.

Restraint of pen and tongue is something that most of us can improve upon. My formula for that is to pause and ask yourself the following three questions:

- Does this need to be said?
- Does this need to be said by me?
- Does this need to be said by me now?

The third question is often the hardest. If you are almost always too quick to respond, try saying “Hmmm, I’d like to give that some thought.” When responding to a critical or upsetting email, use the draft folder. It is easier to send a more appropriate response the next day when we are less upset.

Last but not least, when in doubt about whether you’re being spontaneous or impulsive, ask yourself: “Is this a healthy decision?” **A**

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*A pioneer in the field of ADHD coaching, **Sandy Maynard** holds a master’s degree in health psychology. Maynard was instrumental in the development of the Attention Deficit Disorder Coaching Guidelines for ADDA and was a founding member of the Institute for the Advancement of ADHD Coaching. She has lectured internationally and is a regular contributor to ADDitude magazine. She is now located in Chelsea, Massachusetts, providing services in the Greater Boston area.*

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