

Why Can't I Do This?

How Emotional Intelligence and Self-Regulation Pay Off for Adults with ADHD

by Kay Axtell, MA, SCAC

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you experienced a set of emotions so intense that they overtook your mind, resulting in a lack of normal functioning? Perhaps you blanked in a job interview, shut down during an exam, or spent days wiped out after the emotional explosion with your kids or your spouse. Perhaps it's been months since your divorce and you can't seem to manage minimal home maintenance or self-care.

Ask yourself, "What was the emotion? How did I react? What was the outcome of my reaction?"

Your rational self knows that you are a person with average or above average intelligence and capabilities. So "Why can't I do this?" you ask yourself again and again, perhaps in desperation, and that desperation creates a negative downward spiral that makes it even more difficult to do things that you very much want to do.

It is not that you are lazy, willful, or self-sabotaging. It certainly isn't that you are less intelligent or capable than the average person. It has to do with your particular brain wiring, and knowing that can greatly benefit you. A quick look at that brain wiring can help us understand why people with ADHD might find emotions taking over other parts of the brain, thus impacting daily functions.

ADHD and overwhelming emotions

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Daniel Goleman describes the primitive part of our brain, which was designed to protect us with a “fight or flight” response. That part of the brain can actually interfere with our functioning today. The limbic system, or feeling part of the brain, includes:

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- the *nucleus accumbens*, which manages mood, motivation, and pleasure
- the *amygdala*, which handles emotional control and prioritizing action
- and the *hippocampus*, which stores memories.

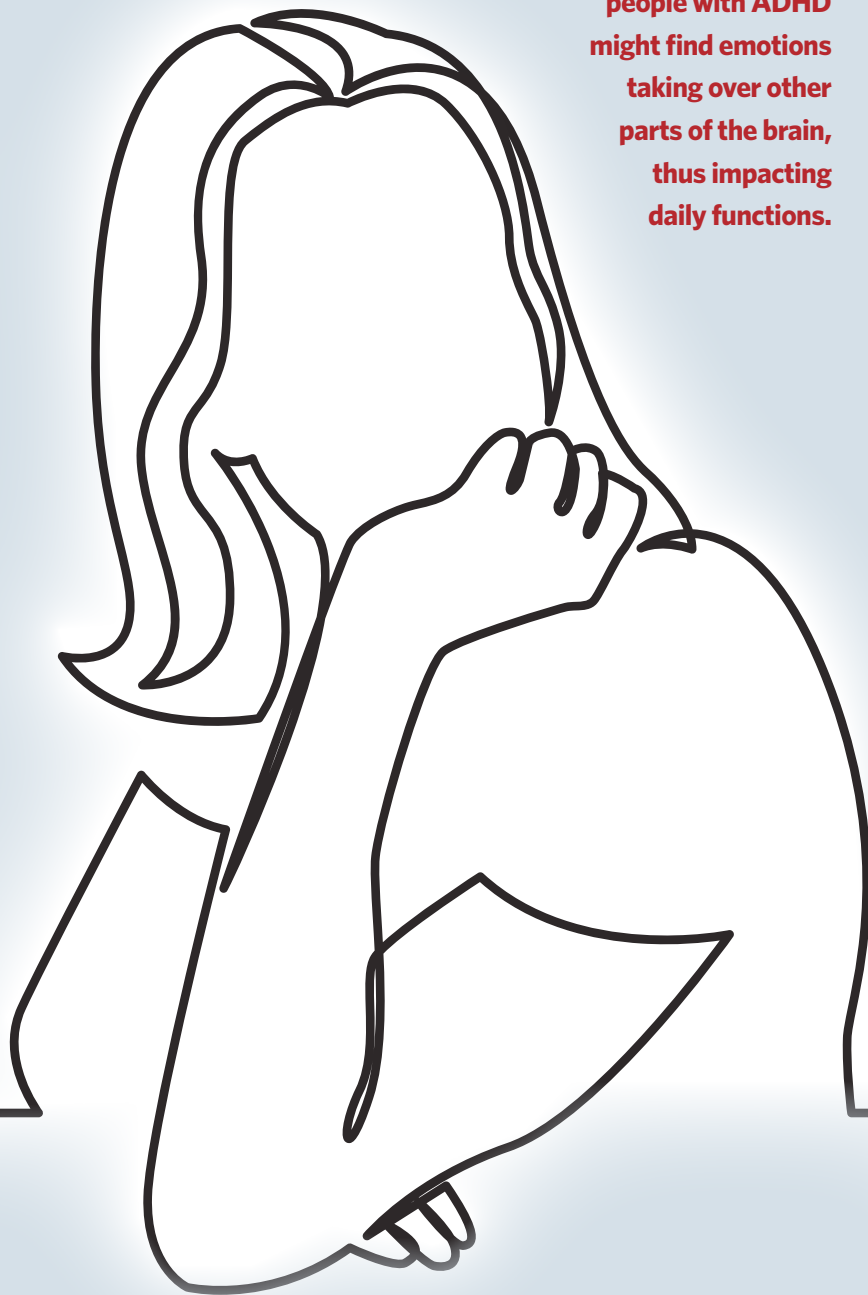
The feeling part of the brain often takes over the thinking part of the brain for a person with ADHD or executive function challenges.

Although emotional regulation is not mentioned as criteria for ADHD in the DSM-5, prominent professionals in the field are very aware of the intensity and frequency of emotions for many individuals so diagnosed. For you, this can be a blessing and a curse. It might be the reason you are such a caring parent. Conversely, it might mean that others’ opinions or perceived opinions of you impact your happiness or sense of self-esteem in a manner that sometimes gets in the way.

Thomas Brown, PhD, describes the overwhelming power of emotions often experienced by a person with ADHD as “flooding.” Emotions can use up all the available space in the brain and other thoughts or feelings are displaced. He also mentions that the individual with ADHD has issues shifting from one emotion to another. It is therefore possible to “get stuck” in an emotional state. Brown describes the difficulty that individuals might experience in identifying what is a major or a minor problem, which might result in “catastrophizing.” Over time, this can affect self-esteem, creating a downward spiral of emotions, which can impact daily functioning for some.

William Dodson, MD, describes intense internal feelings or hyperarousal, which manifest often as extreme emotion. Overwhelming emotions can take over and impede our intentions, making it extremely challenging to accomplish things we truly want or need to do.

Because the amygdala plays a key role in emotional control, Daniel Goleman talks about the “amygdala hijack”—in other words, our emotions take over our ability to act in a rational manner. He believes that we can develop emotional intelligence as a process of *identifying* and *learning to understand* our emotions. He also believes that emotional intelligence can help with self-motivation.



So, how can I do this?

The solution lies in considering, individually, how to deal with the many forms of stress and recover from the mental or emotional fatigue that keeps us from performing in a manner that we are capable of. Consider the following thoughts:

- Some stress is avoidable, and some is not.
- Stress deflates our energy and impacts executive function and behavior.

Goleman believes that our brain is malleable and we can manage our emotion life with our intelligence by:

- being aware of our moods and thoughts about our moods.
- recognizing when emotions are flooding us and managing those emotions.
- achieving the ability to deal with many forms of stress and reducing that stress.
- mobilizing positive emotions to drive us toward our goals.

Stuart Shanker, DPhil, a child development expert, has written *Self-Reg*, a book on self-regulation from the perspective of understanding the role of stress in childhood and parenting. His information is equally beneficial in understanding stress and how to deal with it as an adult, especially for an adult with ADHD. Dr. Shanker identifies stressors in five domain areas. Identifying the domain in which you are experiencing the stress and the specific stressor is a good first step in dealing with that stress. He describes the domains as:

- **Biological:** stressors in our environment or biological makeup, such as sensitivity to materials, light or sounds, insomnia, or allergies.
- **Emotional:** intense emotions in a relationship or an argument. Criticism from someone else, real or perceived. An overly developed sense of responsibility for others.
- **Cognitive:** slow processing, lack of interest in a topic, information overload, executive function deficits such as memory issues, reading or comprehension challenges, planning and prioritizing, etc.
- **Social:** retirement, being an introvert at a party, real or perceived social rejection, discomfort in initiating conversation in a group, jealousy, criticism by friends or partners.
- **Prosocial:** a sick child or aging parent, embarrassment over being late, neglecting one's self-care for the care of others, internet dating, perceived failure of meeting other's expectations or feelings.

This stress impacts all of our other behavior. Executive function, which is often challenged anyway, can show a marked decline when our feeling mind takes over our thinking mind.

Our awareness of the stress and where it comes from can help us determine what to do with it. Dr. Shanker also provides a five-step process that, when followed, can result in not only less stress but also in more productivity.

- 1. Read the signs and reframe the perception of your behavior.** Learn to be aware of intense emotions and rather than labeling them as negative, simply notice, without judgment of what is happening in your limbic system.
- 2. Recognize the stressors.** Are they coming from biological, emotional, cognitive, social, or prosocial domains?
- 3. Reduce the stress** by engaging in a stress-reducing activity that resonates for you, such as being outside, doing yoga, deep breathing, or exercise.
- 4. Reflect.** Think back on a situation where stress took over your functioning and you overcame that stress. What did you do? How can you repeat that process?
- 5. Respond.** Develop strategies that best restore your energy and build future resilience. What calms you? Is it a walk, listening to music, restorative sleep, meditation, daily rituals, spending time with a pet, or some other restorative activity?

Take charge of your brain

Current experts in neuroscience suggest new opportunities that allow individuals with ADHD to take charge of their wildly adventuresome brains and be far more productive on a daily basis. The short-term benefits can be less stress and more energy resulting in a happier, more productive you. Long-term impacts can be a huge increase in self-worth. Some of the steps you might consider are:

- Identify the stressor that is having an effect on your emotions and your functioning.
- Determine the domain in which that stressor resides.
- Engage in a stress-reducing activity that resonates for you.
- Create strategies that restore the energy depleted by the stressful activity.

People with ADHD have neurodiverse brains. They often experience emotions with a heightened sense of arousal. With awareness of your brain's function and a creative plan, you can overcome the stress that impacts other life functions. You can change "Why can't I do this" to "Yes, I can do this!" Enjoy the journey. 🧠

Kay Axtell, MA, SCAC, is a certified ADHD coach currently in a partnership with the Center for Living Well with ADHD. She is a former special education teacher and has been coaching individuals with ADHD and executive function challenges for thirteen years. She enjoys collaborating with and supporting her unique and deserving clients on a path to success. She lives in the mountains west of Denver.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Brown, Thomas E. *Smart but Stuck: Emotions in Teens and Adults with ADHD*. Josey-Bass/Wiley, 2014.

Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Random House Publishing Group, 2005.

Shanker, Stuart. *Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life*. Penguin Books, 2017. See also Dr. Shanker's website, <https://self-reg.ca>, with visuals, infographics, and downloadable tools that are very user-friendly for adults wishing to practice his steps.