

Would an **ADHD Coach** Make Sense for Me?

By Katherine McGavern

IF YOU'RE AN ADULT with undiagnosed ADHD, chances are good you've always known it. Or at least you've had a pretty good idea that you were somehow different. You know you think about things differently, and you do things differently.

Back in the day, school seemed harder for you, but in funny ways. You breezed through some subjects, but really struggled to keep up with the ongoing workload that friends seemed to manage easily. You finished all major assignments at the very last second (involving an all-nighter or two), often with surprisingly good results (!), and now you still procrastinate too much.

Maybe you get bored easily, forget kind of important things frequently, and interrupt a lot. Maybe you misplace or lose things often, or you're always late, or you get super antsy waiting in lines or in traffic. You may drive your friends and family a little nuts, but they love your energy, creativity, sense of humor, inventiveness, good heart, and gift for adventures. You're good in a crisis, generous, willing to take chances, and you are never, *ever* boring. If your work involves something you *love*, you're quite successful.

Now let's say you're the parent of a child who's bright and capable, but really struggling in school, and becoming increasingly difficult to manage at home without a lot of stress. Long story short, you search for explanations, and eventually your child is diagnosed with ADHD. With the help of ADHD-experienced providers (pediatrician, school psychologist, teacher, etc.), things improve. You and your child gradually adopt new learning and behavioral strategies, get school accommodations, consider and take medication, increase structure and accountability at home, and adjust expectations to fit the two-to-five-year developmental lag of an ADHD brain. Life improves, successes follow.

Fast forward. That child is now a college student, attending online classes—at home! After years of working at it (with your help), he is now a capable self-manager, and has recently decided to work with an ADHD coach. Naturally, he shares none of the details, but you're starting to notice things. He happens to mention he's caught up with all his assignments; his grades are improving; he's no longer pull-



ing all-nighters to keep up with his work; he actually *writes things down*—in a planner!—and does them, and you're no longer worried he's going to flunk out (again).

Things keep adding up. When the ADHD evaluator first described your son's brain, you remember thinking, "*That's MY brain he's describing. That's exactly MY brain!*" but you didn't mention it. Later, when the school sponsored an ADHD presentation for parents, you sat there thinking the same thing, over and over: "*That's ME!*" And even if you missed the memo about ADHD being highly heritable—fact: it's genetic, and it runs in families—you eventually put the pieces together. It IS your brain.

No matter when finally you have this *aha* moment, **stop**. Consider the quality of your life right now, including some of your recent snafus (because if you have unmanaged ADHD you will have snafus): missed deadlines, disorganized belongings, poor follow-through (notwithstanding best intentions), the disappointment of botched plans and goals not met.



It's time to ask yourself: Could an ADHD coach help me? What does an ADHD coach actually do? How does this coaching thing work?

ADHD Coaching FAQs

What exactly IS ADHD coaching?

ADHD coaching is a practical, collaborative, problem-solving process which involves regular one-on-one meetings with your coach. Its effectiveness comes from three factors: your commitment to the process, accountability to yourself and your coach, and *having your coach fully on your team and trained to help you start and continue changing behaviors*.

It is NOT therapy, though therapy can be very helpful with the psychological and emotional challenges of ADHD.

What problems does ADHD coaching solve?

ADHD coaching addresses behavioral problems that you identify. Coaching starts with you and your coach taking a hard look at what's working for you right now and what's not. Your goal is not to take on or try to change *all* your ADHD-related behaviors. Rather, it's to address the most problematic ones, those with the highest "cost" to you right now. Certain unmanaged ADHD behaviors can jeopardize your job, your marriage, your financial situation, your health, your overall well-being and much more.

Remember, ADHD is a neurobiological condition with executive function deficits that impair the brain's ability to regulate itself. Unmanaged ADHD can produce such problems as:

- Difficulty starting things and completing things, especially non-optional assignments that are of little interest to you but important to someone else (boss, spouse, child, friend, etc.)
- Being chronically late and consistently missing deadlines
- Unhappy relationships at home and/or work, often involving unmanaged anger flare-ups and unpredictable emotions
- Ongoing disappointment stemming from poor management of basic responsibilities, such as personal and professional obligations, finances, legal matters (such as car accidents or arrests), parenting work, commitments made to others, and so forth.
- Pervasive disorganization and lack of systems for self-management (calendars, to-do lists, alarms and reminders, email management, etc.)
- Difficulty managing healthy life maintenance (regular exercise, control of substance intake, good diet and weight control habits, sound sleep hygiene, etc.)

- Chronic frustration, even despair, over goals repeatedly not met in all categories of your life

Okay, I sort of know what I want to (or need to) work on. Now what?

First, find a coach! Take the time for a conversation with any coach you're considering. A good sense of connection and interpersonal compatibility is essential to your success.

Then, you and your coach get started. You meet regularly, weekly if possible, but scheduling is flexible. Meetings will generally include some combination of the following elements:

- Check-in: What worked this week for you, what didn't? Review goals set at last meeting, and outcomes.
- Regarding what didn't work, what got in the way: was it a one-time thing, or more like an old, familiar obstacle we need to focus on?
- What successes pleased you most? Identify successful behaviors; can they be applied to new goals?
- ADHD information and education (provided by your ADHD coach) to help you better understand your brain and why it acts the way it does. This can be useful for reducing negative self-talk, common to ADHD brains used to failing frequently.
- Goal-setting for next meeting (or in general)
- Brainstorming to anticipate problems or patterns to watch out for, and proposals for what to do *differently* for a positive outcome. A good coach should have a plentiful supply of "tools" for you to try until you find what works best for you.
- Ongoing positive reinforcement!

Can I meet with a coach online?

Absolutely. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 80% of ADHD coaching nationally was being conducted by telephone or via online video sites.

What if I want to try medication?

In order to try treating your ADHD with medication, you'll need to get an ADHD diagnosis. Your coach should be able to provide names of qualified ADHD evaluators and prescribing professionals in your area. Adult ADHD diagnoses usually take less time (and cost less) than pediatric diagnoses. It's best to work with a physician who is trained and experienced in ADHD—usually a psychiatrist—while you find the right medication and the right dosage. It may take some trial and error. Once you know what works for you, your primary care doctor can write the prescriptions you'll need.

How much does ADHD coaching cost? Will insurance cover it?



Costs vary, and may be on a sliding scale or negotiable, depending on the coach. Sorry, there's no insurance coverage yet.

How long does this process usually last?

That depends on you. You may only want to use coaching for a set period of time; for example, for two to three months to get ready for a major exam (standardized admissions tests for college or graduate school, job performance review, financial certification, and so forth). Once you've achieved a specific goal, you may want to stop, or use coaching periodically as needed. Or, you may want to stick with it for as long as it takes to feel like *you* are in charge of your ADHD brain, and not the other way around. It depends on your goals, what challenges you're working with, what you can afford, and the degree of success you're striving for. Why not give ADHD coaching a try? It could be just what you need to improve your productivity, reliability, and overall quality of life.

Where can I find more info on ADHD coaching and on ADHD in general?

The CHADD website is a great place to start: chadd.org/understanding-adhd/adhd-fact-sheets. Or chadd.org/professional-directory. 

Katherine McGavern coaches adults with ADHD and is a certified Parent to Parent teacher. She gives presentations on ADHD to teachers (K-12), community organizations, and parent groups; provides training on ADHD to student teachers at The College of New Jersey; and is a member of the editorial advisory board of Attention. McGavern is a cofounding member of CHADD Mercer County, and facilitates their monthly meetings in Princeton, New Jersey.