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**W**HEN SOMEONE GETS DIAGNOSED with ADHD, he is often thrilled to finally understand what has been going on, to finally put the pieces together. He might eagerly share his diagnosis with others—with too many others. On the other hand, when some people receive their diagnosis, they are dismayed and disbelieving. They decide to keep it a secret at all costs.

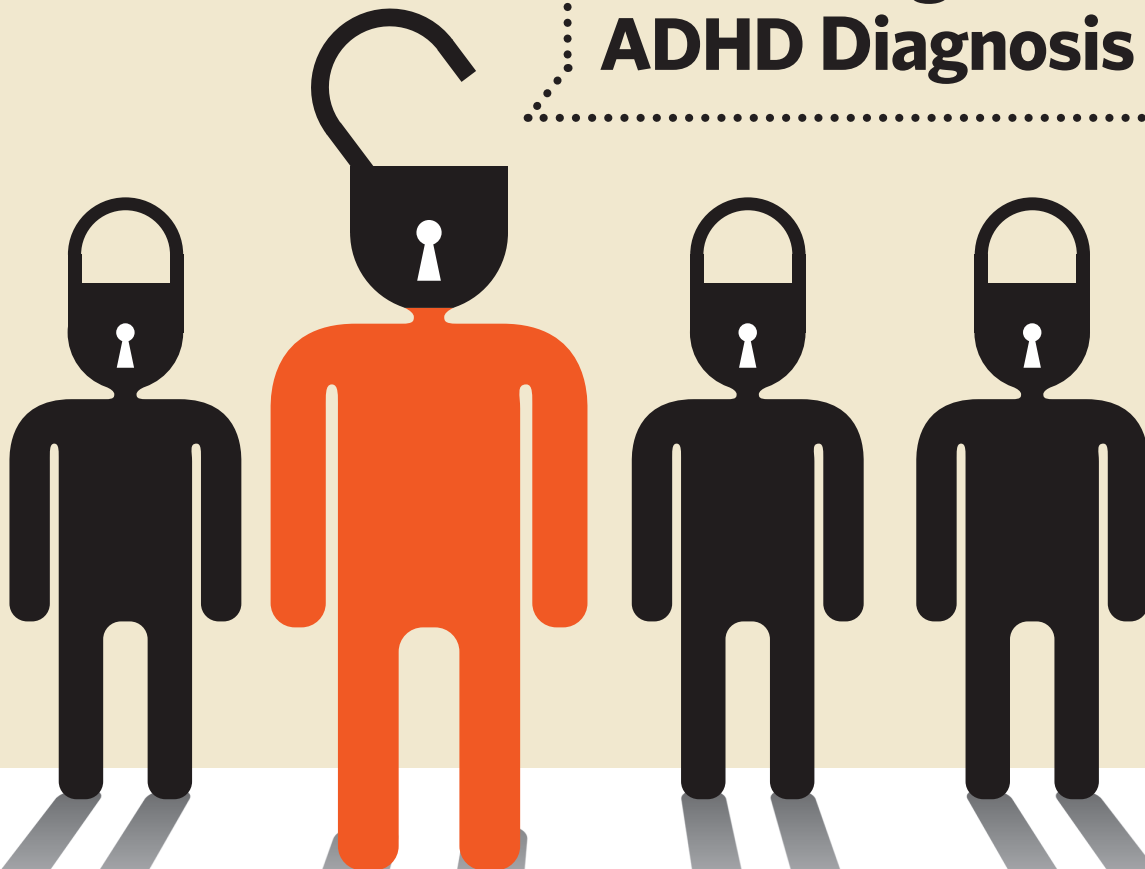
Which is the right response? Like much in life, moderation, the middle path, is the best course. The world can be an unforgiving place. Once something is expressed, it cannot be withdrawn. Proceed with caution when sharing your ADHD diagnosis.

For those reluctant to tell anyone, I encourage you to be more open. To truly accept yourself as a person with ADHD, it is important to be comfortable telling others your diagnosis. It is easier to tell when you truly believe having ADHD does

not minimize who you are. As more and more people disclose their ADHD diagnosis, it becomes less mysterious and less stigmatizing. People will realize that ADHD exists and is widespread. By disclosing, you make the world a more tolerant and accepting place for all people with ADHD.

I recently read that a psychiatrist advises parents of teenagers with ADHD and the teenagers themselves to keep the diagnosis a secret. Maybe the advice was to protect the teenager from friends who want access to his medicine. But if not for this reason, what was the message to the parents? What was the message to the teenager? “You have something too shameful to speak about.” I agree that sometimes, and in some situations, it is necessary to keep your ADHD a secret, but it should be your choice. You are the one to decide when you are comfortable sharing.

## Disclosing Your ADHD Diagnosis



Years ago, after I learned of my ADHD, I decided to announce it in public for the first time. I was hosting the first meeting of our adult ADHD support group. I felt it was important to say I have ADHD as part of my introduction. I sat in my car, practicing, saying aloud, again and again, “I have ADHD. I have ADHD. I have ADHD.” I envisioned speaking to an audience of seventy people.

At first, as I practiced the words, my voice quivered and I was tearful. After visualizing the audience and saying, “I have ADHD” ten or more times, I finally said it without anxiety. I was ready. The night arrived, and instead of seventy people, there were twenty-five! I announced, “I have ADHD.” It was easier than I expected. And from that day forward, I readily tell people, “I have ADHD.”

### **Reaching comfort with disclosure**

I don’t disclose indiscriminately. I am aware of who I want or need to tell, but I am no longer ashamed that I have ADHD. When I tell people, I say it in a matter of fact way—in an it-is-not-a-big-deal-but-I-thought-you-might-want-to-know tone of voice. I encourage you to get to this point on your ADHD journey—accepting yourself as someone with ADHD. Be comfortable telling others, while maintaining an awareness that not everyone needs to know.

How do you reach this point of comfort? It comes from practice, saying the words again and again, until they lose their emotional impact for you. It comes when you have a simple way of explaining how ADHD impacts your life. And it comes, most especially, after you have made progress and aren’t frequently embarrassed or apologizing for your ADHD screw-ups. When ADHD is no longer a big deal for you, you can tell others. This is the ideal scenario—disclose when you are comfortable disclosing. But sometimes we need to tell someone sooner, like a spouse, partner, or family member.

You need to tell them before you have fully incorporated your new understanding and acceptance of yourself. You may not be in the best place emotionally to tell them, but if you want their understanding and cooperation, you need to tell them about your diagnosis.

You may be able to predict their responses, and you can get yourself emotionally prepared for what they may say. Sometimes you know the person will be receptive and supportive, but often you have no idea how a person will respond. You don’t know their knowledge of or beliefs about ADHD, or if they have even heard of the disorder.

Before proceeding, ask yourself, “Who do I need to tell and why do I need to tell them?” “Do they need to know now?” “Is it safe to tell them?” “Is it appropriate?” “Will they handle the information with respect and confidentiality?” Thinking through the answers to these questions, before you impulsively tell others about your diagnosis, could prevent future heartache and regrets. Thinking through what to say and even practicing is helpful. Keep it simple.

### **What if they don’t believe you have ADHD?**

Recently, someone blogged on the ten reasons people don’t believe you have ADHD when you tell them. After reading the reasons, I thought how painful it is to disclose your ADHD to another person, only to have that person to claim, “You don’t have ADHD!” With this hurtful comment, they ignore all your struggles. They belittle the serious disability with which you, unknowingly, have coped for many years.

When we prepare to tell others of our ADHD, we think about our problems with disclosing—fear of what the person will think, shame that something is wrong with us, worry they may reject us, and our confusion about what to say and how to say it. We focus on the problems in telling, without considering the problems it might create for the listener.

There are many reasons people declare, “You don’t have ADHD!” They are expressing their fear and confusion. They don’t know what ADHD is, but believe it is a bad thing to have. They know there is stigma with an ADHD diagnosis, and they want to protect you. If they are your parents or family members, they could be fearful they caused your ADHD. Or they might fear that if you have ADHD, they have it too.

They might think your challenging behaviors are totally within your control, that you could behave differently if you really wanted to. They may believe ADHD is an excuse and you are taking the easy way out. Maybe they believe taking medicine is “cheating” and gives you an unfair advantage. There are a variety of reasons why someone might tell you, “You don’t have ADHD.”

What I have found to be a helpful response is to ask, in a calm, non-threatened voice, “I am curious what makes you say that?” or “What makes you think that?” Gently get them to reveal their thinking. Keep asking questions to clarify what they say. Give encouragement by saying, “I can understand why you might think that way.” “It

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makes perfect sense that you would believe that.” Try to fully understand their thinking. Ask a lot of questions, but don’t rebut what they say. Just keep on your explorer’s hat, fully learning why they believe you don’t have ADHD. As you understand their thinking, you will know what steps to take to re-educate them.

Do they believe only children or only boys have ADHD? Do they believe it was a disorder created by the pharmaceutical companies to sell more medications? Do they believe only totally messed-up people have this disorder and you aren’t like that? Do they know someone with ADHD and you aren’t like them? Have they read an article or seen a TV program on ADHD, and it didn’t sound like you? Do they have some ideas about the challenges people with ADHD experience, and they don’t see you having those challenges?

The more you understand their thinking and how they developed their beliefs, the better conversation you can have to correct their misperceptions. By being open to their response of “You don’t have ADHD” and respectful of their opinions without judgment or hurt feelings, you are in a better place to dialogue. Listen fully to their ideas before providing them with contradicting information.

### **And then there’s the workplace...**

Proceed with extra caution in the workplace, as disclosure there sometimes results in detrimental consequences. A preferred approach is to describe what strategies and accommodations help you to function better without disclosing your ADHD.

For example, you can say, “I work better in an environment free from distractions. Would it be possible

for me to have an office with a door that closes, or could I work with a headset on to reduce distracting background noises?” Another example: “I am able to understand tasks better when I am given them in writing. When you have things for me to do, could you write it out for me?” Or you can say, “I do better when I get frequent feedback on my performance. Could we set up weekly meetings to discuss how I am doing?”

Learn to advocate for whatever you need to be successful at work. There are many examples of people with ADHD who excel in their professions, who live happy, successful and fulfilled lives. I hope that you will join them and will openly and easily tell others about your ADHD and how it contributes positively to your life.

### **Prepare yourself before you tell**

When preparing to tell someone that you have ADHD, prepare yourself for their possible responses. Realize that their learning you have ADHD might not be an easy thing for them to hear and that they might not be open to hearing it. Know that with some people it may be a long-term struggle to get them to acknowledge and accept your ADHD, and that with some you will decide it is not worth the effort.

Some people will never change their opinion. Let go of your hope that they will accept you as a person with ADHD. You might maintain a relationship with them but never be free to discuss your ADHD.

With others, using the right words, articles, books, and workshops, you can educate them and perhaps win them over as allies and advocates. With those open to learning, you will establish a closer, more honest relationship. It will be worth your time as you will know the other person accepts and values you as you are. You are free to be truly yourself.

ADHD does not have to be your dark, dirty secret. Become open to tell others you have ADHD, and you will find the people for whom it makes not one iota of difference. These are the people you want and need in your life. 🗣️



**Cynthia Hammer, MSW**, is executive director of the Inattentive ADHD Coalition, a nonprofit with a mission that children with inattentive ADHD are diagnosed by age eight and adults with inattentive ADHD are readily and correctly diagnosed when they seek help. The

website is [www.iadhd.org](http://www.iadhd.org).