

Helping Patients with Adult ADHD in the COVID-19 Era

Rory C. Reid¹, Ph.D., LCSW

Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Research Psychologist

Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences

University of California Los Angeles

HANDOUT FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS



David Geffen
School of Medicine



Note: The content of this document is intended for healthcare providers working with patients diagnosed with adult ADHD. Suggestions noted below are generally helpful for many diagnosed with adult ADHD, however, as always, therapeutic advice can vary depending on individual patient needs. Consequently, these suggestions are not to be construed as medical advice, evidence-based recommendations, or treatment recommendations by the author, UCLA, or the California Department of Public Health. [Note: For a helpful discussion about signs and symptoms of ADHD in adults, see [video](#) by Dr. Judy Ho, a California Board Certified Neuropsychologist]

1. **Challenge:** Patients who have ADHD are more likely to have comorbid anxiety (~40%). Such patients may **catastrophize** things they see or hear on social media and in the news compounding their distress. Moreover, their anxiety is likely to heighten stress about a number of challenges outlined in this document.

Suggestions: With respect to anxiety about COVID-19, give patients websites and other sources of accurate information (e.g., [CDC](#), [California Department of Public Health](#)). Suggest patients limit time spent watching news and recommend news sources that provide **reliable** and **neutrally biased** information (e.g., see [Media Bias Chart](#)). Caution should be taken when reading information about COVID-19 on social media insofar as it may be inaccurate. Use of social media should focus on creative ideas to cope with stress and other challenges encountered during this time period. Taking time to have “gratitude” moments where you acknowledge what you are grateful for. Additional help for anxiety reduction can be found below on the section related to managing stress.

2. **Challenge:** Patients with ADHD get distracted from focusing on proper hygiene associated with reduced transmission of COVID-19. Even when educated about “hand-washing” and

¹ Dr. Reid is an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Research Psychologist at UCLA. Email: roryreid@ucla.edu

other protocols, they forget, or they are absent minded, or do things impulsively that compromise the health and safety of themselves and loved ones.

Suggestions: ADHD expert and marriage consultant Melissa Orlov suggests loved ones let the individual with ADHD own the problem, solicit empathy “I’m really anxious about this and need your help” and let them know “I need a few weeks of extra effort to really pay attention, I’m not asking for a lifetime of change.” Create routines and assign responsibilities they can succeed at, rather than setting them up to fail. Put reminder signs around the house such as “WASH HANDS OFTEN” and put a smiley emoji on the sign so it doesn’t feel like another “rule.” Take ownership over things you can control and consider being the designated person to go to the grocery stores and run other errands so you can be assured that precautions are being taken to reduce viral transmission.

3. **Challenge:** Working from home for those with ADHD may pose additional difficulties for focusing and concentrating due to distractions not common in their normal work environment (e.g., kids, family members interrupting).

Suggestions: Consider a white noise maker, listening to soft-music while working, taking a small 5 minute break every hour, replicate normal work conditions and boundaries as much as possible (e.g., having dual monitors or an extended monitor for a laptop²; closed door, family members instructed to limit interruptions, etc...). Some individuals with ADHD indicate it is helpful to self-impose boundaries that help them succeed (reduced smartphone time, online web-browser [whitelists / blacklists](#)). Creating a structure that rewards vigilance in order to positively reinforce task completion and goal attainment (e.g., a healthy snack break after a task is completed).

During times when motivation is lacking, individuals can take a few minutes to visualize or imagine getting a task done “take a moment to imagine the *feeling of satisfaction* from getting a mundane or boring task done” and “break out tasks into smaller sub-tasks so things don’t seem so overwhelming.” Having routine and structure with some accountability is ideal, but not always feasible.

The current situation we are all in requires creativity. For example, one patient with ADHD working from home reported he would do a “show and tell” at lunch to his romantic partner about what was accomplished that morning and his partner thought of creative ways to reward him which made it fun and kept him motivated to stay on task. When creativity is essential for work, going for a walk can be helpful. Indeed, Steve Jobs insisted on “walking meetings” with associates at Apple, especially when creative problem solving was required, something that Mark Zuckerberg and many others in Silicon Valley now emulate. Numerous famous authors — Henry David Thoreau, L.M. Montgomery, J.K. Rowling, and Ernest

² This has been recommended by several ADHD coaches and reported helpful by many adults diagnosed with ADHD as it gives them more screen space to organize their work, tasks lists, etc...While it is true it also gives them more screen space to be distracted, most report it’s more of a benefit than a limitation. [[Example Monitor](#)]

Hemingway, to name a few — have stated walking was the only reliable cure to writer’s block. Research has also supported walking with a Stanford University study finding that walking boosts creativity output by 60 percent.³

Finally, providers should also remind patients with adult ADHD who have medications to continue to be compliant with taking their medications under medical direction. New patients should be referred to appropriate prescribers (e.g., psychiatrist, psychiatric nurse practitioner) for consideration to determine if psychotropic medications would be beneficial. Some research suggests ADHD medications may exert a protective factor on addictive behaviors.⁴

4. **Challenge:** Transitions to home-schooling and more parenting time may be stressful, particularly for those with ADHD. Consider also the hereditary component of ADHD suggests one or both parents are more likely to have ADHD. Imagine how challenging it might be for a parent with ADHD to be home-schooling a child with ADHD and then having to also do work from home. In situations where there are single parent families, this may increase the associated burdens and difficulties.

Suggestions: Network with other parents to discuss what they’re doing and share ideas. Become aware of educational resources offered by school. There are many new online resources now available to assist parents during the COVID-19 era. For example, many Zoos are offering online tours, “animal of the day”, and over 12 world-famous museums are offering virtual tours (many for free). Although children are likely to have increased “screen” time during the current crisis, it doesn’t take a long time to set some boundaries around **how** screen time is used so that screen time is educational. While adults with ADHD may express feeling exhausted in their efforts to manage kids, reassure them that taking a few minutes each night to reach out to other parents or do some research different ideas for healthy online resources for children may offer big dividends. Also normalize their frustrations. Many parents, even those without ADHD, are feeling challenged by having to juggle work and parenting.

5. **Challenge:** Be particularly mindful for patients who have co-existing medical conditions known to create vulnerabilities for COVID-19 in addition to their mental health issues.

Suggestions: Discuss their action plans to keep safe. Be specific and talk about cross-contamination, social distancing (e.g., creating greater social distance when going to exercise outdoors such as running along a trail where they may pass others), sanitizing, hand-washing, and so forth. Explore if they have family or friends who can grocery shop, or order online groceries to avoid risk for exposure [[NPR Article](#)]

³ Oppezzo, M., & Schwartz, D. L. (2014). Give your ideas some legs: The positive effect of walking on creative thinking. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 40(4), 1142-1152.

⁴ Quinn, P. D., Chang, Z., Hur, K., Gibbons, R. D., Lahey, B. B., Rickert, M. E, et al...Sjolander, A. (2017). ADHD Medication and substance-related problems. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 174(9), 877-885.

6. **Challenge:** Financial stress is common despite government efforts to limit evictions, foreclosures, and provide economic relief, remember that **many individuals with ADHD were likely experiencing financial difficulties before COVID-19 sanctions began**. These challenges have been exacerbated by the current situation. One or both partners may have lost or reduced employment, lost health insurance, and so forth, adding to their financial and emotional distress. Individuals may also rationalize unnecessary credit card expenditures (buying a deep freezer; purchasing a gun, etc...)

Suggestions: Become aware of government resources and how they work (irs.gov) and the stimulus packages that can be available for those self-employed or small business owners. Seek information from trusted sources to get educated about state laws or orders that provide reassurance to residents such as prohibitions on evictions, shutting utilities off, or medical benefits. People should be encouraged to explore how financial institutions are offering modified terms on mortgages or other loans during the COVID-19 sanctions.

7. **Challenge:** Boredom proneness, boredom susceptibility, and loneliness will likely be heightened during the COVID-19 sanctions.

Suggestions: Look for ways to have meaningful stimulation, particularly activities that patients can feel good about afterwards (e.g., productive time vs. passive unproductive time). Consider things that will offer opportunities for novelty or variety. For example, if someone watches Netflix, choosing an educational documentary about healthy food or an historical event vs. something that will leave them feeling like they 'wasted' time afterward. Meaningful Ted Talks, PodCasts, and so forth can be stimulating. Learning a new skill such as a language, photography (there are interesting sites about how to take amazing photos with a smart phone), or DIY videos for home projects or learning to cooking new recipes. Technology has created unprecedented opportunities to reach out to others through video, audio, social media and so forth. Create realistic expectations and recognize that although social media can give people ways to connect and provide perspectives, sometimes it can also be misleading (e.g., people often post only positive experiences, leaving others to believe that they're alone in their challenges). There are online forums such as [CHADD](#) where those with ADHD can connect with others who also have ADHD and get ideas, vent, and find some comical relief. Despite limitations, there are many opportunities to volunteer and help others during this crisis. One individual did a video chat where he did magic tricks for kids who were feeling restless at home. One woman volunteered to provide online math tutoring for some children in her neighborhood. These are only a few of many creative and profound ways in which individuals are giving back.

Couples can find helpful tips and insights about ways to connect including an online-forum where a number of issues related to relationships and ADHD are addressed. [[Website](#)]

8. **Challenge:** Increased levels of stress and feeling overwhelmed.

Suggestions: Offer some psychoeducation about stress (Consider [CrashCourse](#), [Madhumita Murgia Ted-Ed](#), [Sharon Horesh Bergquist Ted-Ed](#)). Identify the specific types of stressors that are most challenging. Time management is often a challenge for those with ADHD so consider helping patients calibrate realistic expectations about their planning and commitments. Reframing stress as a positive thing that can motivate change as noted by Kelly McGonigal's [Ted Talk](#). Moreover, while patients can focus on the negative aspects of the COVID-19 sanctions, providers can help them reframe this time period as a tremendous opportunity for self-discover, growth, and learning. Providers can help identify patients' strengths and limitations as well as their resources and demands. Often people don't recognize some strengths as resources such as problem solving, optimism, social support, perseverance, or cognitive flexibility. Assess for exercise, specifically the types of exercise that are helpful in relieving stress (e.g., aerobic exercise, 4-5 days a week for 20 minutes or longer, attaining 80% of maximum target heart rate).⁵ People can consider numerous YouTube Yoga videos (some sites are '[pay what you can afford](#)'), and online resources for Mindfulness Meditation that has been shown to reduce stress and enhance affect regulation (see [UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center](#)). Some meditation Apps such as [Calm](#) and [Headspace](#) are offering reduced or free meditation exercises during the COVID-19 sanctions. Finally, author and psychiatrist Dr. Lidia Zylowska, M.D., authored a book "[The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD](#)" which has an accompanying CD-Audio with exercises specifically for those with Adult ADHD that many have found helpful.

9. **Challenge:** Increased risks for intimate partner violence may exist given ADHD has been linked to intimate partner violence independently of associations noted among those with addictions (e.g., gambling disorder, substance abuse).

Suggestions: Help patients identify triggers, create "safe" places in the house, revisit coping skills (especially with anger management, emotion regulation, effective communication, and conflict resolution), and remind patients about the importance of boundaries that will help them make good choices. Find safe ways for high-risk couples to have some time apart each day. Provide at-risk romantic partners with Domestic Violence Hotline numbers or Parents Anonymous for your region where appropriate or necessary. Assess for alcohol or drug abuse that can often be a risk factor for intimate partner violence. Challenge irrational beliefs that often give rise to abuse (e.g., strict or rigid gender role stereotypes). During the COVID-19 crisis, sadly, some normal resources such as Domestic Violence Shelters may be closed, so it is important to invest additional time on prevention among high-risk families.

10. **Challenge:** There may be increased risk for problem gambling given the additional stressors encountered during COVID-19. Don't assume because gambling venues are temporarily

⁵ Obviously this is with a caveat that people are physically able to exercise per their own medical health.

closed that gambling has stopped. Patients may cross-over to illegal online gambling or other games of chance that can increase their risk for relapse. Patients may develop [cross-over addictions](#) or escaping behaviors to cope with stress such as excessive viewing of pornography, compulsive online-shopping, movie-binging, or emotional eating (especially with food or unhealthy snacks being more accessible at home).

Suggestions: In California, State funded treatment can connect problem gamblers to a licensed therapist by calling 1-800-GAMBLER and Telehealth is available allowing people to do therapy remotely from home. Alternatively, individuals can text “support” to 53342 or find a therapist trained to work with problem gambling through the California Department of Public Health [website](#) (again these therapists offer Telehealth). While traditional free community support groups through Gamblers Anonymous are currently suspended, there is a daily group meeting every day currently during the COVID-19 sanctions [see [Meeting Times / Numbers](#)]. UCLA has created a Freedom from [Problem Gambling Self-Help Workbook](#) that is free of charge. There are also other online communities and forums for problem gamblers such as [GamTalk](#) or [SMART Recovery Groups](#). Finally, several studies have shown Mindfulness Meditation exercises can help reduce stress, decrease emotional reactivity and impulsivity, and increase tolerance for addictive cravings. Mindfulness websites to consider: [UCLA](#), [Mindful](#), [Harvard](#), New York Times article on “[How to Meditate](#)”, an article titled [Mindfulness for Gambling Addictions: Does it Work](#), and TedTalk by [Dr. Hedy Kober](#) from Yale University.

Funding Source: Dr. Reid receives salary as a faculty at UCLA and funding from the California Department of Public Health, Office of Problem Gambling.

Conflicts of Interest: Dr. Reid received a small honorarium for the ProTalk “Mindfulness for Gambling Addictions: Does it Work?” He does not have any conflicts of interest with the sites or resources mentioned in this article.