

**Fostering Resilience and Grit in Those with ADHD**  
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*Resilience: The capacity to recover quickly from difficulty*

*Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals*

When treating students with ADHD, I typically see the student and his/her family prior to each semester or very early in the semester and then periodically over the next few months. Without fail, the student states that the new semester will be their best semester ever. They set their goals high, frequently telling me that they will likely make all A's and maybe a few B's. By the middle of the semester, they are reporting that the teacher/professor is not a very good instructor and that they might have a few missing assignments. The parents then tell me that there are two to three times the number of missing assignments that the student reported. By the end of the semester, the students are typically scrambling to complete final projects, pass upcoming exams, and complete unfinished work. Rarely do these students meet the goals they predicted at the beginning of the semester. Yet, they return the next semester with a smile on their face and the same positive outlook. They are resilient and bounce back from the difficulty of the previous semester. And then the cycle starts all over again.

Individuals with ADHD have difficulty with the executive function of looking to the past to change their behavior in the moment regarding future goals. They also struggle with maintaining mental effort and with organization and time management. These factors make academic success difficult. The demands of school run counter to the skillset of most individuals with ADHD. Thus, they often fall below the academic expectations of their parents and teachers as well as their own expectations. Those with ADHD tend to be sprinters, not marathoners – until they find their passion. Once a person with ADHD finds his/her passion, the hyperfocus of ADHD often gives them an advantage. But the dilemma that confronts parents, educators and others who work with individuals with ADHD is how to support them until they find their passion. How do we take the resilience of ADHD and encourage the individual to stay in the game long enough to find his/her passion?

Here are a few thoughts on fostering resilience and grit in those with ADHD.

**Know the disorder.** For most parents, ADHD is a dreaded four-letter word. They often drag their feet in obtaining a diagnosis and fight the idea of medication. The evidence that medication is an effective part of treating ADHD is overwhelming. Over time, most families will eventually concede to a trial of medication. Once parents find that medication can be helpful, all other treatment often ends. At CRG we say that these families have a diagnosis and a medication but no plan.

ADHD is more than an attention problem. Those with ADHD have deficits in executive functioning that can be very impairing in day-to-day functioning. Parents who develop an understanding of these deficits are in a much better position to support and assist their child. The research of Dr. Russell Barkley and others has revealed that ADHD is a disorder of self-regulation that negatively impacts time management, planning and organizing, reflecting on the past and adjusting behavior toward future goals. As Barkley says, ADHD is not a deficit in knowing but a deficit in performance. This means that people with ADHD often know *how* to perform a skill needed to be successful but have chronic difficulty *using* that skill in the moment to be successful. For an overview of ADHD and the executive functions impacted, the following webinars are recommended:

- Dr. Julie Steck: *ADHD: More Than an Attention Problem* (2016)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqZoFMyXZhk>
- Dr. Russell Barkley: *This Is How You Treat ADHD Based Off Science* (2012)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JowPOqRmxNs>
- Dr. Russell Barkley: *ADHD Inattention Disorder* (2014)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpB-B8BXk0>
- Dr. Russell Barkley: *The 30 Essential Ideas Every Parent Needs to Know* (2012)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCAGc-rklfo>

***Build structure and predictability into your family's routine.*** Although children and adolescents fight structure and routine, they rely on it. In today's world of busy schedules and myriad demands placed on both children and adults, the need for structure within the home is more important than ever. All children need bedtimes, regularly scheduled meal times, morning routines, and household rules. This does not equate to rigidity but to regularity. ADHD is a highly genetic disorder, so one or both parents may have ADHD. This makes structure even more difficult but also more important. Parents are encouraged to look closely at their daily routines and the household routines and make sure that they are providing predictable structures.

***Practice love, acceptance and forgiveness daily.*** Those with ADHD receive a lot of negative feedback over the course of the day. They often run late, forget what they are supposed to have done, make careless errors in their work, and utter impulsive comments that result in negative responses from others. By the time a child or adolescent gets home from their day, their emotional tank is drained. Parents need to help refill that tank by giving unconditional love, acceptance of who their child is, and forgiveness of failures or behavioral transgressions. This does not mean that the behaviors are ignored but that the person is forgiven, accepted and loved unconditionally.

***Don't personalize your child or adolescent's behavior.*** Children and adolescents with ADHD are not always truthful. They are impulsive in their behavior and this can result in hitting, kicking or biting. They have impulsive emotions and can say things that are hurtful. Their behavior can be embarrassing or interrupt family functions. Parents often take these actions and emotions personally and respond accordingly. It is important for parents to remember that such behaviors are not really meant to hurt others physically or emotionally. Taking these behaviors personally results in anger toward the child that is not productive.

***Provide opportunities for your child to find their "islands of competence".*** Dr. Robert Brooks coined the term, "islands of competence," almost 30 years ago. He asserts that "every person possesses at least one small 'island of competence,' one area that is or has the potential to be a source of pride and accomplishment" (Brooks, 1999a). Dr. Brooks has dedicated his career to this concept with an emphasis on the need for islands of competence for students with disabilities, including ADHD. Children and adolescents often sign up for many different activities but want to quit when they lose interest or find they need to practice harder. Parents are encouraged to help their children find their passion – their

island of competence. It may be something obscure and not so obvious initially. When your child is trying something new, sign up for a short session or an introductory level course. Make sure that they finish their commitment but allow them to try something different the next time.

***Allow your child or adolescent to fail but assist them with learning from their failures and minimize the likelihood of a repeat failure.*** Everyone will fail at some things and we can learn important lessons from our failures. Parents of children with ADHD cannot and should not try to prevent their child from failures. However, they will need to provide more support for their child with ADHD than that provided to a child without ADHD. I remind parents every day that children and adolescents with ADHD have a 30% delay in the development of self-regulation. We can't prevent failure but we can level the playing field for our children with ADHD by breaking down tasks, providing support in the environments in which they need support, and helping them set realistic and attainable goals. Parents should adopt a coaching approach by guiding and helping children anticipate options and outcomes while resisting the urge to micro-manage and helicopter in to rescue.

#### **Additional Resources**

[https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance)

<https://www.additudemag.com/teaching-grit-to-teens-with-adhd-how-to-build-resilience>

<http://www.cdl.org/articles/self-worth-resilience-and-hope-the-search-for-islands-of-competence>

[Brooks, R. B. \(1999a\). Fostering resilience in exceptional children: The search for islands of competence. In V. Schwean & D. Saklofske \(Eds.\), \*Handbook of Psychosocial Characteristics of Exceptional Children\* \(pp. 563-586\). New York: Academic/Plenum Publishers.](#)