

Heading to College with ADHD Brings Extra Challenges

by Karen Weintraub, Special for USA TODAY

Bridges says it took her that long to get her degree because she wasn't sure what she wanted to do when she grew up. She would impulsively switch majors -- and even schools -- to indulge her latest passion. That's classic ADHD behavior, college guidance counselors say.

Nearly 10% of American young people have been diagnosed with ADHD at some point in their lives. And although some grow out of the diagnosis, most don't, leaving more and more teens with labels and struggles unknown in their parents' generation.

Some flounder in college when mom, dad and homeroom teachers aren't there to offer support, and haphazard course schedules don't provide the structure of high school.

It's important for parents and other adults to take ADHD seriously, says Stephen Hinshaw, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, whose recent study found that girls with ADHD are more likely to attempt suicide or injure themselves than girls without the condition.

But figuring out how to best help those teens can be tricky, say counselors, psychiatrists and adults with ADHD, because everyone's situation and form of ADHD is different.

There are certain common threads, though: Adequate preparation, getting the right accommodations, and being on the appropriate treatment, they add.

Bridges, of Grapevine, Texas, says her own parents did lots of things right. "They did not let me use my ADHD as an excuse for anything," she says. They told her that having it "means you have to work harder, but it doesn't mean you can't achieve what you want to."

But they also could have helped more, she said, by being more sensitive to her needs. They often got upset because her room was a mess -- a battle she says wasn't worth fighting. And they encouraged her to take a reduced course load in her first semester of college, which turned out to be a mistake because it provided too little structure.

Several experts say it's important for students to figure out their own best routines and what works for them. And it's a good idea, they say, to start training teens to do this years before they're ready to leave home.

"Let them practice living independently before they come to college. Getting up and going to bed on their own. Scheduling their daily tasks and keeping their own appointments," says Jamie Davidson, a psychologist and assistant vice president for student wellness at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. It can be frustrating for parents, especially those who have had to advocate for their kids for so long, to be suddenly cut off when their child is at college.

But parents still play a key role in monitoring their child, staying in touch, and calling attention to small problems before they become big ones.

"I think parents have to find the right balance between continuing to be involved in their kids' lives, but allowing the son or daughter to become their own individual and figure out how to solve their problems,"

says physician Ralph Manchester, director of the University Health Service at the University of Rochester (N.Y.), where roughly 5% of students take prescription medication for ADHD. Demand for counseling services has jumped 45% in the last five years.

Colleges can't and won't monitor whether kids take their medications, says Jennifer Haubenreiser, president of the American College Health Association and director of health promotion at Montana State University in Bozeman.

Sometimes those legitimately prescribed ADHD medications will share it with other students, especially around finals time; some believe it will help them concentrate, but there's no data showing it actually does. Haubenreiser says that 90% of non-medical use of ADHD drugs is through friends.

That's why students should keep their ADHD diagnosis and medication status to themselves, "so that at finals time no one comes around looking for it," says psychiatrist Craig Surman, an adult ADHD expert at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital.

Now, heading into another year of teaching third graders, Bridges says she's happy with her life and her ADHD -- "It gives me my creativity, my spunk . . . definitely my patience."

And she's grateful for the meandering she did in college.

"I went on this incredible journey and found myself, and found what I'm meant to do," she says.

Tips for helping a teenager with ADHD adapt to college:

1. Know what helped your child thrive in the past and try to replicate it when they go off to college.
2. Keep their diagnosis and medications private.
3. Find a doctor close to school who can check in about medications without waiting for the holidays. Sometimes students will need to adjust their dosage to help cope with the more stressful, less structured environment at college.
4. Provide your teenager with as much structure and resources as will be helpful. If you foresee that laundry will be a problem, for instance, check into laundry services on campus. Tutoring from the professor or a graduate student in need of extra cash can make a big difference for some students, as can regular check-ins with an on-campus counselor.
5. Most colleges will offer accommodations such as extra time on tests, recorded lectures and help with note-taking, but offerings and costs for these services vary from school to school.
6. Make sure your teen knows the basics of how to eat healthy meals and get adequate exercise and sleep. Healthy habits may be particularly important for teens with ADHD, but also particularly challenging for them to stick to routines.
7. Help them set out goals ahead of time to make sure they keep up with school work. Don't let them wait for poor grades at the end of a semester before recognizing a problem.
8. Teach them to ask for help if they need it -- as a sign of strength, not weakness.

Sources: Psychiatrist Craig Surman, scientific coordinator of the adult ADHD research program at Massachusetts General Hospital, and author, with Dr. Tim Bilkey and Karen Weintraub, of the upcoming book *Fast Minds: What to do if you have ADHD (or think you might)*, due in February.