

SYLLABUS FOR SUCCESS

A Guide For AD/HD College Freshmen

By Patricia Quinn, M.D.

Even though he's taking only two classes this semester, Steven McDonald* finds college profoundly difficult. It's not so much the studying as paying attention in lectures.

"It just sounds like an echo in back of my head," says Steven, 20, who suffers from AD/HD and anxiety disorders. "If I try and make myself concentrate, then I concentrate on concentrating." Taking notes in class only makes matters worse. "I completely lose track of what the professor is talking about," says Steven.

Exams are no less bewildering. "I have to read a question over ten times before I get it," he says. When other students start handing in their tests before he's completed half of his, "I freak out."

Like Steven, 70% of people diagnosed with AD/HD in elementary school continue to have symptoms as young adults. These include problems with attention, impulsivity, hyperactivity or restlessness, mood swings, low frustration tolerance, and difficulty falling asleep.

Some with AD/HD daydream, others have difficulty completing tasks, and many are disorganized, forgetful, or procrastinate. For Steven, who barely squeaked by in high school, all of these symptoms impact his academic performance as he struggles with time management, focusing, completing assignments on time, organizing his life, and setting priorities.

College living conditions — filled with distractions — often compound AD/HD issues. Indeed, the transition from high school to college and from family to semi-independent living can be difficult for students with and without AD/HD. But unless AD/HD students understand and effectively handle their disorder's special issues, they are far less likely to make this transition successfully.

Here are some strategies to help maximize your chances of success.

COLLEGE PROGRAMS 101

The college you choose sets the stage for your success. The school should be a good fit academically, but should also meet your social and emotional needs.

Be realistic about your abilities and disabilities. A college that has a well-established learning disabilities and/or AD/HD program may be essential. These programs insure that a school's service providers are aware of and have sensitized the faculty to the needs of students with AD/HD. In such an environment, you'll have fewer problems getting the accommodations you need to help you succeed academically.

INTRO TO ACCOMMODATIONS

In order to make use of available services, first you must determine what works for you. It's essential that you know all about AD/HD and how it affects you personally. Perhaps more importantly, you must become a forceful self-advocate, requesting special services and accommodations in a clear and effective manner.

Before you leave for college, make two lists: one should detail the specific resources you have found helpful in the past (such as untimed tests, use of a note taker, preferential seating, and assignments provided in writing), and the other should specify the accommodations you feel you will need at college.

When you get to school, immediately make an appointment with the disability support office on campus. When you meet with the staff, bring your accommodations lists, as well as documentation of your learning disability. (A note from your doctor and learning disabilities test results are best.) Explain in your own words how your AD/HD impacts both your academic and psychological functioning, and what you need to compensate for your disability. You and the staff can then work together to develop and implement a workable accommodations plan.

ADVANCED COUNSELING

Learning accommodations can help you achieve success and reach your potential academically, but career and academic counseling are important too. Many students with AD/HD have difficulty completing college in four years because they drop courses and change their major repeatedly. They end up short of credits necessary for graduation in their major and must take several courses in a fifth year. Therefore, counseling around the subject of choosing a career and a major is critical because it will help you establish goals and develop guidelines for meeting them.

Some students with AD/HD find that a reduced course load enables them to achieve success by devoting more time to each course. However, such a plan may also necessitate taking courses during the summer and possibly a fifth year. Discuss this option with your academic advisor and your parents early in your college career.

APPLIED PHARMACOLOGY

If you needed stimulant medication to concentrate in high school, you will likely need it in college. Medication can help you concentrate in class, but it may be even more important for reading comprehension. AD/HD students frequently report that they read all the material assigned, but have no clue as to what they have just read. Be sure that your stimulant is still working while you are reading.

continued on page 36

It is well accepted in the medical community that stimulants and other AD/HD medications are among the most useful AD/HD management tools. But remember, medication does not cure the disorder and it is not the whole answer. Counseling, cognitive therapies, social skills training, coaching, tutoring, and peer support are equally important to your success.

PHYSICAL FITNESS

College life does little to reinforce good living habits. When you have AD/HD, it's especially important that you have a well-balanced, nutritionally sound diet with meals spaced evenly throughout the day; enough rest and sleep; and plenty of exercise.

To accomplish these goals on campus, consider the following:

- Choose a “living and learning” floor in the dorm, if your college offers this option.
- Find and live with a group of students who have similar issues and goals.
- Get a room in a drug-free or smoke-free dorm.
- Join a study group to make learning interactive and help you stay focused.
- Ask for a single dorm room (these can be hard to get but a doctor's note may help).
- Join a team or club that encourages exercise.
- Hire an AD/HD coach to help you achieve your goals.

INTRODUCTION TO COACHING

College is a lot less structured and supportive than high school and home. While this environment stimulates growth and personal development, it can also set up AD/HD students for failure. Poor time management and planning skills can lead to academic and social underachievement if not downright failure.

I frequently recommend partnering with a coach to help students set appropriate goals and work out a program to achieve them. Just as a track star needs a coach to get to the Olympics, AD/HD students may need an academic and social coach to keep them on the track to success. (See *ADDitude's Coaches Classified* page for national coach listings.)

Having ADD may not be under your control, but it doesn't have to make you a victim. You can control how you cope with your disorder. Taking charge of your life will empower you to succeed. *AD*