



Making Reasonable Adjustments for Students with ADHD

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ADHD & Learning

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common form of neurodivergence that occurs in approximately 5% of the population.

ADHDers can be:

- Creative and resourceful
- Flexible and enthusiastic
- Excellent visual, self-motivated and experiential learners

ADHD is defined as [difficulties with executive functioning](#), particularly attention and impulsivity/hyperactivity. Distractions in the environment that other people would not notice can be very disruptive for an ADHDer, scattering their attention and derailing their learning.

Restlessness and impulsivity can make it harder for ADHDers to stay focused and 'on task', particularly when the task is not interesting to them.

Executive functioning also includes a wider range of abilities that allow people to adapt their behaviour to suit different situations, connect with others, and achieve their goals.

One executive function that is essential for learning is working memory, the ability to temporarily hold information in the mind while engaged in other tasks. ADHDers often have difficulties with working memory, forming an additional barrier to success as a student.

ADHDers may have greater difficulty with:

- Processing information in environments where there are distractions, such as outside noises and people moving about
- Hearing or fully understanding instructions, particularly if given verbally
- Understanding and remembering instructions with multiple parts
- Making mistakes due to rushing or missing a part of the instructions
- Maintaining attention, often getting off track and going on tangents, particularly for routine or boring tasks
- Forgetting tasks, equipment, or due dates
- Starting or switching between tasks (procrastination)
- Prioritising and planning their work, and deciding on what to start first

- Estimating how long a task will take
- Knowing how much to contribute to group discussions and when
- Confidence, based on the difficulties they've experienced in the past
- Feeling chronically anxious and overwhelmed

Practical Strategies for Students with ADHD

In general, accommodations that help students focus their attention, understand expectations, and lower demands on working memory will benefit all learners, including those with specific learning disabilities. However, every student is different, and support needs will fluctuate over time in response to the changing requirements of academic programs. Therefore, accommodations should be tailored to address the individual's specific needs, reviewed regularly, and adjusted when needs change.

Outlined below are a range of strategies that can be helpful for ADHDers in lectures and tutorials, as well as considerations for the design and administration of coursework and assessments.

Program Administration

Consider providing:

- Clear, detailed, written instructions about course structure, key dates, and assessment requirements
- Early access to course materials, including reading lists, lecture slides, and assessment requirements
- Ability to undertake an in-depth study of fewer topics/texts instead of a broader reading
- Advance notice of any changes to course structure, deadlines, or expectations
- A single, consolidated document summarising all assessment requirements for the semester
- Flexible deadlines for administrative tasks (e.g., enrolment, form submission)

- Clear, plain-language communication about processes and entitlements

Teaching & Tutorials

Consider providing:

- Repetition of important information
- Assistance in breaking down tasks into small, manageable chunks
- Discussion topics in advance of tutorials
- Allowing students to submit questions in writing before or after class rather than asking in the moment
- Using consistent lesson structures so students know what to expect each session
- Chunking lectures into shorter segments with brief breaks
- Explicit guidance on what is and isn't expected (e.g., how much detail is required in written responses)
- Examples of completed work

Coursework & Materials

Consider providing:

- Materials in a variety of formats, such as handouts, slides, quizzes, worksheets, films, flow charts, diagrams, personal stories, visual imagery, audio recordings, and hands-on, practical activities
- A glossary of key subject terms and acronyms
- Materials that categorise information clearly (e.g. colour-coded) to support visual processing
- Digital versions of all materials so students can use text-to-speech tools, adjust font size, or annotate electronically
- Checklists for multi-step tasks and assignments
- Summary sheets or concept maps for complex topics
- Reading guides that highlight the most essential sections of longer texts

In-Person Learning

Consider providing:

- Permission to sit where they feel most comfortable and least distracted
- Acknowledgement that students may need to arrive late, leave early or have a break during class. Discuss ways to minimise any disruption to learning, if necessary
- Permission to bring and use noise-cancelling headphones, fidget tools, Loop earbuds/earplugs
- Allowing movement breaks without requiring explanation or permission each time
- Advance notice of any changes to the room, time, or format
- Minimising cold-calling in class discussions

Online Learning

Consider providing:

- Closed captions for online lectures
- Written transcripts of pre-recorded lectures
- Flexibility to pause, rewind, and re-watch recorded lectures without time limits
- Asynchronous participation options as an alternative to live attendance

Group Tasks

Consider providing:

- The ability to choose the members of their group, particularly for students with social anxiety
- Option to complete group tasks individually if group work creates significant barriers
- Clear, written role descriptions for each group member to reduce ambiguity
- Grades that are weighted according to individual participation and contribution

Assessments

Consider providing:

- Assessments broken into staged submissions with feedback at each stage
- Ability to choose/adapt assessment topics to match their interests
- Alternative assessment formats that utilise creative strategies and engage the student's interests
- Ability to submit pre-recorded presentations instead of delivering in person
- Extensions without requiring repeated applications or justification
- Reduced penalties for late submission where the disability impacts time management

Examinations

Consider providing:

- A quiet, individual examination room
- Ability to adjust/lower the lighting in the room
- Option to adjust their exam timetable to avoid having two exams on the same day, and to have no exams on consecutive days
- Extra time (pro rata) to be used at the discretion of the student for rest or medical breaks
- Permission to bring noise-cancelling headphones, fidget tools, Loop earbuds/earplugs, and blank paper
- Permission to stand, pace, or move during the exam
- Written instructions that are available throughout the exam, not just at the start
- Option for typed rather than handwritten responses

Learning Support

Consider providing:

- A single point of contact for disability-related queries
- Access to one-to-one support if students feel anxious and overwhelmed

- Access to an ADHD-informed academic skills advisor (distinct from general disability support)
- Regular, scheduled check-ins with a support person rather than requiring students to initiate contact
- Peer mentoring or study buddy programs with other neurodivergent students
- Support with organisation and planning tools, including coaching on strategies suited to ADHD (rather than generic time management advice)

Campus/School Environment

Consider providing:

- Access to a quiet, low-stimulation study space on campus
- Sensory-friendly spaces available for breaks between classes
- Access to standing desks or alternative seating options in study areas

At Home Study

Consider encouraging:

- Exploratory, fluid, non-linear, and problem-solving approaches to reading, such as searching the document for key terms using Control-F, and/or skim-reading to find the answers to questions
- Active reading, including underlining, highlighting and jotting notes
- A study space that suits their learning and self-regulation needs
- Ongoing support from student counsellors in managing time and implementing study routines
- 'Body-doubling': studying with a friend who can help them stay on task

Harnessing Strengths

It can be helpful to remember the acronym NICE when designing study programs for ADHDers. This is because, despite the many barriers ADHDers can face when studying, when engaged in work that they find

Novel, Interesting, or Challenging, or when facing a deadline (Emergency), ADHDers can often achieve outstanding academic results.

When they can minimise distractions and engross themselves in work that has these NICE qualities, ADHDers can often hyperfocus and produce a large volume of high-quality work in a very short period. Harnessing these strengths while providing accommodations that address their barriers is the key to helping ADHDers successfully achieve their study goals.

About Jennifer Kemp

Jennifer Kemp is a clinical psychologist based in Adelaide, Australia. Her neurodiversity-affirming approach is founded on her own experience of being late-diagnosed as Autistic and an ADHDer, listening deeply to the experiences of her neurodivergent clients and the latest research. Jennifer weaves together acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) with compassion-focused approaches to help her clients improve their mental health and develop greater self-acceptance, self-compassion, and pride in their neurodivergent identity.

Jennifer is the co-author of "[The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD: Cultivate Self-Compassion, Live Authentically, and Be Your Own Advocate](#)" and author of "[The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism: Build Your Best \(Imperfect\) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills.](#)"

Access free resources and e-books at www.jenniferkemp.com.au.

