

# 15 Ways to Disarm (and Understand) Explosive ADHD Emotions



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From the ADHD Experts at

**ADDITUDE**

Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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### CONTACT INFORMATION

New Hope Media – 646-366-0830  
108 West 39th St, Suite 805  
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# 15 Ways to Disarm (and Understand) Explosive ADHD Emotions

The volatile (and sometimes destructive) emotions associated with ADHD can manifest in frustration, sensitivity, or tendency to depression. Here's why — and what you should know to control them.

BY WILLIAM DODSON, M.D., AND  
ARI TUCKMAN, Psy.D., MBA

Fact: People with ADHD feel emotions more intensely than do people without the condition. We don't just get happy — we go over the moon; and when something bad happens, we're *devastated*. For someone with ADHD, feelings can be big, scary monsters; they often seem to come out of nowhere, and we often feel powerless in our ability to manage them. In his book [\*Emotional Intelligence\*](#), Daniel Goleman coined the phrase “amygdala hijacking,” referring to the ability of primitive parts of the ADHD brain to pre-empt the cortex, or thinking brain. When powerful emotions take over, there is no thinking going on. Trying to hold it all in or stuffing the feelings back down does not work.

Understanding how you process emotion is a critical first step along the path to managing ADHD impairments. Unfortunately, researchers have mostly ignored the emotional component of ADHD because it can't be consistently measured, and very few doctors factor in emotional challenges when making an ADHD diagnosis. In fact, the current diagnostic criteria for ADHD do not mention “problems with emotions.” Yet recent research reveals that people with ADHD have significantly more difficulty with low frustration tolerance, impatience, hot temper, and excitability than do control groups.

One thing is clear: emotional disruptions are one of the most impairing aspects of ADHD. Here, find out how your emotions affect your life and happiness — and, most importantly, how you can learn to manage them.

*“My tolerance for being disappointed sank, and every frustration or annoyance ticked my off. I couldn't take anything in stride, and became infuriated if a situation seemed unjust or someone made a minor mistake.”*  
—Terry Dickson, an adult with ADHD

from the editors of

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## PART 1:

### Processing Emotion: A Brain Thing

Challenges with emotions start in the brain itself. Sometimes the working memory impairments of ADHD allow a momentary emotion to become too strong, flooding the brain with one intense feeling. At other times, the person with ADHD seems insensitive or unaware of the emotions of others. Brain connectivity networks carrying information related to emotion seem to be somewhat more limited in individuals with ADHD.

When an adolescent with ADHD becomes enraged when a parent refuses him use of the car, for example, his extreme response may be due to “flooding” — a momentary emotion that can gobble up all of the space in his head just like a computer virus can gobble up all of the space on a hard drive. This focus on one emotion crowds out other important information that might help him modulate his anger and regulate his behavior.

### Extreme Sensitivity to Disapproval

Nearly everyone with ADHD answers an emphatic yes to the question: “Have you always been more sensitive than others to rejection, teasing, criticism, or your own perception that you have failed or fallen short?” This is the definition of a condition called rejection-sensitive dysphoria (RSD), which is common among people with ADHD.

Those with ADHD often become quickly immersed in one salient emotion and have problems shifting their focus to other aspects of a situation, which can lead to misinterpretation and hurt feelings. Hearing uncertainty in a coworker’s reaction to a suggestion may be interpreted as criticism and prompt an outburst of inappropriate self-defense before even listening carefully to the coworker’s response.

Significant social anxiety is another chronic difficulty experienced by more than one-third of teens and adults with ADHD. They live almost constantly with exaggerated fears of being seen by others as incompetent, unappealing, or uncool. The emotional response to failure is catastrophic for those with the condition. *Perceived* criticism and withdrawal of love and respect is just as devastating as the real thing. The term “dysphoria” means “difficult to bear,” and most people with ADHD report that they “can hardly stand it.” This doesn’t mean those with ADHD are wimps; disapproval actually hurts them much more than it hurts neurotypical people.

#### PERSONAL BLOG

The fear of rejection in ADHD relationships is real. Read one woman’s story: <http://additu.de/rejection>

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## Carried Away with Emotion

Some people with ADHD don't suffer from a lack of awareness of important emotions but from an inability to tolerate those emotions long enough to deal effectively with them. They become caught up in behavior patterns to avoid painful emotions that seem too overwhelming — looming deadlines or meeting an unfamiliar group of people.

For many people with ADHD, the brain's gating mechanism for regulating emotion does not distinguish between dangerous threats and more minor problems. These individuals are often thrown into panic mode by thoughts or perceptions that do not warrant such a reaction. At times, it seems the ADHD brain can't deal rationally or realistically with events that are stressful.

## Sadness and Low Self-Esteem

People with untreated ADHD can suffer from dysthymia — a mild but long-term form of depression or sadness. It is often brought on by living with the frustrations, failures, negative feedback, and stresses of life due to untreated or inadequately treated ADHD. People who are dysthymic suffer almost every day from low energy and self-esteem.

If emotional pain is internalized, a person with ADHD may experience depression and loss of self-esteem in the short term. If emotions are externalized, pain can be expressed as rage at the person or situation that wounded them. Luckily, the rage is expressed verbally instead of physically, and it passes relatively quickly.

Due to sensitivity to emotional pain, the person with ADHD might become a people pleaser, always making sure that friends, acquaintances, and family approve of them: "Tell me what you want, and I'll do my best to become it. Just don't get mad at me." After years of constant vigilance, the person with ADHD becomes a chameleon who loses track of what she wants for her own life.

## Emotions and Getting Started

Emotions motivate action — action to engage or action to avoid. Many people with untreated ADHD can readily mobilize interest only for activities offering very immediate gratification. They tend to have severe difficulty in activating and sustaining effort for tasks that offer rewards over the longer term. Some people with ADHD find that the pain of failure is so bad that they refuse to try anything unless they are assured of a quick, easy, and complete success. Taking a chance is too big an emotional risk, meaning their lives remain stunted and limited.

### ADHD TIP

Wondering how to build self-esteem that's been damaged by years of ADHD? Follow these tips to get started:

1. Choose your battles
2. Accept "good enough," not "perfect"
3. Don't put off tough tasks
4. Expect difficulties
5. Don't compare yourself to others

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Brain imaging studies demonstrate that chemicals that activate reward-recognizing circuits in the brain tend to bind on significantly fewer receptor sites in people with ADHD than do those in a comparison group. People with ADHD are less able to anticipate pleasure or register satisfaction with tasks for which the payoff is delayed.

## Emotions and Working Memory

Working memory brings into play, consciously and/or subconsciously, the emotional energy needed to help us organize, sustain focus, monitor and self-regulate. Many people with ADHD, though, have inadequate working memory, which may explain why they are often disorganized, lose their temper, or procrastinate.

Sometimes the working memory impairments of ADHD allow a momentary emotion to become too strong. At other times, working memory impairments leave the person with insufficient sensitivity to the importance of a particular emotion because he or she hasn't kept other relevant information in mind.

## Treating Emotional Challenges

Treating the emotional challenges of ADHD requires a multimodal approach: It starts with a careful and accurate evaluation for ADHD, one that explains ADHD and its effect on emotions. ADHD medication may improve the emotional networks in the brain. Talk therapy can help a person manage fear or low self-esteem. Coaching may help a person overcome problems with getting boring tasks completed.

Clinicians and therapists need to be especially vigilant for signs of emotional difficulties, because most people with ADHD have learned to hide that aspect of their lives. Proper diagnosis and successful therapy both require that therapist and patient become aware of the emotional intensity that is so much a part of the patient's life. It is equally important to recognize when a patient is attempting to hide their emotional struggles out of fear that being wounded further.

*WILLIAM DODSON, M.D., is a board-certified adult psychiatrist who has specialized in adults with ADHD for the last 23 years. He has written on how the basic research on ADHD can be applied to everyday clinical practice. He is currently in private practice in Denver, Colorado.*

### EXPERT ANSWER

Could a coach help you manage ADHD symptoms? Find out: <http://additu.de/1a3>

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## PART 2:

### Tapping the Brakes on Runaway Emotion

While proper therapy is the most effective treatment for out-of-control emotions, you can do some things on your own to get a handle on your feelings. Most of the strategies for emotional self-control discussed here are based on three basic ideas: managing your stress, having strategies to control your emotions in situations that set them off, and owning up to your reactions.

- 1. Manage your stress.** Everyone feels stressed out and overwhelmed sometimes. To the extent that you can, try to limit how many demands you have pressing on you at any one time.
- 2. Avoid over-committing yourself.** Everything seems interesting until we find that we have too much going on. You can minimize crunch-time stress by taking on fewer commitments and by graciously bowing out of some when necessary — and with enough warning.
- 3. Get enough sleep.** We are more positive and less reactive when we've gotten enough shut-eye.
- 4. Exercise regularly.** Physical activity is a great stress reliever. It doesn't matter how you exercise, as long as you do it regularly. Even doing a set of push-ups or going for a quick walk around the block can clear your head and put things in perspective.
- 5. Make time for yourself.** It's important to set some aside time for you to do something for your own pleasure. If you don't recharge the batteries, you will burn out.
- 6. Treat co-occurring anxiety and depression.** Adults with ADHD are more likely to be anxious and depressed. Untreated, these conditions may make your emotional control worse, so it is smart to address these professionally.
- 7. Avoid emotionally provocative situations.** It is harder to calm a strong reaction than it is to avoid it in the first place. This does not mean that you should avoid every uncomfortable or difficult situation, but you should know that some situations aren't worth the trouble.

#### ADHD TIP

Looking to bolster your exercise routine? Your legs are likely the key, whether you walk, hike, jog, sprint, climb, or blade. Add hand-held weights and your upper body gets a workout, too.

- 8. Create a plan** ahead of time for how to respond to a situation that you know will evoke some strong feelings. Think about how you can respond to different things the other person might do, as well as what outcomes you hope to achieve. Review the plan right before you go into the situation and keep it in your mind during the situation. If possible, bring in some written notes.
- 9. Take a break.** If your two choices are to blow up or walk away, it's always better to walk away. Even five seconds may be enough to help you calm down and gather yourself. If you are feeling angry at someone with whom you have an ongoing relationship, explain to him or her that a break will help you collect your thoughts and lead to a better outcome for everyone.
- 10. Train others to talk you down.** If you know you will get emotional in certain situations — political discussions, sales at certain stores — train some of your family and friends to talk to you about the bigger picture, or another person's perspective, so that you can catch yourself before things get out of hand.
- 11. Remind yourself that, no matter how strong the emotion you are feeling, it will fade.** This could be a positive feeling, like being excited over a potential purchase, or a negative feeling, like a date that went badly. You will still have the feeling, but know that you will feel differently.
- 12. Remind yourself of the other person's perspective.** We react to people we are closest to. As much as we like to think that we're justified in our feelings, there are times when we react to someone for reasons that have little to do with that person. Don't take things personally that have little to do with you.
- 13. Separate feeling from acting.** Our emotions often drive our behavior, but there doesn't have to be a direct connection between the two. Although it's easier said than done, it's possible to notice the feeling that you're having and what it makes you want to do without acting on it. Mindfulness training teaches people how to do this.
- 14. Educate others about your emotional patterns.** Explain to family members, and close friends, and perhaps some coworkers, that your initial reaction tends to be stronger than that of other people, but that you settle down quickly and can have a productive discussion. This helps them not to overreact in turn. You may also coach them on how you would like them to respond to you when you have a strong emotional reaction.

#### FREE RESOURCE

Learn to speak the same language as your partner (and clear up conflicts in your marriage):

<http://additu.de/talk>

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- 15. After you cool off, explain what you really meant.** If something came out wrong, or if you said something that you didn't really mean, explain your rationale and what you meant. Don't deny what the other person perceived, but let her know that you had better intentions than you conveyed.

*The section above is excerpted from the book **Understand Your Brain, Get More Done**, by ARI TUCKMAN, Psy.D., MBA. Copyright 2012. Dr. Tuckman is a psychologist who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD. He is a former vice president of ADDA and now has a practice in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where he works with adults and teens with attention challenges.*

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### **ADHD Medication and Treatment**

**The latest information on managing medication, starting behavior therapy, evaluating alternative treatments, and more.**

You're relieved to know, finally, that you or your child's symptoms are due to ADHD. But now, you have questions — on everything from which medications are available to how to tell if they're working properly. In this comprehensive special report, you'll learn how to seek an accurate diagnosis and plan a treatment plan that's right for you or your child.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/treatment>

### **9 Conditions Often Diagnosed with ADHD**

**Depression. Bipolar Disorder. Anxiety. OCD. And five more conditions that often show up alongside attention deficit.**

About 80 percent of individuals with ADHD are diagnosed with at least one other psychiatric condition at some time in their lives. This in-depth special report looks at the nine most common, outlining symptoms, treatment strategies, and differentiating features of each. Plus, strategies for living well with any mental health condition.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/related>

### **Mindfulness and Other Natural Treatments**

**The best non-medical treatments for ADHD, including exercise, green time, and mindful meditation.**

Learn how mindfulness works on ADHD brains, and how to begin practicing it today. Plus, research the benefits of other alternative treatments like yoga and deep breathing exercises — including some designed especially for kids — as well as the science behind each natural therapy.

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Depression is a serious mood disorder, but it's not always easy to recognize.

### **It's Not ADHD: 3 Common Diagnosis Mistakes**

Doctors are sometimes too quick to diagnose ADHD. Read up on common misdiagnoses.

### **You Know You Have ADHD When...**

Real ADHDers share personal stories highlighting the lighter side of living with attention deficit.

### **Is It Bipolar Disorder?**

Symptoms of bipolar disorder and ADHD often overlap.

### **Does Your Child Have a Learning Disability?**

Use this self-test to find out if your child's problems at school may be due to LD.

### **11 Celebrities Living with ADHD**

Famous people on how they found success with ADHD.

**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at: <http://additu.de/freedownloads>**

## FREE ADHD Webinar Replays from *ADDitude*:

### Managing ADHD Sensitivities and Emotions

>> <http://additu.de/sensitive>

Does the smallest thing not going your way set off the waterworks? It might be your ADHD. Zoë Kessler explains why ADHD adults often experience emotional sensitivities and shares some strategies to help you cope.

### 7 Fixes for Self-Defeating ADHD Behaviors

>> <http://additu.de/brown>

Are your bad habits setting you up for failure? Find out what behaviors to watch for, and seven simple changes that can help you reach your full potential and put you on the path to success. Entrepreneur and ADHD coach Alan Brown teaches “fix-it” strategies that he used to cope with his own ADHD.

### Emotions in ADHD Teens

>> <http://additu.de/teens>

Dealing with an emotionally volatile teen? It could be her ADHD. Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D., offers strategies for maintaining emotional control, as well as advice for teaching teens to find emotional balance.

### Sensory Processing Disorder in Kids

>> <http://additu.de/spd>

Is your child with ADHD extra sensitive when it comes to tastes, sounds, smells, or even how a certain fabric feels on his skin? It could be Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Carol Kranowitz, M.A., explains how parents can identify, treat, and help their children manage SPD.

### How Stress Impacts Learning and Behavior

>> <http://additu.de/stress>

In today’s high-pressure school environment, kids with ADHD or LD can become overwhelmed by stress. In this audio and slide presentation, hosted by Jerome J. Schultz, Ph.D., find out how school stress impacts your child’s brain — and what you can do about it. Get the tools you need to help your child manage academic stress so their brain has room to grow and learn!

## FREE ADHD Newsletters from *ADDitude*

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### Adult ADHD and LD (weekly)

Expert advice on managing your household, time, money, career, and relationships

### Parenting ADHD and LD Children (weekly)

Strategies and support for parents on behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, and making friends.

### ADHD and LD at School (bimonthly; weekly from August through October)

How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more.

### Treating ADHD (weekly)

Treatment options for attention deficit including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies.