

Psychiatric Disorders to Consider in the Differential Diagnosis of ADHD in Adults

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Patients with a range of psychiatric conditions may emphasize difficulty with concentration, attention or short-term memory when they describe their problems. It is important to consider the historical basis of the symptoms and exclude other psychiatric conditions, most of which are actually more prevalent than ADHD among adults. Major depression and substance abuse, also commonly accompany adult ADHD.

Importantly, most adults with ADHD do not have a "pure" form of the disorder. Comorbidity is more likely to be the rule than the exception. It is not clear whether these comorbid psychiatric conditions are a psychological effect of preexisting ADHD or are simply associated with ADHD

Psychiatric disorder	Features shared with ADHD	Distinctive features
Major Depression	Subjective report of poor concentration, attention and memory; difficulty with task completion	Enduring dysphoric mood or anhedonia; sleep and appetite disturbance
Bipolar Disorder	Hyperactivity, difficulty with maintaining attention and focus; mood swings	Enduring dysphoric or euphoric mood; insomnia; delusions
Generalized Anxiety	Fidgetiness; difficulty concentrating	Exaggerated apprehension and worry; somatic symptoms of anxiety
Substance Abuse or Dependence	Difficulties with attention, concentration and memory; mood swings	Pathologic pattern of substance use with social consequences; physiologic and psychological tolerance and withdrawal
Personality Disorder (particularly Borderline or Antisocial)	Impulsivity; affective lability	Arrest history (antisocial personality); repeated self-injurious or suicidal behavior (borderline personality); lack of recognition that behavior is self-defeating