

## **Adjustment Disorders Misdiagnosed as ADHD<sup>1</sup>**

Bruce L. Bachelder  
Bachelder & Bachelder  
Psychological and Educational Services

Morganton, NC

Adjustment Disorders are maladaptive reactions to psychosocial stressors (e.g., becoming depressed when a marriage breaks up). Adjustment disorders are common among children and adults. They respond well to fairly simple and obvious treatment and rarely require medication. It is this therapist's clinical experience that the common symptoms of adjustment disorders are often misdiagnosed as ADHD with the result that treatment focus is drastically wrong. Treatment for an adjustment disorder focuses on psychological intervention, helping the individual make a better adjustment to the psychosocial stressor. Treatment for ADHD focuses on medication, promotion of better attention to school work, and minimization of secondary self-image problems deriving from the disorder. Given a misdiagnosis, a simple adjustment disorder may not get better in a timely manner; time, effort, and money may be wasted on medication treatment and "attention problems," rather than on the true adjustment problem. Once a diagnosis of ADHD has been made and medication started, even if treatment response is poor or minimal, parents and teachers often refuse to accept a correct diagnosis and treatment. In the worst case, a child needlessly experiences a serious drug side effect when the drug was not indicated in the first place. This presentation will discuss this common problem in detail, relying extensively on case histories from the author's practice. The presentation will focus on two common causes of adjustment disorders in children, depression in a parent and marital problems of parents. The similarity of the symptom pictures of adjustment disorders and ADHD will be explicated in some detail. Suggestions will be made for careful differential diagnosis to help avoid misdiagnosis.

---

<sup>1</sup> In C.R. Ellis & N.N. Singh (1996). *Children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Virginia Beach Conference*. Richmond, VA: Commonwealth Institute for Child and Family Studies, Medical College of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University.