

# **The Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Syndrome Versus the ADHD Disorder<sup>1</sup>**

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Most of the diagnoses in DSM-III and DSM-IV are syndromes, not disorders, a point which is particularly relevant to problems in the way hyperactivity is diagnosed and treated. A syndrome becomes a disorder only when we know the cause. ADHD is now considered a disorder; that is, it is presumed to be caused by a developmental abnormality of the central nervous system. However, the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Syndrome is not always ADHD. The syndrome derives from several disorders, a point which is made clearly in DSM-III and DSM-IV, but which is often overlooked with considerable harm to the child. This presentation illustrates these points by showing how the normal symptom pictures for a sad child, an anxious child, and an angry child are similar enough to the ADHD symptom picture to lead to frequent misdiagnosis resulting in inappropriate interventions. The characteristic symptoms of a sad child include anhedonia (loss of the ability to take pleasure in normal activities), poor motivation and loss of energy, social withdrawal, and failure to respond to encouragement and reinforcement. This child complains of being bored and finds it difficult to stay on task unless the tasks are particular favorites of the child. A child who is overly anxious about classroom performance fears failure, fidgets, avoids engagement of classroom activities and homework, concentrates poorly, and is impulsive and distractible. The angry child is fundamentally non-compliant. He or she appears to have problems focusing attention but, in fact, is refusing to follow instructions out of anger. The anger also leads to disruptive behavior such as blurting out, talking to other children at inappropriate times, and diverse provocative behaviors.

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<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.