What Is the Connection Between Adult ADHD and Lying?

by ERIC PATTERSON

Adult ADHD and Lying: What You Need to Know

Kristi Lazzari and Eric Patterson share advice for dealing with adult ADHD lying.

Lies and lying begin to evolve into a problem when they are done with higher frequency and higher intensity. Someone lying by saying they really like the soup you made for dinner is much different than saying they have no idea what happened to the money in your purse.

Some people in your life will be more prone to lying, while others will maintain a high level of honesty and integrity.

So, what is the difference? What makes some people extremely honest and others lie excessively? What is compulsive lying and how is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) associated with it?

Lying and ADHD – Is Lying a Symptom of ADHD?

It is difficult to say people with ADHD lie more than people without ADHD, but people with ADHD face different challenges that make telling an untruth more likely. Instead of thinking of ADHD as one diagnosis, think of it as a collection of unwanted symptoms including:

- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity
- Poor attention
- Decreased interest in activities that require mental effort

These factors will heavily influence the level of lying the person with ADHD exhibits. Someone with poor attention is more prone to make a statement without thinking about it first.

For example, you could ask them a question they are not entirely paying attention to. They will respond without any awareness of doing so. Later, they may deny their previous statement, not remember their response, or fail to acknowledge any aspect of the conversation.

Someone with poor impulse control may lie as a response to your question or the situation. It comes out of their mouth without appropriate thought attached.

Since impulsivity and hyperactivity tend to increase the speed of the response, there is a greater chance the response will be inaccurate and technically a lie.

Reasons Why Lying Might be a Problem for Someone With ADHD

Adults with ADHD will often not know why they do things. Faced with explaining their actions, they might make something up because they know that others are tired of hearing “I don’t know” as an answer.

At the same time, sometimes “I don’t know” is the only answer they can come up with when they don’t want to answer a question. When a spouse asks where their money went, their ADHD partner might answer with an “I don’t know” rather than admit that impulsively bought four magazines and two candy bars at the grocery store check-out, as well as a new kitchen gadget that we probably won’t use just because it was on sale.

Instead of saying they forgot to do something, which leads to disappointing someone, they may also come up with false reasons as to why they didn’t do something when they said they would. It can be difficult for people with ADHD to say no to someone, even when they know they won’t be able to do what they are asking.

Low self-esteem can be another reason for lying. Sometimes people with ADHD struggle to fit in, they may lie to peers in an attempt to appear normal or more important, they may lie to be liked or accepted by their peers or lie to a loved one or boss to avoid an argument.

Compulsive and Pathological Lying

Compulsive lying is identified as the habit of lying uncontrollably. Habitual liars may lie about important things as well as unimportant. Many compulsive liars have no ulterior motive and sometimes even tell lies that result in personal damage.

Compulsive liars often lie even when being honest would be easier. After exposure, compulsive liars may still find it difficult to admit the truth.

People who compulsively lie may embellish situations for no real purpose and lie without thinking. Some professionals differentiate between compulsive liars and pathological liars, who often lie for personal gain. The lies are often premeditated and manipulative.

Some traits of compulsive lying include:

- Lies have elements of truth and are believable
- Lying continues long-term
- Lying is not due to immediate pressure or stress
- Lies usually present the person in positive light
- Lies typically come from internal motivation, not external.

Some Groups May be at Risk for Compulsive Lying

Compulsive lying is associated with specific psychiatric diagnoses. In children, ADHD is often associated with impulsiveness, and this often includes lying. Habitual liars lie without forethought, and it is this impulsive behavior that can often be seen in those with ADHD.

Aside from ADHD, lying is also associated with other mental health disorders, such as bipolar disorder, substance dependency, borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality, and histrionic [ersonality.

What Can This Look Like?

Recently, Kristi spoke with a mother who spoke of how her child could eat pancakes for breakfast and then walk out of the house and tell someone they ate scrambled eggs. The mother said her son was constantly telling fibs that served no real purpose, while her non-ADHD child did not have an issue with that particular behavior. She was convinced there was a connection between ADHD impulsiveness and his lies.

Another parent told Kristi that their daughter who told fibs to keep from getting into trouble, as most children both ADHD and non-ADHD would do, but she also told lies that made no sense. She would tell a story about

something that happened at school, for instance, but would change the people involved. There was no reason to do it and there was nothing to hide, she just altered the story.

Many parents feel that this is one more symptom to add to the list. Some are afraid their children are going to grow up to be untrustworthy and aren't sure how to handle the situation.

Next page: more information about ADHD and lying in adults, and tips for helping with ADHD and lying.

All Lies Might Not be Intentional

With impaired executive function and processing challenges, people with ADHD are prone to miscommunication. Difficulties in processing change how a person with ADHD perceives what they hear, as well as how they respond to what others are saying.

When they "zone out" they miss information. Details are lost because they did not hear them. When they tune back in, they are trying to play catch up and fill in the blanks, which leads to missing even more information.

It can be difficult to tell if the original information was not heard or misunderstood, or if they changed the communication because of negative reactions from others, or if there was a memory lapse or anxiety about communicating in general.

All of these things can lead to confusion.

These factors may all play a role in a person with ADHD not remembering what they said. When faced with trying to remember, they will sometimes guess and make up what they thought they said, only for others to catch them in their "lies."

A person with ADHD can have difficulty expressing themselves and being perceived as accurate and consistent. Others may see them as unreliable and look at the inconsistencies as lies when that was not the intention.

Sometimes Compulsive Lies Stem from External Factors

Early childhood trauma, parental modeling, and nervous system issues are often factors leading to habitual lying. Lying may also be used as a coping mechanism to escape past trauma or daily stress.

A child who was constantly criticized or berated for symptoms that were beyond their control may form a habit of lying that continues into adulthood. Even as an adult they can be afraid of being reprimanded for symptoms that they cannot control.

It can be challenging to face feeling like they are continually disappointing others. They may tell what they believe are "small" lies to cover their forgetfulness or procrastination. Habitual lying, however, can wreak havoc on relationships with family, friends, and significant others.

ADHD Lying Solutions

Know the Source

Because of the symptom overlap, it can be confusing to know the source of the lying. This step is crucial, though, as there is a huge difference between ADHD lying and OCD or personality disorder lying.

Effective treatments will vary widely as well. Fortunately, success will be more likely with lying rooted in ADHD than in OCD or personality disorders.

Establish Your Expectations

As mentioned previously, modifying your expectations will have an impact on your view of the one telling the lies. Your expectations must be practical and realistic to have any chance of victory in this situation.

Gain the Attention

Anyone will struggle to give a good answer to a question when distracted. Watching TV or scrolling through social media will harm concentration, listening skills and attention.

If you want to increase the odds of producing a truthful response, you must reduce or eliminate the distractions. A good way to accomplish this is by turning off all stimulation and making clear and direct eye contact with the person.

Slow It Down

When someone has ADHD, they are more likely to blurt out an answer with little thought. This is true for children in a classroom and adults at work or in relationships.

If you want to ask someone with ADHD a question you think might produce an impulsive lie, give them extra time. Instead of believing the extra time will provide them with the opportunity to think of a lie, think they will be more likely to think of the truth.

Sometimes, the truth is not so obvious. If you have ADHD and someone asks you a question, ask for a few moments to consider your response. Make them aware of your needs and the benefits of waiting for you.

Just be sure to note the need to respond, so you don’t forget altogether. Using a timer is a great way to accomplish this.

Double Check

If you are the not the person with ADHD, asking “Did you say…” is an appropriate means of double-checking the content expressed to check for lies and changing stories. Rather than try to catch someone in a lie, try to catch them in the truth, since they might not be sure of what they said previously.

If you are the person with ADHD, you can say, “Did you ask me this before? What did I say?” as a means of fact-checking your previous statements. Again, this is not a way to be sneaking or underhanded. It is a way to be more clear and consistent.

Surely there is a link between ADHD and lying. Your job is to thoroughly analyze the lies to assure you know the source, since other mental health disorders can influence the level of lies significantly.

If analysis points to ADHD, take the appropriate steps to set yourself or the person with ADHD up for success. By doing this, the lies can shrink while the relationship quality surges.