

Those considering their job and education options have a lot of choices as we enter 2025. Those choosing to continue their education journey by entering college face a new set of educational and social challenges. For those pursuing college among the estimated 7 million people in America diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), those challenges are twofold.

If you're worried about how to handle the new challenges that may arrive with college, there are a lot of tools, strategies, and options to help students with ADHD cope and thrive in their college career. First, it's important to get a good idea of some hurdles that can come up in higher education if you have ADHD.

Potential challenges to expect if you have ADHD

Most people going into college with ADHD were aware of their diagnosis and learning needs in high school or well before. They experienced ADHD challenges in their educational career prior to college, and any coping skills learned then were practiced in the more structured environment of life with caregivers at home and teachers in a traditional school setting. In college, many of those challenges are compounded by having those structures torn away, and the student with ADHD is faced with the challenge of managing their symptoms on their own and living in a more self-directed way than they are perhaps used to. On top of this, there is an added social aspect that you may not have had at school previously, with many having to start over in creating their community in the new higher education environment. Here are a few more challenging areas someone entering college with ADHD might face.

Managing focus

Two of the major challenges that come with ADHD are focus and executive dysfunction. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of ADHD is the difficulty focusing, which [science suggests is linked to the neurotransmitter dopamine](#) and dysfunction in dopamine's production and transmission in the brain. Dopamine can affect learning, motivation, attention, and impulse control, all of which are areas of challenge for those with ADHD. Having so many classes to focus on as well as having to focus enough in class and during study to pass exams and projects can be especially hard.

Loss of support and routine

Routine and support aren't built into the daily schedule anymore. Parents aren't around to keep students in check, and classes are no longer so regimented within a set period of time throughout the day. Executive function is needed to juggle so many different moving parts on your own, an area where many with ADHD struggle. [Executive function](#) is the set of skills used to manage daily tasks and is marked by skills in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and impulse control. Executive dysfunction is any difficulty in developing or practicing these skills.

Managing your time and workload

Because you don't have a built-in routine anymore, executive dysfunction can increase at this time. This can affect everything, including managing your schedule and ability to get work done on time. Classes are not always back-to-back anymore. You may have to make sure you watch your time and keep a close eye on what class is coming in 3 hours. There are often more projects and assignments to manage, and teachers won't hold students' hands with reminders. This can be challenging if you struggle with ADHD.

Managing social life

Again, because of executive dysfunction, it can be difficult to gain and then maintain friendships in college. In high school, you may have attended school with people you knew for years. Plus, you knew who would be in your class and in your day because everyone is in the same building at the same set time. It is all planned. Not so with college, where it can take effort to see friends regularly, depending on your class schedule and how big the campus is.

Mental Health

Those with ADHD have an [increased susceptibility to other mental health challenges](#), like anxiety and depression. This increased susceptibility mixed with potential difficulty in managing social life in college and overstimulation and overload from an increased workload and need to manage your own schedule can further increase the likelihood of developing an additional mental health challenge.

Tips and strategies for success

Seek professional intervention

If you have ADHD, it can be helpful to talk with your primary care provider to explore your options for things like medication or other interventions to help manage symptoms. You can go a step further and pursue work with a [mental health counselor](#), who can help you develop and practice skills for increasing executive function and find strategies that work for you and your ADHD. They can also help you work through stress and other emotions or mental health challenges that might arise on your college journey. You can check out certified therapists who specialize in ADHD [here](#).

Get some exercise

Exercise might surprise you. Science has found that [exercise can increase dopamine and norepinephrine](#), neurotransmitters which help regulate the attention system. Done over time, exercise can help increase the baseline for both of these neurotransmitters, helping you manage your ADHD symptoms more easily. Exercise also helps regulate mood, increase

executive function, promote brain plasticity, and it can become a part of a routine which you can fall back on when you feel overwhelmed.

Get enough sleep

Those who have struggled with getting good sleep know that getting enough of it is a game changer for all people. However, for someone with ADHD, not getting enough sleep can make symptoms worse. [Poor sleep](#) contributes to emotional disturbance, problems in long and short-term memory, attention and focus disturbances, and impulsivity, which can become two-fold with ADHD. To help manage these symptoms and make sure you're operating at your best, develop a healthy sleep routine. A few ways to help yourself include:

- Choose a time to stop drinking caffeine in the day. For example, if you know drinking coffee after 5 p.m. makes it harder to sleep later, plan to have your last cup earlier in the day and switch to decaf for the evening.
- Exercise also helps with regulating sleep.
- Create a routine for sleep. Work to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Take a warm bath or create another calming ritual before bed.
- Leave activities that cause hyperfocus or hyperfixation for earlier in the day and opt for activities that are less stimulating at night.

Consider using lists and timers

To help manage your time and your workload, find a listing and organization system that works for you. That might look like buying a planner, keeping a notebook on hand, or putting everything in your phone calendar or notes app.

Whatever method you choose to manage your schedule and workload, consider jotting down a list at the beginning of the day or any time you feel overwhelmed. Not only can this help you stay on task throughout the day and get done what you need to get done, it can satisfy a quick dopamine rush to cross something off when you've completed it.

Timers can also be effective for focus. When you know you need to work on something, set a timer for a reasonable length of time, and commit to working on the assignment. When the timer goes off, take a break. These lengths of time can be as short as you need, and they can become longer as you become more used to the process.

Take advantage of your school's resources

Many people don't realize that their school may have resources specifically designed to help those with learning disabilities, ADHD, and other concerns. For example, many universities have students designated as note takers for a class. At the end of the class, they copy their notes for other students who struggle with focus or listening to access later. Consider seeking out a tutor, requesting extra time to complete an exam or an extension when writing a paper. Talk to your professors about changing seating to accommodate focus challenges, or ask if

recordings of the lectures are available. These are just a few examples of accommodations that are available at college. Don't be afraid to ask. Professors and administrators want you to succeed.

Eat a healthy diet

While research is mixed on the effectiveness of an "ADHD diet," maintaining a healthy lifestyle can help regulate ADHD and mental health symptoms, which can trigger each other. Eating a healthy diet is part of a healthy lifestyle, so aim to eat nutritious, balanced meals. Avoiding too much sugar and caffeine can also be helpful for managing ADHD symptoms as well, especially if you already take ADHD medication.

Establish a routine

As mentioned above, creating your own daily routine can help keep you on track throughout the day and get work done even if you're struggling with ADHD symptoms. You will also be more likely to have less trouble with focus, for example, if you have a regularly set time and place where you study or work on assignments. Your routine can help give back some structure that is lost when leaving high school.

Avoid online classes

While [online classes](#) can be convenient, they can make focus and understanding and retaining course content challenging for those with ADHD. When possible, attend classes in-person rather than online to decrease chances of being distracted and make the professor more accessible for asking for accommodations or help.

More tips for students

- Use a highlighter
- It's ok to doodle in class if this helps you listen
- Taking notes can help keep you on track even if the notes don't make sense later
- Study standing up
- Use a highlighter to help you as you read
- Use the audio version of the book if you can
- Use music to measure time instead of a timer (for example, after 3 songs, take a break)
- Get your things ready the night before
- Create a list for the next day and leave it somewhere you will see it
- Make plans with others to study to keep you accountable
- Consider getting an [ADHD coach](#)
- If you take medication, put a timer in your phone to take them on time
- Reach out to friends that you do have for support

- Keep stress down with yoga, a walk, coffee with a friend, or other intervention that feels good
- Join a club to connect with others
- Keep in touch with your current friends
- Don't give up and remember that it is always ok to ask for help!

Remember, you're not alone. For many, this is the first time they have been away from home or on their own when it comes to managing their own time. While not everyone is dealing with ADHD, [there are many who are](#). Because of this, colleges and universities are more neurodivergent friendly than ever, so whether you are on your college journey already or about to embark on it, there is help along the way.

Additional resources

- [ADDitude](#): Online magazine for those with ADHD and parents of kids with ADHD.
- [MindMeister](#): An online tool for visually brainstorming and organizing ideas.
- [StudyGS](#): A resource for study strategies and college guidance.
- [TheArc](#): An advocate group for those living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- [Quizlet](#): For flashcards and studying help.
- [DREAM](#): An organization that places chapters at universities around the country and is run by students. Its aim is to get resources and community to students with disabilities of all types.
- [Hemingway App](#): A free application to help check your writing.
- [Chadd](#): An advocacy group providing education and outreach to those with ADHD and their families.
- [Routinery](#): A free app to help track and develop habits
- [Reddit's ADHD Community \(r/ADHD\)](#)