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# On The River Of Life Be A Boat, Not A Log

## Teens Transitioning to Adulthood

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Welcome to adulthood! Late adolescence and early adulthood are exciting times, bringing tremendous change and personal growth. From choices about higher education to decisions about a career and family, there is so much ahead that it may seem

overwhelming. Take heart — every adult has faced these same decisions and met the same challenges. You'll do fine.

As a young teen with attention deficit disorder (ADD/ADHD), however, be aware that you have some additional responsibilities and concerns to shoulder. As someone who has been there, let me outline six points to consider, and offer some advice and inspiration, as you enter the next phase of your life.

### **1. Take responsibility for managing ADHD in your life**

Be honest — by now, you're a little sick of hearing about ADHD, reading about ADHD, being treated for ADHD, and just plain dealing with ADHD. As you take responsibility for your own life, you might consider discontinuing medical treatment or letting go of the organizational strategies that you've developed to cope with ADHD. This would be a mistake, one with potentially very damaging consequences. As life becomes more complicated and responsibilities increase (college, relationships, work), the need to manage ADHD effectively becomes more important, not less.

Let go of any stigma or resentment you may have about ADHD, so that you can manage it as honestly and constructively as possible. ADHD is simply a part of who you are, like the color of your hair or your athletic ability. Companionship helps, so join a support group in your town or online, and talk with those who've learned to look beyond the ADHD label. Feel comfortable with your unique kind of brain, one that has its positives as well as its negatives.

Get involved with your own treatment. Do you know not only the name, but the dosage of and schedule for taking your medication? Can you tell whether it's working properly or not? Can you monitor any side effects? Build a relationship with your doctor and take on the responsibility for refilling your own prescriptions.

Healthy self-awareness starts with a realistic picture of one's strengths and weaknesses, and willingness to work with them (or around them). Building on strengths and overcoming areas of weakness are two skills that help us succeed in everything we do in life. Accepting ADHD is a step toward accepting yourself for who you are.

### **2. Don't feel that you must go to college — at least not right away**

Attending college after graduating from high school is increasingly seen as a given: "Of course, I'm going to college — doesn't everyone?" But sometimes it makes sense to delay that next step, or not to attend college at all. You may be so tired after 12 years of struggling in school that, instead of seeing college as an opportunity for growth, it feels like a dreaded obligation. If your enthusiasm about this next stage is only lukewarm, consider deferring your enrollment. A college education should not be a race among friends to see who graduates first. Or, if you are not academically ready for a fulltime

college program, consider taking classes at a community college, and transferring to a four-year school in your own good time.

In fact, for many, a college degree may not even be necessary for them to achieve their life goals. If you excel at carpentry or mechanics, for example, and you're thinking of pursuing a career in those fields, you don't need to spend four years at college. Consider your individual interests and abilities, rather than general societal expectations, before making a decision about the next steps in your education.

### **3. Develop life skills before you leave home**

As a psychologist, I am always pained to see an optimistic 18-year-old go away to school, only to return home in a state of shock after the first semester, dismayed, demoralized, and possibly even failing his courses. Usually this happened because the student wasn't sufficiently prepared to function without the external structure that was in place while he was living at home during high school.

Start developing skills for independent living before you leave for college — long before. Take inventory of your survival skills. Are you more productive when you have a set routine? Start getting to bed at the same time and setting your own alarm clock. Which accommodations have worked best for you at your high school? Contact the office of disabilities or student services at the college you'll be attending and ask for similar accommodations there. Whether you're still in junior high or are finishing your last semester of high school, it's not too late, as long as you take action now, so these measures will be in place by the time you leave for freshman year.

And don't forget about Mom and Dad. You may have forgotten that they can be your best resource. Tell your parents that you want to participate in your IEP meetings; ask them to teach you how to budget money, shop for groceries, and do laundry. As you acquire these skills, you won't need to depend on your parents as much, and they will certainly send you in the right direction.

Already in college and feeling a little lost? Don't rely on your academic advisor or the office of disabilities alone. Find a local therapist or a coach who specializes in working with students with ADHD. The strategies you come up with together will be tailored to meet the demands of your current life.

### **4. Follow your heart to the right job or career**

The old saying "follow your heart and the money will follow" is, for most people, a matter of career satisfaction. For ADHDers, it is usually a matter of career survival. A strong personal interest in an activity or subject is critical to both focus and motivation. There is no such thing as the perfect ADHD-friendly job or career. The right career for you is the one that you are passionate about. Discovering your passions needs to be your

focus during this period of your life. If you need help identifying your areas of interest, vocational testing and career counseling can be very helpful.

## **5. Take care of your brain by taking care of your body**

Remember all the advice your mother gave you about the benefits of exercise, sleep, and proper nutrition? Well, it turns out that she was right. A healthy lifestyle makes a significant difference in attention, concentration, memory, irritability, and mood control — all of which are directly affected by ADHD.

**Exercise:** Regular, sustained aerobic exercise is the most effective natural way to raise levels of dopamine and the other brain neurotransmitters that improve your mood and ability to focus.

**Sleep:** More than 70 percent of ADHD adults over age 30 report problems falling asleep and staying asleep — another good reason to develop a healthy sleep routine now. Go to bed at the same time each night and try to get at least eight hours of sleep to avoid aggravating your ADHD symptoms.

**Nutrition:** Inadequate nutrition, including low blood-sugar levels caused by skipping meals, impairs concentration and other aspects of functioning that are already affected by ADHD.

A note of caution: Adults with untreated ADHD are at greater risk for substance abuse and addiction than adults without ADHD. Studies indicate that the rate of substance abuse among the untreated adult ADHD population is roughly twice as high as in the non-ADHD population. The levels of abuse in the treated ADHD population and the non-ADHD population, however, are about the same. Remember that the perceived "benefits" of self-medicating with recreational drugs never come close to the benefits provided by medication used in the course of proper medical care.

## **6. On the river of life, be a boat — not a log**

People with ADHD tend to live in the here and now, caught up in whatever captures their interest at a given point in time. Having a vision for the future and an understanding that your life's course is the result of your own actions is critical. Now is the time to start thinking about the life you want to lead down the road. Planning doesn't come naturally to any of us, so no one expects you to have a detailed, 10-year plan in place by high school graduation. But you'll find that planning for the future, even by establishing short-term goals, is worth the effort. Setting goals will ideally lead to a long-term plan — and to living a fulfilling life and accomplishing the things we want to accomplish.

It doesn't matter if you change your mind later about some of your plans, or even change the direction you want to go in. In fact, you should expect to have some shifts in interests

along the way. Think about it this way: As you plunge into the river of life, be a boat, not a log. As a log, all you can do is float where the current takes you. As a boat, you can drift if you want to, but you have the ability to direct your course when you know where you want to go.

Here's the key for ADHDers: Our passions often help us set and achieve our goals. Understanding what interests you, what you love, and what you value in life, may provide the direction and the motivation necessary to commit to a goal and stay focused on it until you achieve it. Take time to think about what you really enjoy, set your sights, and, above all, believe in yourself.

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## About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.