

Practice Management

What Does ADHD Cost Your Practice?

by Beth Main, CAC

Lauren, an estate attorney in her own practice, is intelligent, effervescent, and well spoken – qualities that help her land nearly all of the clients who come to see her for a consultation. She's dedicated to her career and knows the law related to her practice inside and out.

Trouble is, she's not making enough money to justify the long hours she spends on her practice. She frequently stays up most of the night trying to meet a deadline – and she doesn't always make it. She has very few repeat clients and even fewer referrals. A closer look at her work style reveals that she usually operates in crisis mode, putting things off until the last minute, then panicking. She often misses important details in her work and forgets or loses things. Her frustration level is off the charts.

What's happening here?

Lauren has adult Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), sometimes simply called Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Most people think of ADHD as a childhood disorder. Most of us usually associate it with out-of-control kids running around in classrooms, restaurants, and supermarkets. But have you considered what happens to these kids when they grow up? They become ADHD adults. They become *your clients*. One of them may even be *you* – whether or not you've been diagnosed.

Because ADHD was virtually unheard of 20 years ago, many people don't even realize that they have it, or want to accept it. About half the kids with ADHD will continue to struggle with it when they grow up. That equates to more than 10 million adults – about 5% of the adult US population.

ADHD's primary symptoms are inattention, impulsivity, and sometimes hyperactivity. But those broad categories don't really describe what it's like to live with ADHD.

People with this unique brain wiring are easily distracted and can't control their attention. They have an inordinate amount of difficulty with tasks that involve planning and organization. They lose anything that isn't tied down. They procrastinate. They lack follow-

through. They're restless and impulsive. They're extremely forgetful. They tend to overlook details, leading to mistakes. They interrupt. They're chronically late. They're easily bored, thriving on novelty and instant gratification.

What does this mean for a law practice? Lost income. Missed opportunities. Angry clients – even if it's the *client's* ADHD that's causing the problem. You might think you have things together enough that nobody notices. But do you?

Most clients won't tell you when they're dissatisfied with your service. They just won't hire you again.

Here are some of ADHD's potential pitfalls – and how to avoid them:

- *Lack of organization.*

People with ADHD tend to be woefully disorganized. How much time do you spend looking for client files, documents, and correspondence? Have you ever had to redo work you'd already done once because you couldn't find it later? What do these things cost you in terms of time and money?

An intuitive organization system that includes places for action items, reference materials, and client information is a must-have. It has to be easy to use, so you actually use it. You might claim that sticky-note farms and towers of paper are efficient, but they're *not*. A cluttered workspace makes it easy to lose stuff – and hard to concentrate.

- *Poor time management.*

Even though you may not have the strict billable hours requirements that many large firm attorneys have, your time is still money. Are you as efficient as you can be? How much time do you waste time on trivial tasks that don't generate income? On e-mail? Social networking sites?

Time is one of your most precious assets. Maintaining control over it is crucial to your success as a solo or small firm practitioner.

- *Poor task management.*

Closely related to time management is task management: keeping track of all the stuff you have to do. How do you remember everything you want or need to take action on? Are the exact steps clearly defined (like "Call Mike to schedule

appointment"), or are they a m b i g u o u s (like "web site project")? When does each thing need to be done?

Is everything all in one place, or do you have a menagerie of post-its, scraps of paper, calendar items and mental notes?

A good task management system solves all these problems, whether it's electronic or paper based.

- *Inability to prioritize.*

Even if your work day is all business, and your "to do" list is in good shape, are you effectively prioritizing? Are you scheduling time for the things that will move you closer towards your goals, or do you spend most of your time in crisis mode?

ADHD impulsivity can lead us to work on whatever seems important at the moment, or whatever novel idea has caught our attention. If you don't consciously choose to work on things like business development, for example, you may not have to worry about those emergencies – because you won't be getting any clients.

- *Planning.*

If you have a trial scheduled in three months, what tasks must you complete to be ready on time? What do you need from your client, and when do you need those things? When do you need to request them, so that your client has enough lead time? What about time for emergencies and last minute changes?

Planning can be excruciatingly difficult for people with ADHD. But the alternative is late nights and missed deadlines, not to mention cranky clients. One effective strategy is to create a timeline for each case, noting what is needed and when. Then enter the deliverables into your task management system. Daily and weekly planning sessions – coupled with good time management - will help keep you on track.



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• *Client management.*

Speaking of cranky clients, what about your clients who have ADHD-like tendencies themselves? You know, the ones who disappear like the morning dew in August when you need something from them.

Don't assume that your clients will complete your requests on time – or complete them at all – just because they're paying you. Failure to follow up will cost both of you. You need a good reminder system for things you're waiting for from others.

• *Communication skills.*

You might have the flair of F. Lee Bailey in the courtroom, but how well do you communicate with your clients on a day-to-day basis? Do they understand what you need, where you're coming from, why you're taking a certain approach? Do their

eyes glaze over when you try to explain something to them?

Do you tend to be argumentative? What about your emails – are they clear and concise, or do you usually get a confused phone call after you hit "send"? Problems in these areas – common with ADHD – may hurt your client retention rate. You need to communicate effectively to learn what they really want from you.

• *Attention to detail.*

There's no arguing that the legal profession requires exquisite attention to detail, something else that people with ADHD generally lack. One missed fact can result in a bad outcome – or a legal malpractice claim.

Make it a point to proofread every document before you send it out. Better yet, have someone else do it for you. The credibility you save will be well worth the effort.



How do ADHD tendencies affect your practice? Recognizing these traits in yourself and your clients is the first step towards correcting them. Here are some resources that may help:

- Attention Deficit Disorder Association – www.add.org
- ADDitude Magazine – www.additudemag.com
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Forums – www.addforums.com
- ADHD Solutions – www.adhdsolutions.net

Beth Main is a Certified ADHD Coach and the founder of ADHD Solutions. She coaches adults whose attention-related challenges get in the way of their success, whether they have a formal diagnosis or simply exhibit some of the traits of Attention Deficit Disorder, assisting them with time management, planning, organization, prioritizing, focus and distractibility, life balance, and relationship issues. For more information, visit her website, www.adhdsolutions.net.