

ADHD's Upside Is Creativity, Says New Study

by *Casey Schwartz*

Casey Schwartz is a graduate of Brown University and has a Masters Degree in psychodynamic neuroscience from University College London. She has previously written for The New York Sun and ABC News. Currently, she's working on a book about the brain world



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Parents who've claimed for years that their kids with ADHD are more creative are getting some scientific backup from a new study, which found that subjects with the disorder have enhanced creative abilities.

A new study, published Wednesday in the Journal of Personality and Individual Differences, finds some truth in the increasingly popular theory that along with the thorns of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder comes a rose: increased creativity.

Until now the ADHD-creativity link has been an oft-repeated rumor, seen by some as something exhausted parents cling to for consolation. Dr. Holly White, then at the University of Memphis, and her colleague, Priti Shah of the University of Michigan, set out to find out how much truth there was to the supposed link, and discovered that their subjects with ADHD showed marked differences both in their creative abilities and their approaches to creative problem solving.



A new study implies that ADHD actually increases creative problem solving among children. Credit: Getty Images "Creativity" is a slippery term, of course, often falling under the category of "we know it when we see it." That definition is not good enough

for proper science, however, and in recent years, standardized tests that measure creativity have focused on “divergent” and “convergent” thinking. Divergent thinking is the ability to generate spontaneous, often unexpected ideas or solutions, and test questions calculate originality, elaboration, and flexibility. Convergent thinking, on the other hand, is understood as divergent thinking’s opposite: the kind of thought process that allows you to narrow down your options to one correct answer. This kind of thinking boosts your SAT score but not necessarily your prospects for a career in poetry.

In part because ADHD’s hallmark characteristics include a lack of constraint, intellectually as well as behaviorally, studies have consistently found that people with ADHD often excel at divergent thinking but struggle with convergent thinking.

These classifications, however, barely begin to capture what we mean when we talk about creativity. Divergent and convergent thinking, and the standardized tests that measure them, are well-suited to a laboratory setting; how well they translate to the real world is another matter.

White and her colleagues wanted to address exactly that in their new research: Does ADHD really have the holy grail of upsides?

For their investigation, White and her team recruited 60 undergrads at the University of Memphis, exactly half of whom had an ADHD diagnosis.

One of the tasks the subjects completed is called the Creative Achievement Questionnaire, originally developed by Shelley Carson at Harvard. In it, subjects are asked highly specific questions about their past achievements in 10 creative domains, including drama, humor, science, writing, and cooking, among others. An example of a question on the CAQ: Whether the subject’s “work has won a prize at a juried art show.” The specificity of the questions is designed to limit the vulnerability of the responses to the subjective interpretations of the people answering them.

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White and her team found that overall, with scores from all 10 domains combined, the subjects with ADHD had significantly higher scores than those without the diagnosis. Interestingly, White said she also noticed a distinctive pattern, one not included in the study: ADHD subjects were more likely to excel at certain creative domains than at others. The performing arts in particular were their forte. Although White did not find statistically significant differences here, she definitely noticed the trend. Her ADHD subjects were particularly masterful when the talent in question involved a lack of inhibition.

The other measure White used that differs from most past studies is called the FourSight Thinking Profile, developed by Gerard Puccio in 2002. This questionnaire—which, like the CAQ, depends on self-reporting by the subjects it’s administered to—is designed to explore “preference for each phase of creative problem solving.” The measure conceptualizes creative problem solving in four phases: clarification—“let’s look at this problem,” as White puts it; brainstorming; developing and refining of ideas; and implementing the arrived-at solutions.

For each phase, a name: the Clarifier, the Ideator, the Developer, and the Implementer.

Here, again, White came up with significant findings. Her ADHD subjects markedly gravitated toward the Ideator and Developer styles; her non-ADHD subjects toward the Clarifier role. She found no difference between her groups for the Implementer.

One notable thing about the FourSight Thinking Profile is that it does not measure ability but preferences. Thus, for example, it asks the extent to which subjects "enjoy taking the necessary steps to put my ideas into actions."

White notes that she found no significant differences between those students with ADHD who were on medication and those who were not. Exactly why this should be is an interesting question that, for the time being, she has no answers for.

As for why exactly her subjects with ADHD showed such marked differences in their creative abilities and their approaches to creative problem solving, White zeroes in on the question of inhibition.

ADHD, she says, "tends to just increase the amount of collisions between all of your ideas, so at any given time, you have more potential processes being activated and you're less likely to rule out any options. It's hard to know where this operates—like someone coming up with an idea and saying, 'No, that's not a good idea,' and not even writing it down, versus, they don't even think about it because they're inhibiting it. But the key seems to be the inhibitory control—the same thing that allows somebody to not be distracted—which possibly could put a mental wall between what is right in front of them and other possibilities."

However big an upside to ADHD White's new study reveals, there's an important caveat to keep in mind. Her subjects—students who have managed to graduate high school, matriculate to a university, and are motivated and organized enough to sign up for a psychology study—are not representative of the typical ADHD trajectory.

"The first thing I do when I see a study like this is I look at who the sample is, and that creates a little bit of an interesting issue in terms of interpreting it," says Dr. Steven Kurtz, senior director of the ADHD and Disruptive Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute in New York. "The subset of folks who have ADHD who are there have been able already to exceed a bunch of hurdles."

Dr. Kurtz emphasizes that ADHD presents so many challenges for children—focus, task completion, perseverance—that getting through high school successfully is a feat that requires proper support from both family and educators.

"When I read this, I thought of Kinko's. You know why?" Dr. Kurtz asks. "Because the guy who started Kinko's, who is an 11 on a scale of 1 to 10 of ADHD... was able to think outside the box. He had an extremely high IQ, an incredible amount of support, and the appropriate accommodation in school." *Casey Schwartz is a graduate of Brown University and has a master's in psychodynamic neuroscience from University College London. She has previously written for The New York Sun and ABC News. Currently, she's working on a book about the brain world.*

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