

Young ADDAulthood

Preparing Late Teens for the Road Ahead

by Wes Crenshaw, PhD

FEW STAGES IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD ARE MORE CRUCIAL THAN THE TRANSITION BETWEEN ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD.

Of my twenty-four years of practice, sixteen have been spent working next door to a major midwestern university and a few miles down the road from one of the largest and best junior colleges in America. Specializing in teen and young adult psychotherapy, I've worked thousands of hours with kids who have ADHD and I've learned a lot about how they can succeed and how they can fail on the path to a better tomorrow.

Failure usually comes from a mismatch between expectations and reality that is, for the ADHD crowd, a bit more pronounced than for their peers. Thus, from middle school through the postsecondary years, therapy becomes a process of challenging cognitive distortions and misunderstandings about how the world works and how young people can make it work for them. Sometimes this goes easily. More often, it's a tough-love grind. Though transitional difficulties vary with the level of impairment, high schoolers with ADHD typically fall into one of three categories: overly optimistic, terrified, and lost. Each comes with its own set of benefits and challenges.





OVERLY OPTIMISTIC

These teens are a bit too ready to get out and on with life. Despite research indicating they can't live independently at age eighteen, they desperately want to get parents out of their hair. They have overdeveloped yearnings for freedom and underdeveloped skills of independence, not yet realizing that freedom isn't free, it's actually pretty expensive and impossible to achieve without true independence. They discount the importance of further education or attempt it half-heartedly. In severe cases, they will face school or career failure, financial ruin, and sometimes even criminal behavior.

TERRIFIED

These kids lean in exactly the opposite direction, seeing things so realistically that they become submerged in hopelessness. Fearful of their own shortcomings, they may avoid leaving home or only try it for a year before bailing out and heading back into their parents' basement. They depend too much on their families, refusing normal stages of independence that other teens hold dear, like learning to drive, living in a dorm, or holding consistent employment. Parents find them frustratingly satisfied with their situations and unmotivated to strive for anything greater, lest they be pushed beyond their limits of anxiety.

LOST

Lost teens are confused and overwhelmed by their current situations and options in life. They lack both the confidence of optimism and the driving energy of worry and can easily become depressed and defeated. They often go back and forth from living independently to living at home or depending upon friends or dating partners. When asked to develop a plan—even a simple one—they admit they don't have any idea what to do. They know plans exist, their friends have them, but no matter how hard parents or school counselors push, lost ADHD teens genuinely can't see themselves anywhere doing anything. In worst-case scenarios, they imagine living in communes or becoming homeless as good alternatives, or decide to have babies at a young age, thus extending their family's support for years to come. Some wish they were dead. One of the twenty-year-olds I see becomes emotional any time I bring up the future and begs me to stop talking. Another starts an argument to distract me.

What to do?

Fear not. Despite this grim picture, all is not lost. Regardless of which category your teen fits into, the solution is hope (Snyder, 2003). Hope is not optimism. It's what separates teens with ADHD who succeed from those who don't. It's an operational, definable, and practical tool with two components,

Willpower and Waypower.



WILLPOWER

WAYPOWER

WILLPOWER

is the way we think about our goals and the mental energy we draw on to achieve them. Does your teen believe goals are attainable? Will getting what s/he wants be useful? Does s/he have the patience and persistence to get there? Willpower is rarely present for ADHD kids, but it can be trained into them, preferably from an early age. The key is to develop cause and effect contingencies so kids learn that grit and persistence pay off. Simply put, never give kids things for free. Expect them to earn them in a clearly defined system of incentives and to a lesser extent, punishments.

Rewards help teens stay encouraged, especially people with ADHD. This can be a financial incentive or incremental rewards toward a larger goal. But it doesn't always have to be. It can be

a celebration when your teen does something well. You can take a picture of an achieved goal and text or tweet it to your teen whenever he or she is feeling hopeless on the path to a new goal. You can have teens list objectives, large or small, and check them off one by one until they hit their goal, then keep the list as a reminder that your teen really can finish something.

WAYPOWER

is the mental plan that guides us to our goals. It's great for teens to believe in themselves, but if they have no plan or their plan is flawed, they won't get far. Teaching those kids to plan and forge ahead may seem like herding very chaotic cats, but it absolutely can be done and I have a whole list of successful clients to prove it. Though it is more complex than the contingency system that undergirds Willpower, here's a step-by-step list of techniques to get you started on building Waypower:

- **Brainstorm.** Hook your teen up with a mentor or coach to make suggestions and offer feedback and critique. This will be hard on your teen's ego, because only a few of his or her ideas will add up. But it's a lot easier for someone else to spot those than it will be for your teen (think ABC's Shark Tank). This may not be the best role for a parent, as late teens should also be working on healthy differentiation from their families of origin.
- **Determine if your teen's goal is attainable.** A lot of teens with ADHD start off with fun goals like becoming a video game designer, playing in the NFL, or making it big in Hollywood. That happens, but not very often. Instead, help teens set an achievable goal while striving for higher aspirations in their spare time.
- **Do a cost-benefit analysis.** Help teens list all the reasons to try something on the left side of a page and all the reasons not to on the right side. Assign each a weight like -4 or +6 and then add them up. If they're honest and get good guidance, the numbers rarely lie. I have a spreadsheet for college selection that works this way. I'll share it for free if you email me at ask@dr-wes.com. It can be modified for use in making a lot of other decisions.
- **Make every choice an authentic one.** Real choice requires at least two valid options, both of which deserve serious consideration. For example, teens should never go to college simply because they don't know what else to do or a parent says they should go. That's not a real choice. It's an edict and one need only look at the drop-out statistics to see that it often turns out badly.
- **Don't overcomplicate decisions.** Many teens, especially the optimistic ones, conjure up more choices than really exist, just to avoid making a decision or because they can't sort things down to the core components of a decision. Most decisions can be reduced down to a series of binary, yes/no choices. Speaking of which...
- **Banish "try" and "want" from teen vocabularies.** Master Yoda tells Luke Skywalker, "Do or do not. There is no try." Eliminating these two little words may seem like a Jedi mind trick, but words create their own stories and for people with ADHD, stories that start with "try" and "want" usually end with "didn't."
- **Help teens find their limits.** Some teens bite off more than they can chew. It's fun to start new things. Finish-

ing? Not so much. Never teach teens that they can do anything they set their minds to. That's feel-good nonsense. Instead, teach that everyone can do something and finding that something is Goal One. Only when you know your limits can you...

- **Stretch those limits.** Help teens maximize what they're able to achieve by pushing a little farther than they think they can. Another good word to banish at this point is "can't." Replace it with "I choose not to do this."
- **Pace.** Teens have to make many authentic choices on the way to reaching any goal, but if they try and think them all through at once, they'll get overwhelmed and go back to hopelessness. This is especially true of the Terrified and Lost Teens. Pace teens by identifying achievable short-term objectives and be willing to take time-limited breaks. That may slow progress, but in most cases it's better to be the tortoise than the hare.
- **Never make life-altering decisions while altered.** Substance abuse does not promote good choices. Quite the opposite, in fact. I realize young people like to party (remember, I live in a college town), but those with ADHD have more trouble with impulsivity to begin with. Adding a little booze, weed, or narcotics won't improve judgment. And when it comes to dating and sexual choices, teens can double down on that advice.

It can be hard for your teens with ADHD to feel hopeful when everyone else is growing up, making key life decisions, taking calculated risks, and succeeding at life while they're not. It all seems so easy for everyone else. But, if you help them follow this path of Willpower and Waypower, you'll find that hope is something teens can learn to do, not just something they feel. 🍊

Wes Crenshaw, PhD, ABPP, is a board certified couples and family psychologist and certified sex therapist. He is author of *I Always Want to Be Where I'm Not: Successful Living with ADD and ADHD*, (Family Psychological Press, 2014) and coauthor of the forthcoming (2017) *ADD and Zombies: Fearless Medication Management for ADD and ADHD*. He is a frequent guest on public radio and commercial television on topics related to ADHD, teens, and sexuality. Learn more about his writing and clinical practice at www.dr-wes.com.

ADDITIONAL READING

Snyder, C.R. (2003) *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get Here from There*, Free Press.