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CHAPTER 1

HOW TO TELL IF A LOVED ONE HAS ADHD

Do you know an adult loved one who you feel has serious and persistent problems with their attention, concentration, distractibility, impulsiveness, forgetfulness, self-control, or all of these symptoms? Do you have an adult child, partner or spouse, brother, or sister with these problems? If so, do you want to know more about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and especially how you can best help them? Then this book is for you.

Why should you trust what I have to say about ADHD? Because I know ADHD inside and out, personally and professionally, like very few others do. I have conducted research on ADHD since 1973 and have published nearly 300 scientific studies and book chapters on ADHD and related disorders. And every week, I follow every research article newly published in the world's scientific journals to stay abreast of key developments in this field and to summarize those key findings in my newsletter, *The ADHD Report*. So ADHD is my professional specialty.

But it is not just a professional focus for me. Members of my own family also have ADHD. They include not only various extended relatives but also a fraternal twin brother, Ron, whose ADHD indirectly cost him his life in a car crash in the summer of 2006. I share more of his story later in the book. Just as tragic was

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what happened 7 years later when Ron's son with ADHD impulsively committed suicide after an argument with a girlfriend. So I have a personal stake in understanding ADHD and how it affects those of us who deeply care about someone with adult ADHD.

You want to know what ADHD is all about. You want to know how you can tell if a loved one may have it. If they do, you want the facts about it straight up, not sugar coated. You also want to know all the risks ADHD imposes on those who have it, and indirectly on those, like you, who care about them. You also want to know what helps treat adult ADHD and what you can personally do to help your loved one. By effectively treating your loved one with ADHD, he or she can have a happier, more successful, and more effective life and a stronger, closer relationship with you and others. You need to know what doesn't help ADHD so that you don't waste valuable resources on sham treatments. And you likely want to know what you can still do if your loved one does not yet want your help or anyone else's. You want to know all these answers directly and quickly so that you don't waste your time. I will do just that.

I won't tell you how great ADHD is, because it isn't. I won't tell you what a gift it is for those who have it, because it's not. It is a serious disorder that your loved one would give up in a heartbeat if that were possible. Yes, people with ADHD can be incredibly successful; I discuss some of them. But their success is not due to their ADHD. It is the result of how they and the loved ones around them helped that person to master and manage it and then to pursue paths in life, often nontraditional ones, in which ADHD might not pose such a big problem.

WHAT ADHD LOOKS LIKE

The signs of adult ADHD are many but can be initially classified as difficulties with attention, inhibition, and excess activity level. Those all have something larger in common—they all reflect a sub-

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stantial problem with self-control, as I discuss in the next chapter. Here I want to explain what signs and symptoms have to be present for someone to be diagnosed as having ADHD. Before I do so, you need to understand that ADHD falls along a spectrum or dimension of symptoms in the human population. Most people have no symptoms or just a few that occur only occasionally. Others have more frequent symptoms but those do not interfere much, if at all, with their daily life activities. Think of them as having an ADHD-like personality: talkative, outgoing, occasionally impulsive, sometimes distracted, and active. But when the degree of those symptoms reaches a level of severity and frequency where they interfere with effectively engaging in major life activities, such as work and education, the person now can be considered to have the disorder of ADHD. Yet even among those with the disorder, their symptoms and impairments can also vary in severity from mild to severe. So ADHD isn't like pregnancy, that you have or don't; it is like language ability in which people range from gifted to typical to severely deficient or completely unable to talk.

In this book, I focus on adults with ADHD who have been impaired enough to qualify for a clinical diagnosis of the disorder. But understand that milder forms of the condition can exist in some adults and not be very impairing, if at all. I chose this focus of necessity because the majority of adults likely to read this book have loved ones who are substantially impaired from their ADHD or they probably wouldn't bother with reading it. In explaining ADHD, I won't talk down to you or oversimplify it. Instead I explain the science of ADHD to you like any educated person would want it explained, professional terms and all, as if you were sitting before me in my office.

To help you understand how ADHD symptoms can affect people differently, I give you quotes from real people and real-life case stories across a wide range of adults and their situations. These

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range from people who are highly successful in their work (although often not in certain domains of life outside of work) to people who struggle to sustain their employment at all and from those with just a few focused problem areas to those with many issues. I do all this to show the broad diversity of how ADHD adversely affects adults and their lives. But realize that although ADHD can be a very impairing disorder in adulthood, it is among the most treatable disorders in psychiatry, with many effective treatments for its management. I discuss those in the later chapters of this book.

Dreams, Interrupted: A Partner's Story of Adult ADHD

My current boyfriend with whom I live is 26 years old and we are living in New England. His mother has told me that he displayed symptoms of ADHD very early in life. But his parents decided not to medicate him because of personal beliefs against drugs and not wanting to stamp him with the stigma often associated with the label in school. I've recently come to realize that his ADHD is still present and has largely been what's hindered him from accomplishing many of his goals up until this point. Yes, he has had some small successes, but as a whole, he does not feel like he is on the same level as his peers, either when he was at school or now in his line of work. I can see all the symptoms of ADHD I read about on the Internet. I wish his parents had taken them more seriously when he was a child. Maybe then he would have been treated earlier and so might not be having so many difficulties.

As a child, he paced endlessly about, his mother told me, and as far as I can tell he still does. She said that through his middle and high school years and even into college, his grades never matched his potential or high intelligence. He has friends to whom he has even taught grammar, English, and vocabulary because he is so smart. I know that some people don't have the amount of knowledge he does yet they have finished their master's degrees, while he is kind of stuck in limbo, having yet to finish his undergraduate degree. His father told me that my boyfriend never had "low"

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Dreams, Interrupted: A Partner's Story of Adult ADHD (*Continued*)

grades when he actually completed his work. But he didn't complete a lot of it. And so he got a lot of 0's due to not turning in homework or projects. In college he was able to get a number of A's, but that was offset by the fact that he also got a number of W's (withdrawals) or "Incompletes" that resulted from not turning in final papers and from missing final exams.

We have had a number of financial problems and debt since we have been together because I often find that he has made bad decisions with money. A prime example: We now have just one car but we used to have two. Up until 2 years ago or so when I first met him and we were both working full time, we both had cars. He had a really nice sports car. Then it broke down. Of course, he had no savings and we got completely overwhelmed, with no money to fix it. When he finally got the money to fix his car from his tax return a few months later, he decided that he wanted to show me some appreciation for being so helpful during some hard times. He knows that he shouldn't have, but he wound up on a whim taking me to Las Vegas for a long holiday weekend. He ended up spending $1,100 of the $2,000 he needed to purchase a new engine for his car. The car was later repossessed because he couldn't pay for everything he needed to fix it in time. He spends so much time wondering why he makes these horrible and impulsive financial decisions. . . . This wasn't the first time he has done things like this.

Another problem—he can't seem to stay with an occupation very long. After he left his initial job in sales, he decided to focus on his music full time because he has always had a love of music and is a great musician. He has now had some pretty good successes with music. Yet one time he was working with a major writer who's written many popular songs. Here they are giving him instrumentals to write for them so they can add lyrics and pitch their songs to well-known artists. But when he is under the gun like this with a deadline he can't seem to make himself sit down and write, even though it's what he has done since he was a kid and what he says he has always wanted to do. When the time came, he knew he had to sit down and work and just get one song placed with a major artist

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Dreams, Interrupted: A Partner's Story of Adult ADHD (*Continued*)

to get his foot in the door in that highly competitive business. But he was unable to stick with it. So he failed to meet their demands and the song promoters dropped him. Now we are living in an unorganized, somewhat dirty, one bedroom . . . shack. . . . He keeps telling me that we deserve so much more. I am younger than he is by 3 years, already finished with school and college, and now want nice things in life. I really think that he should be able to motivate himself to work better and give us so much more. But he can be so unfocused and he just doesn't seem to be able to plan for the future or think things through.

While he considers himself to be a songwriter, and it's always been his passion and what he excelled at, he has also tried lots of other activities, none of which he sticks with for very long. His mother told me that in school he played baseball, basketball, tennis, and clarinet, and he still plays piano. He then transferred to a high school for the arts and focused mainly on both ballet and vocal music; he even danced in a ballet company for a few years while in school. There he was in student council and even thought about pursuing law for a while before he decided he wanted to go to college for art (which he did at first). Along the way he has taught himself computer programming and even spent a few months making an app for a major Internet company. But he also pursued videography, has been a DJ, has toured with bands on the weekends, has done some video editing for others, and occasionally does some song mixing, and music producing. Despite all those different career potentials, he is currently doing wedding photography just trying to make a living before we lose more than we have. In short, he starts a million things, yet he doesn't finish much at all.

I've also found that he is unable to mute emotions at times. With me he does his best to avoid arguments because he considers us both to be generally positive people. However, if I push him about an issue in our relationship or about his projects too much, he ends up yelling and goes on a whole rant in which he keeps asking me why I have to go and ruin everything. He wants to know why we can't just be happy the way we are. Eventually, he does start calming down, maybe even faster than most people would who get so upset.

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Dreams, Interrupted: A Partner's Story of Adult ADHD (*Continued*)

One thing that annoys me is that he constantly interrupts me while I am working at home or at my office. It's because he can't deal with it being too quiet in our home or being alone for very long. Another thing he does that can be irritating is that he is always pacing, shaking his leg, and literally pulling out his hair.

A few years ago before he met me he was dating a girl who had just finished her PhD in sociology. He told me that he would never forget what she told him when they broke up. She said, "I just finished my Ph.D, I'm going to want to settle down soon, start a family, buy a house, and you're not ready for any of those things. You're fun and I enjoy spending time with you but this is just right now. I'm not looking at you as a long-term option." I am starting to see her point. Yet he can be so sweet and kind to others, tutoring people who need help, answering questions, and volunteering to do things for others. We need to get him some professional help, or I may also have to move on from this relationship.

Note. All cases in this book are real but have all identifying information disguised so as to protect the identity of these individuals. In some cases they may be an amalgamation of several different people I have known.

It's About Being Very Inattentive

When an adult has ADHD, inattentiveness may take different forms. It may mean the person cannot pay attention for long periods of time. Or, it may mean the person is easily distracted. I describe some common behavior patterns in the remainder of this chapter.

Can't Concentrate or Sustain Attention

I am 50, female, well educated, and I even made it through law school. Yet I was diagnosed with ADHD 3 months ago because

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> I cannot persist at doing things I find to be dull or boring. But much of legal work is just that. So I have floundered professionally and personally all my life. Everyone missed it while I was growing up and even through college because I was bright enough to learn things quickly. But the more I progressed in college and then in my career, the more I had to process, the more work I had to do that I found uninteresting, and the more trouble I ran into in school and later on the job. Now, with the diagnosis and treatment, everything has changed and I have hope that I can live up to what I expect of myself personally and professionally.[1]

This symptom is especially likely to occur if the work to be done is dull or tedious. As a result, adults with ADHD often do not finish the projects they start, may not even begin the projects they know must be done, and/or they put off doing boring projects until the absolute last minute. Even if they[2] start the work, people with ADHD are not able to sustain the focus of their attention on the task for as long as others are able to. Also, while doing work, they may daydream, talk to passersby, jot down notes on unrelated projects or ideas, doodle on a notepad, interrupt the work frequently to get beverages, use the bathroom, visit with others, check e-mail, surf the Internet, or find anything else to do

[1]All personalized statements are either (a) from actual comments by clients seen in my clinic or research projects made to me, (b) from e-mails written to me by adults with ADHD, (c) comments or e-mails their loved ones said to me, or (d) paraphrases or amalgamations of such statements. In all instances, all identifying information has been altered to protect identities and confidentiality.

[2]To avoid using just one gender, I will alternate the use of *he/him* or *she/her* throughout the text or use the gender neutral term *they/them*.

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that requires less effort than the work they are faced with needing to get done. They may often report not being able to think about work or other boring but necessary ideas for very long before more interesting ideas pop up and cause them to divert their thoughts to other, more pleasant ideas.

Easily Distracted

> My wife will be talking to me, but she can get so easily distracted, even by other thoughts, that in the middle of our conversation on one topic I can see her mind go "pffitt" as her thinking jumps the rails and off she goes on to some other track or tangent.

When work or some other boring activity must get done right away, the adult with ADHD often finds other things around them to be highly distracting. These are usually events, sounds, or even the actions of others, or anything else that is "off-task" and not relevant to the goal or project at hand. But the adult with ADHD can't ignore them like you can do. Adults with ADHD find it hard not to think about, react to, or otherwise interact with this distracting event. The interruption or distractor may cause them to think about ideas that have nothing to do with the work needing to get done. It can also cause them to start talking about the distraction when it has absolutely nothing to do with the project at hand. And it may even lead them to change their behavior so they leave the task or situation, and shift to interacting with the distracting person or event. All this leads the adult with ADHD to be "off-task" a lot of the time.

If it is a solitary activity that has to get done, it causes him to take far longer to accomplish it than others typically require. At other times, he simply doesn't finish the work at all. His powers

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of sustained attention are so weak and fragile that many interruptions or distractions that others would find easy to ignore will overpower his weak concentration so that things just don't get done. In short, more interesting but irrelevant events around him are like magnets or flashy neon lights to his restless mind. These distractions cause your loved one to get sidetracked easily from the business at hand.

It's About Poor Inhibition (Impulsiveness)

> My adult son has made many impulsive choices about money. On one occasion with a girlfriend, he impulsively spent $450 a night on a 3-day "romantic" weekend in an expensive hotel in New York City when he knew his rent was due the next week and this money was needed for that expense.

Adults with ADHD are often impulsive—they typically show a rather stunning quickness or "rush to judgment" when making decisions. They give short shrift to thinking through their ideas for the best ways to do something. And they don't think about any later problems their plan of action may create. Acting on impulse, adults with ADHD think, say, and do things with far less regard for the consequences that may be associated with those actions, both now and later, than would others.

The adult with ADHD is just responding on autopilot at the moment to his initial feelings about the choice, conflict, or other decision to be made. Her behavior is reactive, usually based on some whim, not thoughtful action based on deliberation. Sometimes this impulsiveness can seem exciting and fun, such as making spur of the moment decisions while on vacation about fun things to do next. Yet most of life is not spent on vacation! The consequences for making a too-quick decision about more weighty mat-

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ters in life than mere entertainment can result in far more serious consequences.

Adults with ADHD are usually not monitoring themselves and what they are doing but instead, like the Nike slogan, they "Just Do It." They sometimes realize after the fact that what they have said or done was a huge mistake, one they are likely to regret. So they may eventually say they are sorry, wished they had not said or done what they did, and hope to try to do things better the next time. Yet that is little consolation to others when the adult with ADHD keeps doing or saying such impulsive things repeatedly.

It May Also Involve Being Hyperactive

People with ADHD are often far more active and restless than others, especially if they are in a boring situation. This is certainly even more true for children with ADHD, who are described as "constantly on the go" or "acting as if driven by a motor." But it is also true of some adults with the disorder.

More Fidgety, Restless, or Active

> I married my best friend last April. He is a builder, so I didn't think anything about how active he always seemed to be. We had never lived together, and being as each of us had always rented a room in homes there wasn't any opportunity to hang out except in the general community. We didn't find a house to rent till May, so we didn't really live together till then. By mid-June I was almost out of my mind with my husband's over-the-top behaviors. He is so active when we are home, cannot sit still for long to read or watch television, and always has to be doing something, even though he rarely finishes the projects he has started. Help!

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As children with ADHD grow up, their outward hyperactivity diminishes substantially. The climbing on things, running about, pacing, and generally moving more than others becomes far less of a problem by adulthood. Instead, it becomes a problem of feeling more internally restless. This leads to feeling as if he needs to stay busy in various activities. Minor fidgeting may be especially apparent when he is bored, like when he has to stay seated or confined to a classroom or meeting room. He feels a need to stay busy with lots of activities to do, such as sports and physical pursuits. Adults with ADHD may also like more active work, such as the trades, travel, sales, videography, physical education, sports, the military, police work, driving for a living, emergency medical technician or physician, or even trial lawyer.

Often Talk Excessively

> I am 51 years old and a saleswoman. I was diagnosed with ADHD as a child. I can't stop talking or thinking or changing from project to project, or keep a job, or stick with anything I say I'm going to do.

Although this is not always the case, adults with ADHD often cannot stop talking in the presence of others (or even when alone). Some can speak so much that it seems their mouth is just a vehicle for expressing the constant stream of thought in their consciousness. Yet what she may be saying is often pointless. Or it is only tangential to the topic at hand, if there even is one, instead of making a direct, brief, coherent, and compelling point.

Along with their striking talkativeness, adults with ADHD show an apparent disregard for what anyone else may have to say in a conversation. Thus they come off as verbally domineering, self-interested, and insensitive to the views of others. They emit just a one-way stream of verbalizations. The give-and-take, that important

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mutual inquiring of each other in typical conversations, is rarely respected. Sharing and turn taking occur far less often in the verbal exchanges or social behavior of an adult with ADHD. Instead, one typically hears just a one-sided barrage of pointless verbiage. One can literally not get a word in edgewise. The minute one tries to utter even a single syllable, the adult with ADHD is "off to the races," reacting to it with her own incessant chatter.

The adult with ADHD frequently interrupts others or intrudes on others who are having a conversation. This is often seen as an unwelcomed hijacking of the discussion. In response, others start peeling off from the conversation to find different people with whom to have a mature and truly reciprocal talk. Or they simply try to get away from the verbal "stickiness" of the adult with ADHD.

Surprisingly, in contrast to this excessive speech, the adult with ADHD will suddenly be at a loss for words and ideas when she is put on the spot with an immediate question or demand that must be answered. In a classroom situation, for example, instead of giving a clear, logical, and brief explanation of the key ideas on a topic, an adult student with ADHD gives a smattering of spontaneous reactions containing only the most concrete and obvious contents of the assigned reading, if that. His explanation is often halting, and involves lots of delaying tactics or other ploys, such as "uhs" and "likes," to buy time for thinking. And he often misses the plot, crux, or deeper meaning of the reading material. Moreover, what explanations that may be given are often out of sequence relative to what occurred in the actual material he read. His comments also contain a lot of "beating-around-the-bush" types of statements before even getting to any of those key points.

An adult with ADHD may also get easily distracted during this broken narrative. He then goes off on tangents that have little to do with the story. He might even end this long and winding narrative

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with a "lost" look on his face, and say, "What did you ask me?" He has quickly forgotten the original question.

DECIDING WHETHER YOUR LOVED ONE MAY HAVE ADULT ADHD

The symptoms are just some of the major problems adults with ADHD can have with inattention, impulsive behavior, and even activity level. Now that you know them, let's do a quick check to see if your loved one might well have ADHD. Think about your loved one's behavior over the past 6 months. Then answer the following questions about their behavior. Simply answer *yes* or *no* to each of the items listed.

The Symptoms of ADHD

	Yes	No
(1) Inattention		
(a) Often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, at work, or during other activities (e.g., overlooks or misses details, work is inaccurate).		
(b) Often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities (e.g., has difficulty remaining focused during lectures, conversations, or lengthy reading).		
(c) Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly (e.g., mind seems elsewhere, even in the absence of any obvious distraction).		

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The Symptoms of ADHD (*Continued*)

	Yes	No
(d) Often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (e.g., starts tasks but quickly loses focus and is easily sidetracked).		
(e) Often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities (e.g., difficulty managing sequential tasks; difficulty keeping materials and belongings in order; messy, disorganized work; has poor time management; fails to meet deadlines).		
(f) Often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort (e.g., schoolwork or homework; for older adolescents and adults, preparing reports, completing forms, reviewing lengthy papers).		
(g) Often loses things necessary for tasks or activities (e.g., school materials, pencils, books, tools, wallets, keys, paperwork, eyeglasses, mobile telephones).		
(h) Is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli (for older adolescents and adults, may include unrelated thoughts).		
(i) Is often forgetful in daily activities (e.g., doing chores, running errands; for older adolescents and adults, returning calls paying bills, keeping appointments).		

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The Symptoms of ADHD (*Continued*)

	Yes	No
(2) Hyperactivity and Impulsivity		
(a) Often fidgets with or taps hands or feet or squirms in seat.		
(b) Often leaves seat situations when remaining seated is expected (e.g., leaves his or her place in the classroom, in the office or other workplace, or in other situations that require remaining in place).		
(c) Often runs about or climbs in situations where it is inappropriate. (Note: In adolescents or adults, may be limited to feeling restless).		
(d) Often unable to play or engage in leisure activities quietly.		
(e) Is often "on the go," acting as if "driven by a motor" (e.g., is unable or uncomfortable being still for extended time, as in restaurants, meetings; may be observed by others as being restless or difficult to keep up with).		
(f) Often talks excessively (in social situations).		
(g) Often blurts out an answer before a question has been completed (e.g., completes people's sentences; cannot wait for turn in conversation).		
(h) Often has difficulty awaiting his or her turn (e.g., while waiting in line).		

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The Symptoms of ADHD (*Continued*)

	Yes	No
(i) Often interrupts or intrudes on others (e.g., butts into conversations, games, or activities; may start using other people's things without asking or receiving permission; for adolescents and adults, may intrude into or take over what others are doing).		

Did you answer *yes* to 4 of the 9 symptoms under Inattention?[3] Or did you say *yes* to 4 of the 9 symptoms of Hyperactive–Impulsive behavior? Or did you answer *yes* to a total of 7 out of all 18 items in this list? If you did, then your loved one has symptoms of ADHD that are far in excess of what exists in typical adults.

Note. These 18 symptoms are from the diagnostic criteria for ADHD contained in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM–5*), by the American Psychiatric Association, 2013, Washington, DC: Author. Copyright 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association. Reprinted with permission. As of October 15, 2015, for billing purposes, mental health providers are required to use the latest version of the World Health Organization's diagnostic coding guidelines laid out in the *International Classification of Diseases* (10th ed.; *ICD–10*). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2015.

Now, answer these three additional questions.

- *Have any of these current symptoms lasted at least 6 months or longer?*
- *As far as you can tell, did they first begin anytime during childhood or adolescence?*

[3]The official *DSM–5* criteria for ADHD in the Appendix require that five symptoms be present on either symptom list to diagnose it. But research routinely shows that four symptoms is a better threshold for determining if the symptoms are deviant from typical adults.

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- *Do any of these symptoms produce impairment in your loved one?* That is to say, do these symptoms lead to significant adverse consequences for the person in major life activities, such as home life, education, work, social relationships, and so on? A critical part of diagnosis is making sure that those symptoms are leading to impairment (harm or adverse consequences). *Both* symptoms and impairment must be present to make a diagnosis of ADHD.

If your answers were *yes* to all three of these questions, then your loved one may well have adult ADHD. The full diagnostic criteria for making the diagnosis of ADHD by a professional are contained in the appendix at the end of this book.

TAKING ACTION

When the time seems right, try to discuss your concerns with your loved one. This can be when your loved one complains yet again about the problems she is having in her family, work, school, or social life. When that happens, you should tell her you understand, that you think these problems might be related to adult ADHD. Then encourage her to get a professional evaluation for the disorder if you believe that she would be open to doing so. In Chapter 9, you can find more tips for starting this kind of conversation.

Even if your loved one has already been diagnosed, this review of the symptoms of ADHD may give you a better understanding of what the problem behaviors are that your loved one may be experiencing. Reading this book can certainly help you better understand and assist that loved one as well. And even if the adult you believe may have ADHD is not (yet) open to getting an appropriate evaluation and treatment, this book can still help you understand ADHD. It can teach you its causes, the impairments it leads to, and the appropriate treatments. It can also show you what you can still do to be of help even if your loved one does not want professional assistance just now.