

# The Synapse: Intercollegiate science magazine

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Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 7

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2018

## Treating ADHD While Preserving Creativity

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### Recommended Citation

Schneier, Gabriel (2018) "Treating ADHD While Preserving Creativity," *The Synapse: Intercollegiate science magazine*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/synapse/vol17/iss1/7>

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**M**any people with ADHD struggle with knowing how and when to treat it. Especially at a school like Oberlin where creativity is highly valued, it can be tricky for people to treat their ADHD with medication while holding on to the creativity and spontaneity that are vital to their personality. Fortunately, there has been extensive research done recently on this topic that can help us understand the complex relationship between ADHD treatment and facilitating creativity.

In order to understand these studies, it is necessary to have a sense of context regarding how psychologists diagnose ADHD and how they define creativity. In order to be considered as having ADHD, according to the DSM-V, older adults and adolescents must display five out of a list of ten symptoms that each characterize a lack of directed attention (i.e. “often fails to give close attention to details” or “often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly”). There are ample means of measuring creativity, but many bear resemblance to the oldest and most popular metric, called the Torrance Test. The Torrance Test relies on four scales which are used to evaluate creativity and “divergent thinking” in problem-solving, including fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. In the test, emphasis is placed on generating ideas that score high on these scales — fluency is the total number of ideas generated, flexibility is the number of different categories of responses, originality is their rarity, and elaboration is the amount of detail. In this test, and many others, creativity is thought of as a non-linear thinking process. It involves novel, imaginative ideas that differ from the norm.

The most apparent question that follows for doctors and patients is: should I treat ADHD with medication? If these aspects of someone’s personality are a mixed bag, can treatment address negative symptoms while preserving the good? This is an ongoing debate, with strong cases on both sides.

A few recent studies show interesting findings. One report from 2006 tested the performance of children with and without ADHD on measures of creativity. They used four groups: children with ADHD who are creative, children with ADHD who are not creative, those who are creative without ADHD, and one control. They found that 40% of creative children showed levels of ADHD symptomatology without classifying as ADHD.

Furthermore, they found that the children with ADHD underperformed in certain cognitive measures, but those with ADHD and creativity outperformed the rest in all other measures. The symptoms of ADHD coincide with many typical traits of creative people, and this study further indicates this correlation. The most striking aspect of this study was the finding that children with ADHD and creativity outperformed all other categories on many tests. Taken in conjunction with other recent studies showing a correlation between ADHD and giftedness, this may point to certain upsides of the ADHD/“creative” profile.

Another study, carried out in 2017 on adults, showed that a group with ADHD generated more creative ideas than those without ADHD when competing for a bonus, concluding that “goal directed motivation may drive the enhanced real-world creative achievements of people with ADHD.”

This study focused on “real-world creativity,” described as “a complex construct that relies on the novel and appropriate combination of existing knowledge through several lower-level cognitive processes.” This can be understood as goal-oriented, productive creativity that is valued in job settings. This study indicates that people with ADHD who consider themselves creative can succeed especially in certain scenarios, namely those in which they are most driven. In these high-pressure situations, people with ADHD tend to outperform those without. In other tests, those without ADHD demonstrated similar levels of creativity, but ultimately did not report as many real-world creative achievements. This suggests that perhaps ADHD can define the settings in which creativity is expressed, and how it is

expressed — an idea that could help doctors navigate the pitfalls of treatment.

There are fewer studies that actually delve into the ways in which medications actually work, but there have been some that hold promise. One study at the University of Amsterdam in 2017 found that one ADHD medication known as Concerta increased creativity in people who rated low in measures of novelty-seeking, while it decreased creativity in those who measured high. Novelty-seeking is a trait measured by psychologists that describes how often and how persistently individuals seek out new experiences and risks.

As is suggested by the study from the University of Amsterdam, and many others, people with ADHD tend to perform better in high-pressure or high-risk situations. In many cases, this leads people with ADHD to seek out those situations in which they know that they can unlock their creative potential. The researchers sum it up as, “These findings highlight the role of the dopaminergic system in creativity, and indicate that among healthy individuals NS [novelty seeking] can be seen as a predictor of the effect of MPH [active ingredient in Concerta] on creativity.” This indicates that treatment

must be tailored to the individual in order for it to effectively work without having a negative impact on creativity.

There is much more work to be done, but this study shows promise in that it provides concrete advice for doctors. With new medications constantly under development, it is an ongoing project to study each one and try to gauge the best practices for its use. ●



**Treating ADHD**  
While Preserving Creativity  
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