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# Leading Soldiers with ADHD

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*“ADHD adults bring many positive attributes to the workplace; they can be highly intelligent, creative, and outside-the-box thinkers. They may also have high energy levels, be very persistent, and take risks.”*  
— Carnes & Holloway 2009, para. 2

**T**he hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattentiveness symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) could be concerning or even dangerous in a military setting, but addressing the challenges and recognizing the potential can be beneficial to the U.S. Army. Adults with ADHD bring a high degree of creativity and innovation to the workplace due to their tendency to think outside the box (Yu et al., 2018). This

article addresses some of the challenges Soldiers with ADHD face and provides six tips to help Army leaders manage and optimize their performance.

## Background

ADHD is a growing diagnosis in American society. According to Health.mil, “The prevalence of ADHD in U.S. children ages 2–17 is estimated to range from 9–11%”



Col. Ryan E. McCormack, commander of the 75th Field Artillery Brigade, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, speaks to a Soldier while conducting the Army Combat Fitness Test hand-release push-up on April 22, 2021, at Fort Sill. Col. McCormack hosted a mentorship physical training session where Soldiers were given a more in-depth understanding of the new ACFT events as well as the opportunity to bond with and train alongside their commander. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Dustin Biven)

(Sayers et al., 2021, para. 2). The American Psychiatric Association defines the major symptoms of ADHD as inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (“What is ADHD?” 2017). On the surface, these symptoms make affected individuals seem incompatible with the rigid, disciplinary structure of the military (Fruchter et al., 2019). On the contrary, according to *Scientific American*:

ADHD may also bring with it an advantage: the ability to think more creatively. Three aspects of creative cognition are divergent thinking, conceptual expansion and overcoming knowledge constraints. Divergent thinking, or the ability to think of many ideas from a single starting point, is a critical part of creative thinking. Previous research has established that individuals with ADHD are exceptionally good at divergent thinking tasks, such as inventing creative new uses for everyday objects, or brainstorming new features for an innovative device. In a new study, college students with ADHD scored higher than non-ADHD peers on two tasks that tapped conceptual expansion and the ability to overcome knowledge constraints. (White, 2019, para. 2)

## Leading Soldiers with ADHD

A priority in setting your Soldiers with ADHD up for success is adopting a situational leadership style (Brown, 2020). According to Kendra Cherry, “The most effective

leaders are those who are able to adapt their style to the situation and look at cues such as the type of task, the nature of the group, and other factors that might contribute...” (Cherry, 2020, para. 1).

This approach, as well as the following six tips which I developed from a variety of ADHD resources, worked for me as a first sergeant when I needed to refocus my Soldiers on assigned tasks and curb their hyperactivity. With these adjustments, their behavior and work performance significantly improved, contributing to the unit’s success. In 2017, our team won the Secretary of Defense Field-level Maintenance Award and the Superior Unit Award.

## Helping Soldiers with ADHD

1. Provide creative, realistic training. Individuals with ADHD typically struggle with repetitive and routine work or training. When possible, leaders should provide realistic, stimulating, and challenging training and environments. This will help the entire unit prepare for combat as well as keep them engaged in their training (Department of the Army, 2020).
2. Encourage breaks. Your Soldiers may show signs of hyperactivity or impulsive behavior with tapping, humming, and fidgeting. Scheduling breaks can help them release their energy with physical activity (Mind Tools Content Team, n.d.).
3. Encourage Soldiers to be early. Individuals with ADHD symptoms function better if they arrive early for formations and meetings, accomplish tasks ahead of schedule, and work to minimize competing requirements (Nadeau & Novotni, n.d.). Leaders can suggest they take advantage of tools like timers, Outlook reminders, checklists, timelines/milestones, and in-process reviews (IPRs) to stay on track.
4. Help them set goals and stay organized. If a particular goal matches their preference and ability, individuals with ADHD can become focused on that task to the exclusion of other tasks. This is a sign of executive function disorder where the brain struggles to analyze, plan, organize, schedule, and complete certain tasks (Goodman, 2021). To avoid this, leaders should help these individuals by setting work-related goals and providing individual development plans (IDP) — ensuring they are on track with personal and professional goals.
5. Explain the “why.” Whenever possible, share the underlying reasons for a task. Understanding the basis of a task can trigger their creativity and in-

novation, potentially enhancing task accomplishment. This approach is consistent with the Army's approach to the mission command philosophy and is also a best practice to lead and engage Generation Z Soldiers (Moore, 2019).

6. Frequent feedback and rewards. Individuals with ADHD thrive when given feedback on their progress, ensuring they're consistently within the commander's intent and mission/task objectives. It's also important as emotionally intelligent leaders to reward those Soldiers, and really all Soldiers, when they do good work (Low, 2020). It doesn't have to be a large reward, sometimes even just telling them they did a great job is enough to keep them motivated and boost their self-esteem.

## Large-Scale Solution

While these tips worked wonders for my unit, they are only small-scale remedies to help individual units. The

Army can do more. As a whole, it should help leaders recognize and adapt to Soldiers with ADHD. NCO Professional Military Education (PME) is a great place to expand training and include classroom instruction on how to recognize, manage, and lead Soldiers with ADHD.

## Conclusion

Research shows individuals with ADHD bring a great degree of creativity and innovation to the workplace. Leaders should help Soldiers with ADHD by adopting a situational leadership style and following, at a minimum, the six tips provided in order to help them thrive in a structured military environment -- provide creative, realistic training; encourage breaks; encourage them to be early; help them set goals and stay organized; explain the "why;" and provide frequent feedback and rewards. Following these tips will ensure units function at maximum efficiency and are ready for the battlefield, regardless of the challenges some Soldiers may face.

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