

Coping with ADHD & Heightened Emotions

Melissa Springstead Cahill, Psy.D., has dedicated her career to the psychosocial and mental health needs of adolescents for over a decade. She specializes in working with teens who struggle with ADHD, learning disabilities and other educational barriers.

Few people factor in the emotional challenges that are associated with a diagnosis of ADHD. In fact, it is not even a part of the diagnostic criteria.

However, people who have ADHD and those who support them know that emotions are a part of the struggle. **People with ADHD don't feel a different set of emotions than those without ADHD—rather, they feel both positive and negative emotions more intensely and frequently, and often for longer periods of time.** It is often difficult for them to regulate their emotions, which causes them to respond to situations in an emotionally inappropriate way.

For example, some adolescents may have a hard time letting go of intense emotions when they are stressed, angry, or experiencing any other negative feeling. They may worry or become annoyed over what others may think are small things. Being sensitive is also a common emotional experience. Adolescents with ADHD frequently say that things “aren't fair” because of their emotional sensitivity. Parents, caregivers, and teachers may find themselves getting frustrated when a person with ADHD “can't seem to let things go.”

When we remember that ADHD causes difficulty with executive functioning, it can be easier to have some compassion and understanding in terms of why emotion regulation may be difficult. At the same time, even though ADHD makes it more difficult to regulate our emotions, it does not mean that we can allow each and every one of our emotions to rule our lives and determine how we react the exact moment we feel something. **Instead, our goal is to have a foundational understanding of why things are happening and to then make choices that protect against any negative consequences.**

However, adolescents with executive functioning difficulties may have trouble seeing the big picture. Instead, they tend to get stuck in whatever they feel in the moment, which leads them to react—vs. respond—to their emotions. As a result, they may avoid difficult tasks out of fear that they will have a negative emotional experience. On the other side, if they do attempt a difficult task, they may give up at any sign of emotional discomfort. They also may feel easily overwhelmed, which can lead them to avoid interacting with others. If any of the above has been true for your clients, you'll find this tool to be very comforting and useful.

When clients can stop and say, “This is something that is happening due to my ADHD,” and not just because they are “overly emotional,” then they can make some changes. They can start to recognize when an emotional response does not feel right. It is only when they become curious about their emotions that they can **respond** to a situation rather than **react**. Note the key difference between those two words!

Once clients have paused and developed a curiosity about emotions, they can choose how to proceed in the situation using mindfulness strategies, such as breathing techniques and/or guided meditations. The [R.A.I.N Tracking Sheet](#) will help to initially guide them through this process. Over time, they may notice that it gets easier and that they no longer need the worksheet. However, in the beginning, using the worksheet is helpful in order to track and learn from experience. Clients can use this [free exercise](#) during (or right before) highly emotional experiences.

This is an adapted exercise from *ADHD in Teens & Young Adults: A Mindfulness Workbook to Keep You ANCHORED* by Melissa Springstead Cahill, PsyD.



MINDFULNESS EXERCISE:

R.A.I.N.

Using mindfulness strategies can help improve your emotion regulation skills, especially in situations that can initially seem overwhelming. One particular strategy that can help you deal with your emotions more mindfully is to remember the mnemonic **R.A.I.N.** While this technique is best used immediately when you feel a strong negative emotion—or even an intensely strong positive emotion that seems confusing or overwhelming—I recommend that you practice using it right now, in this quiet moment, in order to familiarize yourself with what it is and how it works. The **R.A.I.N.** technique will remind you to:

Recognize what is going on.

- Label with curiosity the feeling that you are experiencing.

Allow and accept the experience to be there, just as it is.

- This does not mean that you have to *like* the feeling.
- Just see if you can accept that it is a feeling you are having now and that it is only temporary.

Investigate with kindness.

- Notice if you are feeling anything in your body like tense muscles, a pit in your stomach, your heart racing, or shallow breathing.
- Notice if you have any thoughts connected to the feeling.

Natural awareness and non-identity.

- Try to not personalize.
- Remember that it is a temporary feeling. It is a wave of emotions, and like all emotions, it will come and go.

SAMPLE WORKSHEET:
R.A.I.N. TRACKING SHEET

<p style="text-align: center;">What was the situation?</p>	<p>EXAMPLE: I had given my parent/caregiver something to proofread, and they returned it with so many corrections that I could hardly see what I had originally written.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Recognize</p> <p><i>What is going on? What are your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?</i></p>	<p>I felt anger—hot, burning, face flushing. I thought, “I only asked for your impression, not for you to re-write every word!”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Allow</p> <p><i>Don't try to block and hide the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Allow them to be present without judgment.</i></p>	<p>I took notice of my body tension and the slow burn I was feeling, staying with these feelings and sensations without trying to banish them.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Investigate</p> <p><i>Notice what is going on in your body. Note any emotions that are triggered by those physical sensations.</i></p>	<p>Underneath the anger was hurt. I thought I did a good job. Then, I had the recognition that they had spent a lot of time looking at this paper just to help me.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Natural Awareness</p> <p><i>Be aware that the feelings are temporary and that you do not have to attach to them.</i></p>	<p>I noticed that the hot anger had dissipated somewhat. Now I could see that with their suggestions, the writing was greatly improved.</p>

WORKSHEET:
R.A.I.N. TRACKING SHEET

What was the situation?			
<u>R</u>ecognize			
<u>A</u>llow			
<u>I</u>nvestigate			
<u>N</u>atural Awareness			