

WHEN DID YOU FIRST TELL A LIE? You were likely very young (maybe two or three years old), afraid or ashamed of a situation, and used language to protect yourself.

What if some fibbing is not a character flaw? What if fibs are a self-preservation response, an outcome of challenges with inhibition, emotional regulation, working memory, and attention—signposts of ADHD? Could this insight give us better understanding, empathy, and strategies to support our loved ones with ADHD?

As the human brain evolved, it developed a self-protective mechanism designed to ensure survival in times of extreme danger or stress. Ever since our primitive ancestors were roaming the earth in their efforts to survive, our brains have needed to be highly vigilant and be alert for potential incoming threats. Faced with a threat, the brain must react in a split second; deciding how to best protect itself and survive is an instantaneous reaction—the well-known responses of fight, flight, or freeze.

As ADHD coaches we observed and documented a fourth “F” that manifests in times of real or perceived danger for children, adolescents, and even adults with ADHD: Fib. But let’s be fair and clear, this is not solely seen in those with ADHD. What we observed is that people with ADHD may find themselves in this position of protection more often, as they are under stress with the background pressures of ADHD. Or, in the moment, their ADHD may predispose them to partly processed, impulsive, or emotional responses. To understand this cascade of events, we need to understand what is happening in the brain at this point of challenged performance. It is a matter of biology and psychology.

Fibbing is a powerful fear response

The limbic region of the brain constantly processes information from our environment. It is alert to changes in the environment and senses the presence of danger. It assesses threats and instantaneously triggers or activates an attack or defense mode. We become chemically fueled and primed to respond into action. These chemical cascades trigger the response to *fight* (attack and defend) or *flight* (to flee) or *freeze* (play dead). This response diverts resources such as oxygen and energy stores to the moving muscles of the body in order to survive.

But now, we have a far more advanced brain through the development of the neocortex (new brain), the outermost level of the brain. This is the complex or advanced thinking and processing—an additional avenue for processing thoughts and consequently behaviors (or actions). It is a new line of self-defense achieved through language, as language centers are situated within the neocortex. With complex and advanced language not available to our primitive ancestors, we have the ability to verbalize both factual and/or fictitious reasoning instantaneously at point of performance, most notably in times of stress and threat.

People with ADHD often struggle with having impaired or challenged executive function, which frequently places the individual under stress. As ADHD coaches, we have observed this fib mechanism as a powerful fear response.

Beyond Fight, Flight, or Freeze—

THE

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FIB

Fibbing often follows poor academic outcomes, challenges, or not reaching expectations at home or in the workplace, incomplete assignments or tasks, and missed appointments or classes. In such times of stress, the person doesn't attack, run away, or play dead in front of teachers or bosses or spouses—he or she fibs to protect self-esteem.



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How the fib mechanism protects

The fib mechanism protects its maker in a number of ways.

- **Protection** from the feeling of having disappointed someone, such as a parent, partner, teacher, friends or work colleagues.

Case example: Ben, 32, sought an ADHD assessment. He was constantly in trouble for telling lies at his construction job, misleading his foreman that he was on top of projects and then failing to meet deadlines. At home, he and his wife struggled with his continuous inability to stay employed due to his bad reputation and job performance. “I am a compulsive liar,” Ben says. “I don’t know why I do it but I do. I do it before I realize I am doing it. I think I do it because I feel like a failure, when I don’t finish tasks. I am sick of my wife and my boss being disappointed in me. I lie to get me out of trouble, but the lie follows me till I get trapped.”

- **Deflection** of parental/significant other anger and the anticipated consequence. Deflecting blame can make the individual feel they are safe in the moment.

Case example: Alice, age 8, and brother Leo, 5, were playing. Alice fibbed to her mother, Janet, about creating a “magic potion” that spilled on the carpet before friends were due for a playdate. Janet demanded answers, but Alice fibbed and said that she didn’t know anything about the potion. She was scared Janet would cancel the playdate if she found out the truth.

- **Extension** may be caused by a desire to buy some time in the momentary absence of information, or information that is not acceptable to the person that is perceived as a threat. This provides the maker with an extension of available processing or thinking time. The consequence of the fib is not planned for.

Case example: Cara fibbed to her parents about failing her college courses and that she had stopped attending classes altogether. She told them all was going well. She even altered her transcript to prolong the inevitable exposure of the truth, all the while overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. She kept up the charade to extend the reality of coming to grips with failure, which she knew would anger her parents and further devastate their relationship.

- **Self-preservation.** The person fibs to preserve self-esteem and self-worth; to avoid the perceived reduced self-esteem of a “failure” due to ADHD-related behaviors that end in negative outcomes. Consequences often lead to shame and embarrassment.

Case example: Shelly, a mother of three, can’t have anyone over to her home because her house is in chaos. When her friends call to drop over for a visit, or it is her turn to host the playdate, she panics. Shelley feels fear and fibs. This affects the entire family’s ability to both socialize and maintain friendships.

A fib often allows someone to avert a present danger or threat, at least for the time being. The escape from fear, embarrassment, judgment, guilt, or shame provides a brief but powerful sense of reward (of escape or victory). An example of this is when someone lies to lessen the intensity of an inquisition about work completion. The person is able to gain relief from what seems like a barrage of questions, while justifying possible completion scenarios in his or her own mind. “Oh, I’m nearly finished with the essay, I’ve only got the quotes to do,” he may say. The reality is far different.

The role of weak executive function skills

How do weak executive function skills play in? By examining four key elements of executive functioning (adapted from books by Russell Barkley, PhD) and the associated challenges faced by those with ADHD, we can understand how this fibbing occurs.

- **Inconsistent inhibition:** the inability to stop an action, in this case verbal or physical communication, when under pressure for an answer.
- **Inconsistent emotional regulation:** overwhelming fear in the face of the stressful situation; the inability to process emotions to an appropriate level and be overwhelmed or responding more vigorously.
- **Inconsistent working memory:** planning for the future consequence of potentially being found out in the heat of the current moment does not happen. By not accessing the information of “the relief of now” in contrast to the later unpleasant outcome, the working memory challenge is evident. Also, the inability of self-talk to self-soothe and plan a logical way forward.
- **Inconsistent attention regulation:** may be implicated if the subject had succumbed to a dire situation from ineffective regulation of attention or was distracted, causing their inability to achieve success.

Helpful strategies

So, what can we do as parents, partners, teachers, or healthcare professionals to identify, support, and alleviate the impact of this stressful situation and the maladaptive fibbing strategy—or habit—that follows? Here are some strategies to try.

- 1. Be objective to the situation, and with empathy instead of judgment.** In a workplace setting, for example, say, “I know it can be tough when you have lots of demands, I’ve been there before, and I know how overwhelming it feels. How is your workload going?” Implementing a perspective of curiosity in place of judgment allows the individual a space to process verbally with another person. Use open-ended questioning to uncover the fear component of a situation. “Is there anything you are worried about?” Or, “Is there anything getting in the way of staying on top of your projects?” Be a safe, calm place to open up issues.
- 2. Create early, extra, or intermittent accountability opportunities and supports** (such as an accountability partner) to ensure effective planning, self-monitoring, and reviewing of processes. Breaking down projects into smaller tasks and meeting with daily or as often as necessary can ensure success goal achievement without undue stress. Monitor progress more accurately by supporting students, for example, with a visible and detailed study plan.
- 3. Use metacognitive or socratic questioning techniques.** These are questions that look for thought-provoking or deeper answers. For example, ask a student, “How do you think your calendar will look with the upcoming exams and assignment load?” This question opens the opportunity to add, “How are you managing yourself or could you use some support to stay on track?”
- 4. Use the WIN and COOL mindfulness strategies.** Using this tool can make WIN a “muscle memory” by bringing awareness in the moment of stress/fear and replacing it with assessment and purposeful actions forward.

WIN
Mindful Fib Crusher

W = What is the “threat” right now?
I = Is there a way to respond (not react) truthfully to benefit this situation?
N = Now what do I need to say or do to move forward successfully?

Making WIN a muscle memory

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- 5. Let the person know that telling the truth will ultimately provide a better outcome.** Providing honest information can go a long way in starting to solve challenging situations or even be a turning point for a successful solution.
- 6. Paraphrase a conversation** if you suspect a fib. This can give an individual an opportunity to rephrase or adjust a statement in a more truthful way. For example: “I heard you say (your room has been cleaned, your assignment is complete, you have done enough study for your exams, you have paid that bill)—is that what you want to say?”

- 7. Assist the individual with creating a “space for time”** in order to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed in the heat of the situation.
- 8. Medication as prescribed by a treating physician** can be a useful tool in ensuring optimal performance. ADHD medications support a consistent level of focus in order to set goals and achieve completion.

The evolving and adaptable human brain has undergone significant expansion and modification as we progress and face new threats to our survival. With the advancement of complex brain regions and neural networks, we accessed a more complex, self-preserving response beyond fight, flight, or freeze—the fib response.

Not solely the domain of people with ADHD, fibbing is, however, a less successful self-preservation strategy. People with ADHD yearn to live their best life as much as anyone else, but inconsistent executive function appears to back them into vulnerability and therefore attack or defense mode. When ADHD impacts challenges with inhibition, emotional regulation (and motivation), attention management, and working memory in the person’s daily experience, it almost certainly contributes to this phenomenon.

Taking a biopsychological approach provides significant others with an opportunity to identify fibbing as a neurological response and not a character flaw, but a mind in crisis. 🧠

COOL
In the Heat of a Situation

C = Calm and center your thoughts
O = Observe and assess, what is going on and “who”
O = Organize a way forward, plan, attend
L = Lead by example, keep COOL, avoid being part of the heat and drama

Remember to take any negative habits (voice raising or threats) out of the situation

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