

When School's Out: ADHD Symptoms, Procrastination, and Personal Goal Pursuit During the Summer

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders among youth in Canada and is associated with poorer academic performance, reduced well-being, and longer-term employment instability and financial difficulties¹⁻⁶. Although adolescents with ADHD often struggle with academic goal pursuit, less is known about how ADHD symptoms affect the pursuit of personally meaningful goals beyond academic settings⁷. Procrastination may help explain these difficulties. Often conceptualized as a short-term mood-improvement strategy, procrastination interferes with task completion and long-term goal attainment and is particularly common among individuals with ADHD⁸⁻¹². Motivational deficits and executive function impairments related to planning, task initiation, and inhibiting unproductive behaviours may also reduce goal progress^{5,13}. However, previous research has focused primarily on academic procrastination among university students, leaving adolescents' non-academic goal pursuit less understood.

To address these gaps, this summer research project examined two questions: (1) What types of goals do adolescents set and pursue during the summer? and (2) Do adolescents with higher levels of ADHD symptoms procrastinate more, and how are these symptoms and procrastination related to their goal pursuit and overall well-being? Participants aged 15 and older, with an average age of 17, were recruited through the City of Ottawa's Summer 2026 wading pool staff email list. They completed three online questionnaires approximately one month apart. At baseline, participants reported a summer goal, ADHD symptoms, procrastination, and well-being. The two follow-ups assessed goal pursuit and progress, procrastination, and well-being.

Most participants set health-related or self-improvement goals, while others focused on finances, academics, and hobbies. Although no clinical conclusions can be drawn, adolescents and young adults in the current study reported higher average levels of ADHD symptoms than participants in a similar study with adults. Consistent with results from the adult study, higher levels of ADHD symptoms were associated with greater procrastination. Higher ADHD symptoms were also associated with greater controlled motivation, negative affect, psychological need frustration, difficulty regulating negative emotions, and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Although preliminary, findings suggest that procrastination remains a challenge for adolescents outside the academic year and extends to the pursuit of personal goals during the summer, particularly among those with higher levels of ADHD symptoms.

Unlike studies that recruit and compensate adults through online platforms, this study highlighted the distinct challenges of recruiting and retaining adolescents and young adults without guaranteed compensation. These challenges, potentially compounded by the sample's relatively high average level of ADHD symptoms, resulted in substantial attrition and a sample that was too small to examine changes in goal progress over the summer. This research will therefore continue next summer using expanded recruitment and creative strategies to support sustained participation.

Adolescence involves increasing demands for self-regulation, which may make the challenges associated with ADHD symptoms especially consequential during this developmental period. Supporting goal pursuit and well-being may therefore require strategies that reduce procrastination, help select personally meaningful goals adolescents are autonomously motivated to pursue, and address their emotional and mental health needs.

References

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