

## **An ADHD Coach's Guide for Clients: Understanding, Embracing, and Thriving With ADHD**

*For many people, ADD is not a disorder but a trait, a way of being in the world. When it impairs their lives, then it becomes a disorder.*

- Edward Hallowell, *Delivered From Distraction*

### **A Feast and a Minefield**

If you have ADHD, life can be both a feast and a minefield. The vastness of possibility for exploration – family, career, social, spiritual – can be intoxicating. At the same time, the virtually complete lack of structure, along with constant, seemingly limitless distractions modern living presents, can pose a significant danger to individuals for whom getting organized, getting started, staying on track, prioritizing, and following through, can be challenging.

Adults with ADHD face unique challenges. You have unique strengths and talents that set you apart. It is sometimes the sheer force of your resilience and creativity that has allowed you to succeed in spite of waiting to the last minute to go to the store or write a proposal; of writing the proposal and then leaving it in your work bag; of habitually being unable to find things; or of getting lost for hours in web-surfing marathons, or just somewhere outside the window.

### **Challenges Just Below the Surface**

If you don't manage your ADHD, the persistence and creativity can enable you to get by, but your life is at risk of becoming a string of:

- exhausting last minute deadlines
- too many commitments
- inconsistent and seemingly unpredictable grades
- missed appointments, missed deadlines, missed opportunities
- strained or broken relationships
- a pervasive sense of underachievement, frustration, and guilt
- unrelenting, grinding stress.

Your strengths may enable you to survive, but sometimes at great cost. And surviving is not thriving. No one wants to just survive.

### **The First Step**

How do you thrive? First of all, learn as much as you can about Attention Deficit Disorder. Whether you've known you've had it since you were 7, or were just diagnosed last week, how much do you really know about it? Do you know, for instance, that ADHD is neurobiology, brain wiring, and that it has nothing whatsoever to do with either your intelligence or the strength of your character? That "attention deficit" is a misleading term, as this syndrome is characterized not by a *deficit* of attention as much as by an inability to *allocate* attention? This is especially true when you're engaged in a task that requires a sustained mental effort...such as completing paperwork or trying to do an extended reading assignment.

Do you know that, while ADHD is the officially correct term, you may have the less visible "ADHD Predominately Inattentive" sub-type, without Hyperactivity? Did you also know that

even if you do have the H, H might look very different in adults than in children? What was once careening around wildly and often uncontrollably may become an internalized restlessness: you fidget and squirm, constantly bounce a leg, talk a lot, or find that driving around is one of your favorite relaxing and focusing pastimes. Physical stillness may belie what one person with ADHD terms “cognitive hyperactivity” – a racing mind that will not quit.

Do you know that difficulty getting started can be as much a symptom of ADHD as difficulty getting stopped, and that transitioning from one thing to another is a common challenge for people with ADHD?

Do you know that inconsistency is a major defining characteristic of ADHD?

Do you know that some people feel those with ADHD are also characterized by unusual imagination, creativity, generosity, warmth, energy, and innovative thinking?

Do you know why stimulant medications are so effective in treating a set of behaviors that often present themselves as overstimulation?

Do you know that ADHD has *nothing* to do with intelligence?

### **Settling a Question, and Considering Perspectives**

ADHD exists. It is neither a conspiracy, an excuse, an invention of the drug companies, nor a fraud. Nor is it new: it has been recognized and treated for over 50 years, albeit under a number of different names, the most recent of which is Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Hundreds of studies have been published in mainstream, peer-reviewed scientific journals, indicating that the condition is real, measurable, and not as benign as people tend to think. Developments in the field of neuroimaging have allowed researchers to actually see the differences in the working brains of people with ADHD.

In January of 2002, under the leadership of Russell Barkley, PhD, Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, an international panel of more than 80 scientists from institutions around the world published a consensus statement on the existence and nature of ADHD.

Unfortunately, an all-too-common perspective of individuals with ADHD is “this is a bad thing. It’s called a *disorder*, for pity’s sake. So it’s a deficiency. Therefore I am deficient. Let’s not go there. Don’t tell anyone. Especially, don’t tell anyone!”

Having ADHD, however, is not the same thing as letting ADHD define you. It is merely one aspect of who you are; it is, as Hallowell suggests, a way of being. It has no moral charge, any more than having blue eyes does. It does not make you lazy, or stupid, or selfish, or incompetent. It does not keep you from making choices, excelling at the things you love, achieving what it is that you most want to achieve. The key to thriving with ADHD in life is first to learn what this syndrome is all about and how it affects you in particular, and then to learn ways to manage the behaviors that can be particularly problematic while you are a student.

## What's So Hard About Being an Organized Adult with ADHD?

When you were in school, an often-invisible scaffolding of frequent homework and classroom evaluations, as well as time structured by classes, sports, activities, jobs, and parents, kept you on track and moving forward. Beyond school, the world is radically different. The scaffolding has disappeared completely, while the tasks you are required to fit into that time have multiplied.

Figuring out when, where, and how long to work, when to do chores, how much time to spend on tasks, when to eat, when to sleep, when to get up, how to get up, when to go out, when to stay in: all these are balls you must keep in the air at the same time. And if you are an adult with ADHD, these are the exact things that may be most difficult for you.

In order to be successful in life, it is necessary to learn to self-regulate both your living and your working on a level abruptly more challenging than it has ever been before. And the ability to successfully self-regulate is dependent on the working of your brain's executive functions.

### The Executive Functions

Executive function processing occurs primarily in the frontal lobes of the brain. These are the functions that quite literally allow you to “get your act together,” and recent research is indicating that impairment of these functions is virtually always present with ADHD. Thomas Brown, Ph.D., Associate Director of the Yale Clinic for Attention and Related Disorders, groups them as being responsible for the following:

- Activation:** organizing, prioritizing, activating for work tasks;
- Focus:** focusing, sustaining, and shifting attention for work tasks;
- Effort:** regulating alertness, sustaining effort, processing speed;
- Emotion:** managing frustration and managing emotion;
- Memory:** utilizing working memory and recall;
- Action:** monitoring and self-regulating behavior.

Martha Denckla, M.D., Director of the Developmental Cognitive Neurology Clinic at Johns Hopkins, offers the acronym **ISIS** for the essential executive functions: **Initiating** (a task), **Sustaining** (energy for carrying through a difficult task), **Inhibiting** (sidetracking distractions), **Shifting** (from one task or activity to another).

Brown also observes that there is no “the” executive function, but rather that these functions work together to comprise the cognitive management system of the brain. They interact, connecting, integrating, and prioritizing cognitive functions, which may in fact be very strong. When executive function is impaired, your cognitive abilities may be intact, but the coordination of these abilities, required for satisfactory performance, isn't.

### An Orchestra Without a Conductor

Brown compares chronic executive function impairment (and chronicity is one of the hallmarks of ADHD) to an orchestra without a conductor. The individual musicians may be superb, but without a conductor to keep them playing together, the quality of the music they perform will be poor. Similarly, you, may have a gift for critical thinking, or learning languages, or sculpting, or mathematics, or writing, but if you rarely manage to turn in projects on time, or sustain focus

throughout a lengthy conversation, your performance, no matter how talented you are, will take the hit.

### **All the Ingredients, No Recipe**

Equally evocative is Denckla's metaphor for impaired executive function: "the cupboards are full, but you can't make dinner because you don't have a recipe." The ingredients are there, but not the direction for putting them together. Some ADHD adults have suggested that this is exactly the way they feel when faced with having to write a complex proposal, for instance: they have done the research, they have thought critically about their subject, they have generated insightful and original ideas, but they are defeated by the daunting task of organizing them into the organic whole of a paper.

### **The Airbag Phenomenon and Other Wonders**

Failure to initiate tasks gives rise to a famous characterization of ADHD by Barkley, that ADHD is not a disorder of not knowing what to do, but of not doing what you know. It looks like willful behavior. One individual described this as actually knowing where to start (writing a paper, mailing a package), but the impact of suddenly being smack up against doing the thing itself seems to cause it to explode into something much larger than it actually is, something big and puffy and without distinct edges of beginning and ending, and therefore no time seems like the right time to start it, because whatever it is, it's going to take too long.

Or you may fail to take an action because of what Barkley calls a lack of "timesight:" if the event isn't right in front of you, it isn't registering on your screen. People with ADHD commonly experience the phenomena of feeling that they float in time, untethered by those constructed marker threads that other people seem to find so useful: weeks, days, hours, minutes. "Time is that thing that keeps everything in our lives from running together," except, for people with ADHD, it doesn't. If you lack timesight, you estimate time badly, and even though you know it takes you 20 minutes to get from your house to your workplace, and has taken 20 minutes every time you've done it for the past 2 months, you can still convince yourself that this time it's only going to take 10. And you believe it – you really believe it – every time.

Other reasons for not taking action, or not taking the appropriate action, can stem from difficulties in areas such as focus. If, as Brown describes, you consider focus not as something static, such as focusing a camera, but dynamic, such as driving a car, you can see immediately the number of pieces involved in "just focusing:" steering the car, watching the speedometer, checking the rear-view mirrors, keeping an eye on the cars around you, watching out for the kids playing ball on the sidewalk, searching for a street sign, noticing a dog about to run across the street in front of you, looking for the right lane from which to turn, etc. "Focus" may actually be involving a dozen or more separate activities, all of which you need to keep smoothly integrated as you move forward.

If you get caught up in paying too much attention to the dog, you may go right through a red light. Not because you don't know that red means stop, but because you missed seeing the light entirely, an example of an observation made by Sam Goldstein, Ph.D, that adults with ADHD are not *clueless*, but *cueless*. You know that red means stop, but you missed the cue - you didn't see the light. It isn't too hard to translate this into an individual focused on all the details of handing

in her expense report – “How much time do I have left til 5:00? Do I have all my receipts? Where’s that page of graphs? Are those my child’s library books I said I’d return? Who’d I say I was going to meet for dinner? I’m going to miss the bus!” – and see how she could hurriedly and unwittingly forget to pick up the report from the printer and not take it with her.

***Chronically impaired executive functions, probably more than anything else, cause the greatest problems for adults with ADHD.***

## **YOU ARE HERE: WHAT NOW?**

There are actions you can take and resources available to you to help you manage your ADHD and thrive in life and work.

- 1. Learn as much as you can about ADHD and how it may affect your performance.** There are a number of excellent books, articles, and web sites available, some on ADHD in general, and others targeted for particular groups, such as college students, adults, and women. Also, if you have a formal, recent ADHD evaluation and haven’t already done this, sit down with the evaluator or other knowledgeable person and go over it with them. Doing so can give you a clear understanding of exactly where your strengths and weaknesses lie, and may also suggest possible academic interventions.
- 2. Develop a positive systems mindset.** Focus on the things you CAN do, your strengths and passions, rather than on what you can’t do. Keep these at the center of your life, and keep your identification affirmative – “these are the things I can do and these are my limitations, and I will honor both.” Learn to become a strong advocate for yourself: know how to use the existing language of disability, but don’t allow yourself to be defined by it.
- 3. Consider ADHD coaching.** Coaching is a process grounded in self-determination that “helps people get what they want without doing it for them or telling them what to do.” An ADHD coach helps you clarify what you want, determine the present reality of your strengths and challenges in the context of your life, and make concrete plans to reach your objectives. A coach supports you in putting your plans into action and allowing yourself to be accountable for what you have chosen to do. Coaching also provides time to reflect on outcomes, increase your awareness of how you operate, and deepen your learning about yourself as a learner. A coach helps you develop ‘a life that fits’.
- 4. Develop strategies. These may include the following:**
  - **Exercise!**
  - Find a calendar/planner that makes sense to you, and plan to use it. It can be electronic or paper. It should be small enough to carry with you always – you might want a second, larger desk or wall calendar for the larger picture. The more time and task management you can do outside your head, the more you are freed up to think about more interesting things.

- Connect with like-minded individuals.
- Choose work that interests you.
- When you can, work at times that are optimal for you. What time of day are you at your best?
- Access people as resources. People can be very helpful with scheduling (“I’ll meet you”), completing (body double) and mood management.
- Practice self-care. Explore the combination of exercise, nutrition, rest, meditation, etc. that is right for you.
- Pay attention to the conditions under which you work best, then work under those conditions. If you work best with things going on around you, try a café. If you like silence, try going deep into the library stacks. Some people prefer to always work in the same place; other people need variation. The bottom line is to find a place where you can control the distractions.
- Consider a Body Double. A body double is a variation on a study buddy. If you have an attention impairment, simply having someone else in the room as you perform a work task – such as working, or doing paperwork – can help you stay focused on what you’re doing, as well as making it easier to actually get started. This person doesn’t have to be doing the same thing you’re doing, but they, too, should be working at something, and shouldn’t be distracting you. A room full of people (e.g. library reading room) doesn’t have the same effect, dogs don’t work, and your current romantic interest is not your best choice.
- If you take medications, talk with your current doctor about the best way for you to manage them. You may need to develop strategies to help you remember to take your meds.
- Understand that a reasonable amount of sleep is especially important to you, and ADHD symptoms, including memory impairment, are worsened by sleep deprivation.

### **Awareness, Engagement, Completion**

Finally, ADHD is a disorder that actively makes individuals *unaware* of their surroundings, *disengage* from tasks and conversations and *incomplete* projects. When we approach our ADHD head on with curiosity and possibility we are able to arrive at a new level of functioning: One of comprehension, integration and acceptance.