

Be Well



Let Me Tell You What It's Like ... to Have **ADULT ADHD**

*Getting through the day can be a struggle,
but I'm learning how to thrive despite my condition.*

BY REBECCA SHANE, AS TOLD TO BARBARA BRODY

Living with ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, is a little like living inside a tornado. I'm constantly drawn into situations that seem exciting but turn out to be disasters—for me and for the people who are left swirling around me. That scenario was especially true before I was diagnosed and treated, which happened only a few years ago.

In 2012, shortly before my 40th birthday, my life was getting more and more chaotic. For about 10 years I had been teaching private voice lessons from my home in Lincoln, Nebraska. I loved teaching, but being self-employed provided many opportunities for the chaos of my personal and professional lives to spin out of control. At the same time I was diagnosed with depression. I needed a change. When an opportunity to work for my church's large music ministry cropped up, I was thrilled.

I was initially hired to fill in for six weeks, but when my predecessor left for a new position, I stayed on. Suddenly I had a full-time job in addition to more

than 40 voice students. Of course I also wanted to spend time with my husband and my kids, who were then 13, 10, and 8.

Anyone might have been overwhelmed, but I felt like I was drowning. I had no idea what to do first or how I would get everything done, yet I had no desire to scale back. At work I had big ideas about how to expand the church's music program, but I never followed through. Whenever I'd sit in a meeting or pass coworkers in the hallway, I couldn't help but feel guilty; I was constantly getting them excited and then letting them down.

At about that time I was introduced to Jennifer, a friend of my boss who had recently moved to our area. She's a real force—she was instrumental in turning around the public schools in Detroit—but I didn't feel like I knew her especially well. So when she showed up at my office, handed me a book about ADHD, and said “you need to read this,” I was stunned and insulted. But I ended up going home and reading the entire thing.

The next day I called Jennifer and thanked her. I told her that the book,

Driven to Distraction by Edward M. Hallowell, M.D., and John J. Ratey, M.D. (Touchstone; 1995), could have been my own journal. I already knew I was a mess, but I didn't know why. Now I had some insight and the push I needed to do something about it.

PUTTING THE PUZZLE TOGETHER

Looking back, there were plenty of earlier signs that something was amiss. As a child I often had trouble finishing things, whether it was putting away my toys or turning in an extra-credit assignment for school. I was very social, but I kind of lived in my own world until somebody snapped me out of it. I remember I'd be outside, just twirling around and singing, and suddenly someone would be upset with me and I didn't understand why. Family and friends often acted like I was ignoring or disappointing them. My parents referred to me as daffy.

In college I remember feeling very anxious. I was trying to pursue music—I was involved in student operas—as well as juggle my regular classes. Once I got so frustrated about



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COULD YOU HAVE ADHD?

About 4 percent of the adult population has ADHD, a behavioral disorder that interferes with the ability to stay focused and organized. Experts believe it's caused by low levels of dopamine, a chemical that helps the neurons in the brain communicate effectively, says Stephanie Sarkis, Ph.D., a Florida-based psychotherapist and author of the forthcoming book *Natural Relief for Adult ADHD* (New Harbinger Publications; 2015). To meet the diagnostic criteria, your symptoms must have started in childhood, even if you weren't diagnosed, and they must be significantly disrupting at least two areas of your life, such as work and family relationships. If the following issues sound familiar, talk to a mental health professional about getting evaluated:

- You constantly have a feeling of inner restlessness and an overwhelming desire to multitask.
- You feel like you have so many thoughts in your mind at once that if you don't voice them or write them down immediately, you'll lose them.
- You're easily distracted; your mind tends to wander and your thoughts jump around.
- You take on projects you have the skills to tackle but don't finish them.
- You frequently lose or misplace items.
- You often show up late or at the wrong time for appointments and events.
- You can't sit still long enough to play with your kids.
- You have trouble remembering birthdays and anniversaries.

my inability to keep up with the demanding schedule I had created that I made an appointment to see a campus mental health counselor. It took weeks to get on the calendar, and when I showed up, the receptionist said the therapist would be unable to see me that day. I was so furious that I kicked her desk and stormed out, which wasn't like me at all. I was whisked in to see a psychiatrist, who quickly diagnosed me as bipolar. I knew that wasn't accurate—I've known people who are bipolar—so I threw the prescription he gave me into the garbage.

Later my behavior put strain on my marriage. I was always running late, which drove my organized husband, Daniel, crazy. And I was constantly failing to finish the simplest things. Daniel would come home and say, "Why is the laundry still in the wash?" or "Why is the front door open?" and I'd have no idea why I hadn't managed to complete such a basic task. There were also many times when I left the house without turning off the stove or blowing out a candle.

When my children were little, I was terrified that I was going to accidentally lock them in the car. It wasn't a completely paranoid thought, because I had often left the keys in the ignition and locked myself out. So I started keeping all the car doors open while getting anything, including the kids, out of the back seat.

My trick worked, but I was still hardly the perfect parent. My kids got in trouble a lot at school for being tardy, even though it was my fault for dropping them off late. Meanwhile, I frequently forgot to sign permission slips and pack lunches, which I'm sure was upsetting and embarrassing for them.

LEARNING TO COPE

By the time I saw a psychiatrist in 2012, I had a lot of emotional baggage to sort through. We spent weeks talking about my childhood and current issues before she officially diagnosed me with ADHD. She encouraged me to develop

new coping skills, and I now use a number of calendar alerts, text message reminders, and smartphone apps to stay as organized and on time as possible. She also started me on medication.

On most days I take two doses of Adderall (amphetamine and dextroamphetamine). It's not a miracle cure, and I don't like the side effects—I tend to get kind of weepy as it

leaves my system—but it helps. It is hard to explain, but I can feel the moment a pill kicks in. Things start to sharpen; it's as if I have really terrible vision, and for the first time, I've put on glasses.

People have a lot of misconceptions about ADHD, and many tend not to take it seriously. Having ADHD doesn't mean a person is acting hyper and jumping out of their seat; it's more that their brain is "all over the place." There's a constant static in my mind that makes it really hard to focus, and if I come off as being spacey or flaky, it's not because I'm checked out but rather because I'm thinking about everything at once. It's also really hard for me to prioritize, as my brain just isn't able to determine that an urgent meeting or phone call is more important to focus on than any other random thought that might pop into my head.


Living with ADHD isn't easy, but I'm managing. Fortunately my husband is supportive, as are my coworkers. I'm up-front about my challenges. For example, I'll tell my coworkers that I won't remember something we just discussed by the time I walk down the hall to my office, so they'll write it on a sticky note and hand it to me to jog my memory.

I know many people don't understand ADHD, but I want them to know it's a real disorder and that those of us who have it are making every effort to do our best. If I seem a little scattered sometimes, it's not because I am airheaded. It's just that you might be thinking about one thing and I am thinking about 50, because that's how my brain works.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Want to learn more about adult ADHD or locate an expert in your area? These organizations can help.

● **CHADD:** Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (chadd.org)

● **ADDA:** Attention Deficit Disorder Association (add.org) 

TREATMENT OPTIONS

There's no one-size-fits-all fix for ADHD, but most patients benefit from a combination of prescription drugs and therapy. "Medication won't treat your core problems, such as being disorganized or having a tendency to procrastinate, but it can help you pay attention and focus so that your mind isn't wandering so much and information is more likely to stick," says Craig Surman, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Fast Minds: How to Thrive If You Have ADHD (Or Think You Might)* (Berkley Trade; 2014). While a pill won't cure you, it can treat ADHD traits, making it easier for you to implement various coping strategies.

The most commonly prescribed medications for ADHD are stimulants, such as Adderall, Concerta, and Vyvanse, which work by raising dopamine levels in the brain. Regardless of whether you take medication, you should plan on working closely with a therapist or ADHD coach; these professionals can help you figure out how to manage your time, become more organized, and set priorities. They should also be able to address mood problems, such as depression or anxiety, that often go hand in hand with ADHD.