

# Awakening the

By Dona Witten, PhD

**AS THE PARENT OF A CHILD WITH ADHD,** you want one thing: That the child you love so much—yet who drives you nearly crazy—can someday make it on his or her own. All parents dream their children will have a life that does not require parental, scholastic, therapeutic, and eventually even spousal support to keep them organized and on track.

For your child, teen, and eventual adult this means developing emotional and behavioral self-regulation mechanisms that will sustain him or her for a lifetime. As our understanding of ADHD and executive functioning grows, it's clear that many, if not most, children and teens don't

to motivate and inspire as it is teach self-regulation and organizational skills. The sad truth is that children and teens with ADHD hear far too many negative messages about themselves. These messages carry forward into adulthood as internalized voices of failure and dependency that rob otherwise brilliant and inquisitive

outgrow their impulsiveness, inattentiveness, and other executive functioning limitations. Rather, the characteristics of the ADHD mind continue to affect behaviors and attitudes counterproductively through the entire lifespan. For our offspring to prosper and become truly independent, they need to develop emotional and behavioral self-regulation patterns that will carry them through their own lifetimes and eventually into their children's lifetimes. This is especially true given that so often ADHD is multigenerational.

As an ADHD coach, I strive to teach life skills, including self-regulation. I also strive to counter some of the negative messages my young clients so often receive from their environment. As an unabashed advocate for their goodness and intrinsic value, it is as much my role

minds of confidence and self-esteem. As an ADHD coach, one of my roles is to provide a new voice to counter the negative messages.

As we transition through life, we move through roles as students, workers, spouses, parents, caregivers, and on and on. Each role carries with it different responsibilities—and different challenges for the ADHD mind. Keeping this in mind, it is important for me to work with my clients to develop not only the behavioral skills that will get them through this year's essay-style tests but also to develop the more generalized skills and attitudes that will be transferable to a variety of situations throughout their lifespan.

I call this second kind of work "awakening the inner coach." What I strive to achieve with my clients is the development of a level of self-awareness and insight that will allow them to identify situations that require self-regulation and then to apply the appropriate self-regulatory mechanisms—all on their own. Rather than having my voice pointing out areas for improvement and suggesting self-improvement practices, I work with them to internalize this process, to become their own coach whispering in their ear the very same messages I have been offering them.

# Inner Coach

## Awakening Phillip's inner coach

Phillip could be typical of many of the teens and young adults with whom I work. A second-year freshman at a premier college, Phillip has a dazzlingly brilliant mind that finds connections everywhere. His mind works at blazing speed and he impulsively follows every new thread of thought.

When our weekly coaching calls begin, it is pretty difficult to get a word in edgewise. When Phillip starts talking about his homework assignments, he quickly transitions into ideas about what he is studying, the instructor's teaching style, doing homework at Starbucks, coffee versus tea in the afternoon, the cupholder in his car, how things are going with his roommate. He does all this seemingly without catching a breath and completely oblivious to his effect on me, the other person in the "conversation." I do my best to interrupt this stream of unconsciousness and remind him to come back to the topic at hand. I do this gently but persistently, over and over again, as part of our coaching conversations and his skills development. The coaching role allows me to do this without judgment.

Learning to self-regulate his thinking processes is critical to Phillip's academic as well as his interpersonal success. For example, as we take a closer look at his very low scores on written exams, we discover that when he begins writing his response, his mind runs away with him—just as it does in our conversations. He can write for half an hour without realizing that he is so far off topic that his sentences have no connection whatsoever to the original question.

Clearly, having my voice in his ear telling him to "come back" is useful during our coaching calls. But how can Phillip develop the self-regulation necessary to "speak" the same messages to himself when I'm not around—when he's sitting for an exam, or (assuming he completes college) making a meeting presentation at the job of his choice? How do we awaken Phillip's inner coach?

The first step is developing self-awareness. That is, Phillip will not be able to interrupt his wandering thought processes until he can develop awareness that his thoughts are wandering *as it happens*. He must acquire the ability to be aware in the present moment. This is mindfulness.

We start small. This is the key for anyone with a mind like Phillip's. Even though Phillip is using a planning book for the big things, it's the small stuff that often trips him up. So every day I ask him to spend one or two minutes doing what I call Reflective Planning. First, he does a breathing practice—five slow, deep breaths in through the nose and

out through the mouth. He focuses on clearing the clutter out of his mind. Then I ask him to close his eyes and contemplate the coming day. What will happen? What might happen? What shouldn't happen? Gently, gently, gently... he can decide when and where to do the practice. Every day or two I send him a text message reminding him to do his Reflective Planning practice.

Phillip continues the practice for three or four weeks. Then something magical happens. During a coaching call, we discuss his dramatically improving grades including those on written exams. And then he starts wandering off into other topics again. But before I could use our phrase "come back," he stops himself. "Hey, I was off topic again, wasn't I? Sorry about that," he says. This occurs a few more times during our conversation, indicating Phillip's increased self-awareness and ability to regulate his own behavior. His inner coach is beginning to speak in his ear.

So what happens next? First, we agree that Reflective Planning should become a lifetime practice. Phillip is so pleased with himself. He has gained some small amount of control over his life—and with so small an effort. Over the next few weeks we work on sustaining his daily Reflective Planning practice. We

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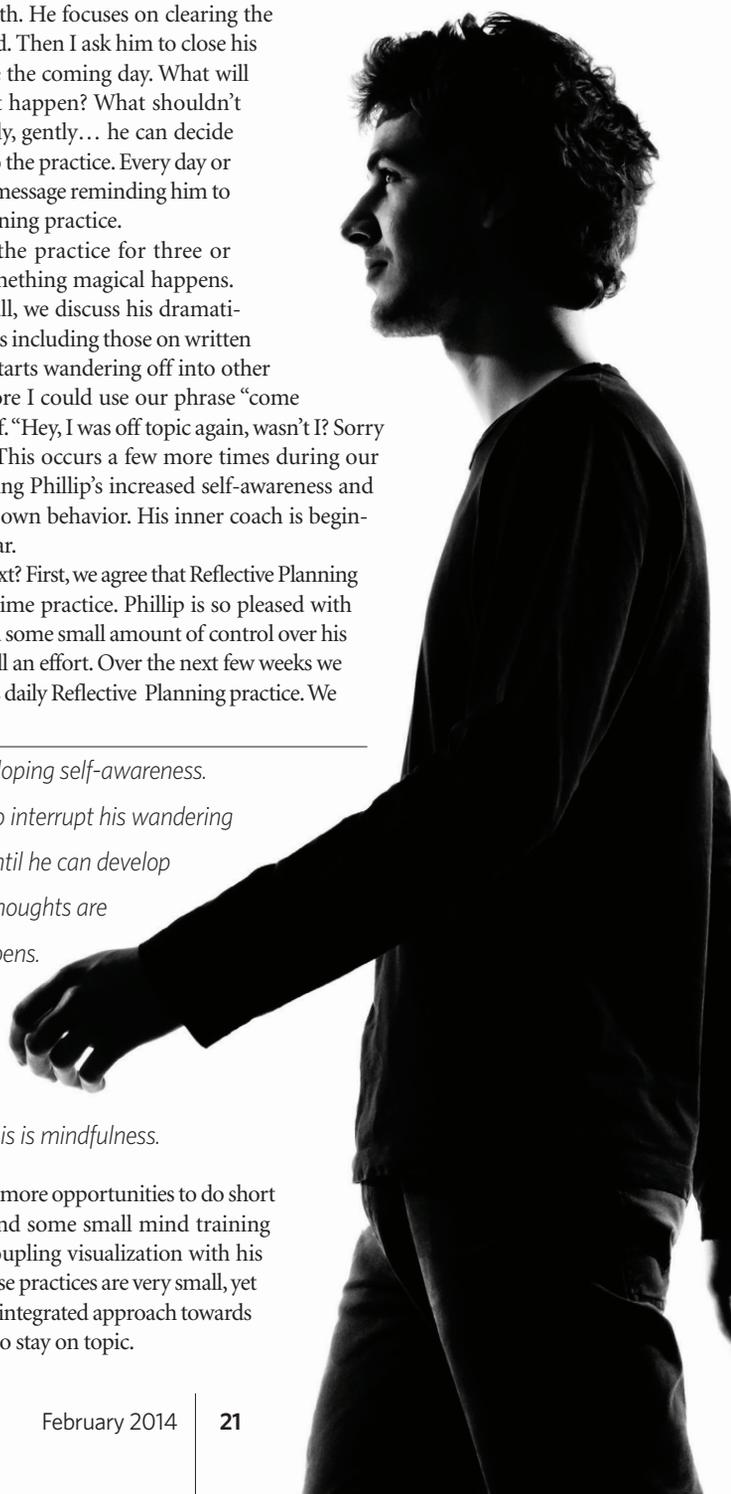
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also start adding a few more opportunities to do short breathing practices and some small mind training practices related to coupling visualization with his study habits. All of these practices are very small, yet together they form an integrated approach towards improving his ability to stay on topic.





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Over the weeks our coaching conversations slowly begin to change. First, they actually become conversations. We dialogue. Phillip continues to bring himself back whenever he wanders off topic. It becomes a bit of playfulness. Then, one of the key benefits of mindfulness and mind training practices—insight—begins to activate. Insight is one of the benefits that come from a consistent mindfulness practice, no matter how small.

Soon Phillip and I start having coaching sessions during which Phillip might say something like, “Hey, you know, I figured out that people have been telling me all my life that I never actually finish a thought in a conversation. Now I know what they mean. It’s like now I can see it.” Phillip is beginning to develop insights into his self-limiting behaviors. He is beginning to recognize what he needs to do to change them. The voice of his inner coach is growing stronger.

### **Moving toward independence**

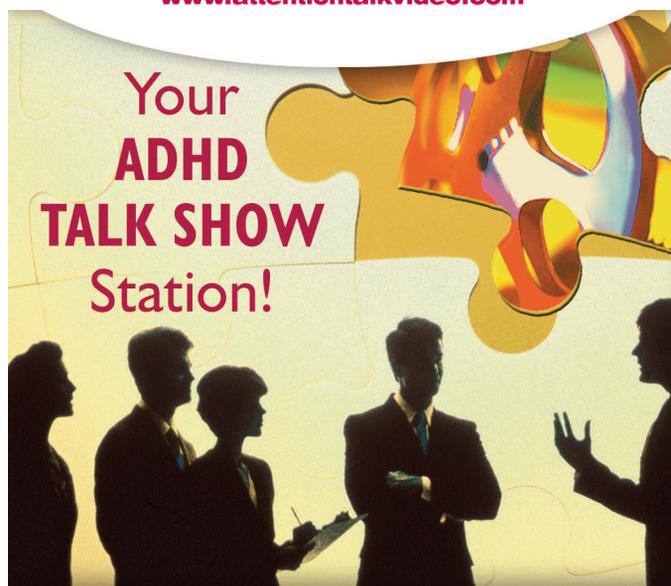
As we continue to work together, my role becomes one of partner. As a coach I take great care to maintain the balance between just enough support and just enough letting go. Sometimes I make recommendations. But increasingly it is Phillip who is able to do his own problem solving. I continue to reinforce his mindfulness practices with well-placed reminders, but these too are becoming less necessary. Phillip is becoming more independent of me. We begin to talk about how to phase out our relationship.

As Phillip continues to develop through his lifetime there will be other self-limiting behaviors that he will want to work on. Perhaps as he moves into the business or professional world he will carry with him a tendency not to let other people finish their thoughts before he jumps into the conversation with his own ideas.

Phillip can, of course, continue to work with me or another coach to help point out to him how self-limiting these behaviors are. But he can also continue to expand the reach of his inner coach. He can do this by expanding his self-awareness to include not only awareness of how he is behav-

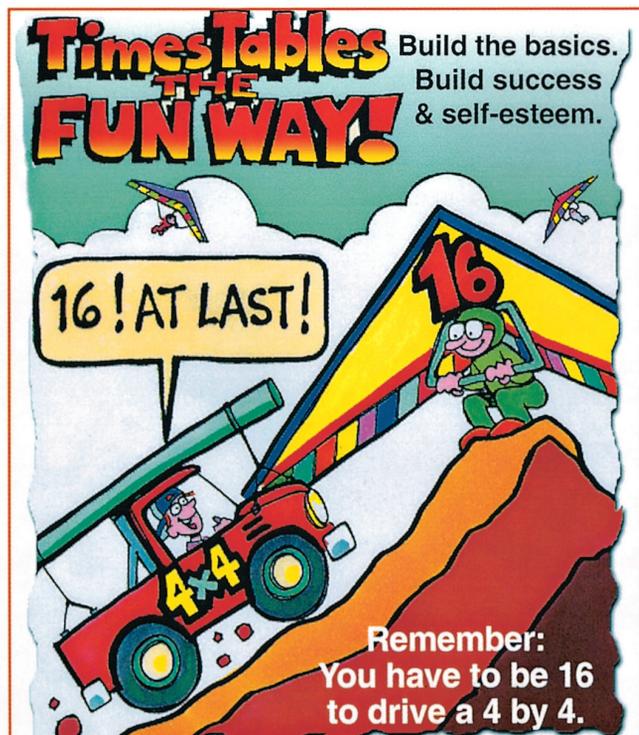
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# Parent to Parent

ing but also awareness of how other people are responding to his behavior. He can expand the reach of his self-awareness.

In the case of having a tendency to interrupt other people's conversations, he can begin to develop awareness of what is happening around him. Perhaps he notices some annoyance on the face of someone in a meeting. Perhaps someone in irritation even says, "Please let me finish." Perhaps someone else interrupts him while he is speaking.

Once he recognizes the behavior he wants to change, he can develop a behavior modification plan on his own. Perhaps he can develop his own phrase to work with; "patience, patience, patience," for example. Perhaps he can even develop a behavior modification plan that includes saying this phrase to himself each time he wants to blurt something out. Phillip will have figured out how to approach the problem and develop his own solution. Well done, Phillip!

For us as observers, there are two points very important to keep in mind as we follow Phillip's journey to independence. Phillip's ADHD still remains. He is still impulsive. His mind still wants to race away with him. He still has a tendency to be forgetful. Planning will never be his favorite activity. But he now has self-awareness. Now, as he sees himself engaging in self-limiting behaviors, he can catch himself and apply remedies. Second, in the beginning Phillip does need support to guide him through the process. His coach guides him first by providing highly directive support and then gradually working with a lighter and lighter touch as Phillip's inner coach awakens.

There's no escaping that it is a long journey. But if Phillip maintains his mindfulness practices he will be able to carry this inner coach with him for a lifetime. He will have achieved what his parents wanted for him when he was a child—emotional and behavioral independence. 

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**Dona Witten, PhD**, is a psychologist and ADHD coach located in the Northern Virginia and Washington, DC, area. She has over forty years of experience as a meditation practitioner. She specializes in integrating aspects of mindfulness and mind training into her ADHD coaching practice. Witten is the coauthor of *Enlightened Management: A Compassionate Guide to Working with People*. Her newest book is *Beyond Mindfulness: Mind Training for a World with a Short Attention Span*.



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