

A man with short, spiky hair, glasses, and a beard is looking directly at the camera with a questioning expression. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt. The background is a textured, greyish wall.

Have  
You  
Noticed

**You're  
Not Good  
at Noticing?**

by Owen W. Mason, MD

**C**OMING TO THE REALIZATION that one probably has ADHD can be dastardly hard. I'm not talking about the diagnostic process itself, with its forms and computer tests of attention and hours of interviews. Neither is this about the laborious process of finding someone who diagnoses ADHD, works with your insurance company, and can see you within six months. This is about the come-to-Jesus moment when our excuses fail, we finally admit that (for sure) *something* is wrong, and form the first real conviction to stop procrastinating about the procrastinating. It's the figuring-out-that-we-even-need-to-start-the-diagnosis-process moment that is so tricky. If you've crossed this threshold yourself or witnessed someone else do it, you've been party to something of a miracle.

How is it possible to be born with a disorder that is well known and common but isn't diagnosed in many cases until adulthood? In my own case, it took more than forty years plus some seriously good luck to realize I had ADHD and needed to see someone. To reach this point, I had to notice how bad I was at noticing. Just how does one notice he is navigating in the fog, if he's never seen the sunlight? And to make the whole catch-22 a bit more perverse, one of the attentional abilities impaired in ADHD is the clarity of self-observation. I was driving in the fog and my glasses were steamed up, too? Shucks, I never noticed that, either!

### Impaired self-awareness

Self-awareness is the remarkable ability that allows us to see both inside and outside ourselves. Russ Barkley calls it the vital starting point for all executive function. Not only do we experience inner thoughts and feelings, but we can listen to our own words, watch our reflection in a mirror, and "read" feedback from others to construct an image of our external selves. Our imagination can assemble these to let us "see ourselves as others see us." Self-awareness is the tool that we use to develop our self-concept, including our sense of our strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness is how we notice things that go wrong and that need professional medical attention. But what happens when self-awareness itself is impaired?

I was fortunate that my wife, Chris, helped me recognize my own ADHD. I wrote about the come-to-Jesus moment in my book, *Reaching for a New Potential*. The moment occurred during a period of time when we were struggling to respond to the recent ADHD diagnosis of our eight-year-old son, Ben:

First, [Chris] noticed that I did not study well. We would be reading and discussing some aspect of childhood ADHD, and in the midst of it she might look over and find me reading the latest *Time* magazine. Something important needed attention, but I could not attend to it.

Second, she noticed that I was terrible at follow-through. This was not a ground-shaking surprise for her. We were married for eighteen years then, and I had been bad at it for all eighteen. She had reached some peace with her disappointment that I could not follow through out of love for her. But it truly surprised her that I also couldn't step up to the plate when our son's well-being was on the line.

Finally, she noticed that everything that she read about ADHD applied not only to Ben, but to me as well. This fact had not escaped my notice either and probably explained my need to put down books about ADHD and pick up almost anything else within reach—*Runner's World* magazine, overdue bills, kitchenware catalogues, anything. One night Chris asked me to read a certain chapter in one of our books so that we could discuss it. I put it down halfway through and picked up something else.

"Why won't you read that?" she asked.

"It hits too close to home," I said with rare honesty.

"Then when are you going to get diagnosed?" she countered.

I was a family doctor who had spent several months intensively studying ADHD, and it *still* took someone else to help me overcome my defensiveness and admit that I had it.



### **A different experience**

Another person's story illustrates this dilemma from a different angle. BJ was a thirtysomething married salesman, and he had a very compelling case of not noticing his own poor noticing. He was seeing me for the first time to find out whether he had ADHD.

When I asked him how often he had trouble losing or misplacing things, he replied that he *never* did. Even though he struggled with most aspects of attention and organization, at least he never misplaced things. In a separate interview, his wife reported that he *frequently* misplaced things. Every day—sometimes several times in a day—he would need her help to find his shoes, coat, wallet, or keys. BJ did, in fact, have ADHD, and we found a medication that significantly improved his attention, but he also had a complaint about the medication that I had never heard before.

“You know what's strange, doc? The med really helps my attention, and I like that, but there's one big problem with it. This stuff actually makes me *dis-organized*.”

It is rare for an ADHD medication to worsen attention, especially just one symptom, so I asked for an example.

“Three different times this past week, my wife had to stand around and wait for me to leave the house after she was ready, while I searched everywhere for something I still needed like my wallet or keys. This is new, and it's embarrassing. I've never had problems with this before.”

This was still puzzling... simultaneous improvement and worsening of attention? Did he think it was pronounced enough that his wife would have noticed it? “Ask her,” he said as he motioned toward the phone. So I called her, somewhat sheepishly, expecting to get chewed out for worsening her husband's challenges.

Her voice on the phone was upbeat. To my relief, she sounded clearly excited. “BJ is so much better! I used to have to wait for him to find his wallet or keys *every* time we went *anywhere*. But this medication is really helping him, in fact, the past week, it only happened three times!”

For BJ, it was a very profound “Aha!” moment. He finally noticed how poorly he had been noticing. It took him a few minutes to absorb the implications. And then it took a few months with a therapist to rethink his self-concept. What other blunders and weaknesses were invisible to him

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but obvious to others? What else hadn't he noticed that he needed to see? Socrates famously said, "Know thyself." Step number one in that process is, "Notice thyself."

Certain quirks of language and logic result in a small group of yes-or-no questions with meaningless answers. "Do you always tell lies?" is properly answered "No" by both honest people and liars. "Do you drink too much?" is answered "No" by both teetotalers and alcoholics in denial. "Have you noticed you're not good at noticing?" is also one of these questions. People with good self-awareness and people with poor self-awareness will properly answer the question, "No."

#### **Improving self-awareness**

Fortunately, there are several therapies that consistently lead to demonstrable improvements in self-awareness. Medications have long been known to improve self-awareness and remain the gold standard for therapy. However, recent studies have shown that both cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness training have benefits when used alone, but are even more beneficial when combined with medication.

Fifteen years ago, my wife kindly pointed out that she had noticed I was bad at noticing. I hadn't noticed any problems there. It was hard not to take the observation as an insult, and it took me a few months to process it. It took a fair measure of trust in her to believe that she might know more about a part of my internal workings than I did. And it took some faith that there might be a place in the world with less fog and more sunlight than I had ever seen.

Having your self-concept shredded and then rebuilding it is a major life undertaking. People who think ADHD treatments are no more than a quick shortcut to better focus are missing most of the big picture. For many of us, treatment is the doorway to a world rich with sunlight, a world where both strengths and weaknesses stand out sharply, where shame is less hidden and progress more visible. And who could love sunlight more than someone who has spent so many years in the fog? 🌞

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