

My Perspective on ADHD

DIAGNOSED IN 1990, I grew up in an environment where even the existence of ADHD was highly debated. With medical research on ADHD still in its infancy, the diagnosis provided as many questions as answers. I was forced to understand and manage my ADHD on my own. Over the past 25 years, I have had both academic and professional success—including an undergraduate degree, two graduate programs, and a CPA license, all of which I accomplished without special accommodations.

Only now, at age 33, have I stopped to acknowledge my ADHD, educate myself, and reflect on how it has impacted my life. I feel the behaviors associated with ADHD as defined by the medical community are correct, but from the perspective of observable actions instead of an understanding of the triggers that cause these behaviors. As someone who has managed his ADHD and achieved a high level of success, my goal is to provide insight and provide perspective on a diagnosis that is far too often perceived as a limitation. Once I understood what triggered my behaviors, I was able to make the necessary changes to allow me to be successful at anything.

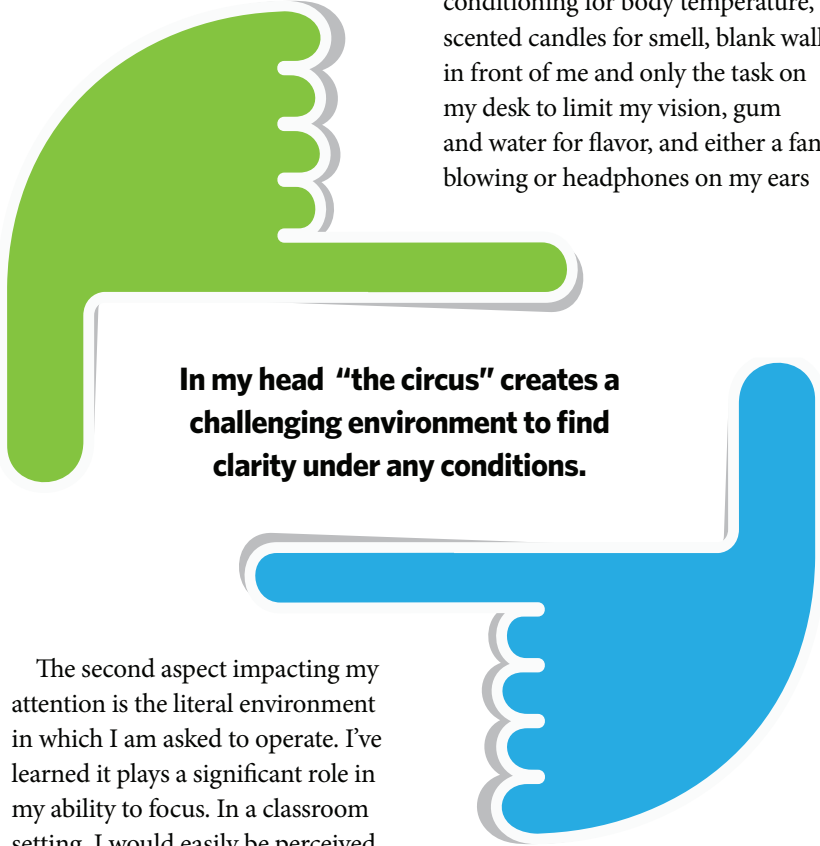
Inattention

To understand why someone would be described as inattentive, you first have to understand the environment in which he operates. I call the first aspect of my environment “the circus” in my head. I imagine that someone without ADHD closes their eyes in a quiet room and it’s,

well, silent. Despite what’s going on around me, there is another world in my head that includes a Ferris wheel, clowns, carnival games, and an up-tempo soundtrack. As a child, it was as if my classes were held in the middle of a circus every day. In the absence of external distractions, I can easily become distracted by the circus in my head when I become bored.

class. More than likely, the child will have difficulty focusing on the lesson as he becomes aware of more surrounding noises. For me, this is every day—and all five of my senses are amplified, not just my hearing.

During my graduate programs, I spent a significant amount of time studying. I learned to create an environment that met my needs: air conditioning for body temperature, scented candles for smell, blank walls in front of me and only the task on my desk to limit my vision, gum and water for flavor, and either a fan blowing or headphones on my ears



In my head “the circus” creates a challenging environment to find clarity under any conditions.

The second aspect impacting my attention is the literal environment in which I am asked to operate. I’ve learned it plays a significant role in my ability to focus. In a classroom setting, I would easily be perceived as inattentive, but I believe my cornerstone characteristic is hypersensitivity to my environment.

Any change in one’s environment would trigger one to investigate and possibly lose focus. For me, however, these changes are magnified. Imagine you gave a child without hearing problems two hearing aids before

to block out sound. I knew I was hypersensitive; once I put myself in the right environment, I suddenly became effective and productive.

To operate in that world, I had to manage my hypersensitivity instead of leveraging it as a talent. When I entered the work force, my hypersensitivity became a valuable asset.

I thrived as a project leader. I understood my audiences and was able to engender the trust of leadership and my staff.

Hyperactivity and impulsivity

Hyperactivity and impulsive behaviors are also commonly associated with ADHD. In the classroom setting, these are often described as “frequently leaves desk,” acts as if “driven by motor,” “talks excessively,” and “interrupts others.”

The primary driver of hyperactive behavior is what I can only describe as sporadic rushes of energy, almost like electricity rushing through my body randomly throughout the day. I imagine it's similar to the feeling you get after drinking a six-pack of energy drinks, except I don't have control over when it comes. I feel instantly amplified and can't stop physically moving. The result in a restrictive environment is an uncomfortable and awkward feeling. You may have felt similar feelings during a difficult conversation; you just want it to be over so you can escape.

When the energy hits, the idea of being calm or patient seems as obtainable as having the power to fly. The energy speeds up my brain and pace of thinking. If I can keep up I am a superstar, and if not, I get overwhelmed. At my best, I operate at a fast pace and outperform my peers. At my worst, I rush, get easily confused, and become unproductive. Juggling my education, career, and personal life, I would frequently rush myself to the point of frustration. Sometimes I would realize after reading several pages that I hadn't retained anything. In an effort to move on to the next task, I was reading the beginning and ending of sentences and moving on. My pace had exceeded my brain, and I had to slow myself down before I could complete any task.

Impulsive behaviors, like many of our behaviors, are perceived behaviors resulting from deeper underlying issues. To understand what drives my impulsive

behavior, you simply need to appreciate my decision-making environment. In my head “the circus” creates a challenging environment to find clarity under any conditions. Add on the influence of my external environment as I constantly battle distractions. Finally, throughout the day I ride a roller coaster of energy, both emotionally and physically. With each burst of energy, the circus in my head speeds up, the Ferris wheel spins faster, and the result is a volatile environment where thinking before I act becomes difficult.

For me, focusing on managing my environment—while understanding and appreciating “the circus” in my head and my rushes of energy—gives me knowledge to prepare myself to be successful. Believing I'm simply inattentive, hyperactive, and

impulsive is limiting. Plus, it's an ambiguous battle to fight.

How adults with ADHD describe and educate others about ADHD needs to evolve. The phrase “attention deficit” makes me cringe as much today as it did the first day I was told about my ADHD. By forcing the idea that we have a disability, the medical community is doing as much psychological harm as good. Had I bought into that view I likely would not have had the success I've enjoyed. I fear we may be unintentionally introducing children to self-limiting behaviors. With a community of experienced adults with ADHD to provide a better understanding, we need to begin to rethink the message we are sending. 🗣️

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