

Can You Be the Parent of a Child with ADHD...
and



Still Be Happy?

by Marie S. Paxson

WHEN OUR CHADD CHAPTER PRESENTED THIS TOPIC, MEETING ATTENDANCE DOUBLED.

Ironically, without coordinator's expert leadership, it could have become one of our gloomiest meetings. Managing unhappiness is one of the keys to increasing happiness.

You should know that I'm the parent of two young adults with ADHD. Here's the way I describe my parenting journey: You know that chart of all the bad things that can happen to young people with ADHD? With a few exceptions, my kids used it as some sort of to-do list. Several troubling incidents happened after the age of eighteen, which meant that protections in place for minors had expired. I believe these difficult episodes reinforce the theory that those with ADHD may have a thirty percent lag in brain development.

Managing unhappiness

Some of the lessons I've learned and insights I've gained about managing unhappiness may be helpful for you.

- During difficult times, is aiming for happiness even realistic? When leaving the courthouse after my children's legal woes (yes, that is plural), it was not appropriate to cheer myself up. Some things are just sad or upsetting. Learning to stay in uncomfortable moments is not instinctive. It was much easier to go to my favorite vices, like distracting myself by meddling, uninvited, into other people's business. I had to learn techniques to "sit with the sadness."
- If you are in a truly miserable situation, read the sidebar on radical self-care. You may want to tackle a problem immediately, but it is better to stabilize yourself before taking part in tough decisions or difficult conversations.
- Connect with others in a similar situation. You will probably have to look outside your circle of friends who are raising neurotypical children. Having understanding and supportive friends provides many benefits. Make this a priority. (See the article by Woodhouse & Vincent.)

One Mother's Day, my best friend and I didn't like how our teens were treating us. So, we went to a local restaurant for brunch together. Yes, it was odd being surrounded by happy moms and grandmoms receiving flowers and adulation from their families. But since that was not our experience, we celebrated our ability to rise above it all. Jill and I ended up giggling and feeling so grateful we could count on each other. (We met at a CHADD meeting, by the way.)

- Adjust your expectations. I like the saying "Don't go to the hardware store for a loaf of bread." This means having reasonable expectations and not expecting actions that are beyond our children's *current* capabilities. If our children will struggle with forgetfulness, lack of focus, or impulsive behavior, why do we get annoyed when they display these traits? Recognizing that they are a work in progress provides perspective. Realizing that they pay a bigger price than we do for their difficulties invites compassion.
- Avoid braggy parents who have "perfect" children. You are NEVER stuck with these folks; you have choices. In their company, fake a lost phone or stomach distress. Get away from them as soon as you can. Sometimes braggers do this because they miscalculate their audience. Sometimes they are taking credit for their child's

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accomplishments. Sometimes they are lying. The reasons don't matter. Just like baseball players don't swing the bat at every pitch, you don't have to listen to every story they share about their fabulous children.

As you add more happiness to your life, you will develop greater tolerance and may even appreciate other children's accomplishments. But if you aren't there yet, don't make yourself miserable... RUN. As you are running, send the bragger a warm (not smug) thought. Sooner or later, all children make disappointing decisions and these parents do not have the coping skills or resilience that you have acquired.

- Don't overdo the parental sacrificing. All parents give up time, energy, and money. If you feel resentful about missing a favorite aspect of your life, that is a sign that you have scaled back too much.

Becoming happier

Here are some ways to become happier while raising challenging children. These suggestions may feel contrived. We all want happiness to just appear as needed, but it doesn't work that way. Genuinely happy people invite it in and make room for it.

Elements of ongoing happiness and contentment include gratitude, spirituality, and pleasant memories.

Let's start with gratitude. Ugh—right? I'm not a sunshine-and-rainbows kind of gal. I embrace my tendency towards snark, since I'm not mean spirited. But it is hard to argue with the scientific evidence that gratitude increases one's ability to be happy. (See the article by Emmons & McCollough.) Research also suggests that expressing gratitude should be done frequently, not just while one is unhappy.

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Here's what I do, since smelling the roses doesn't come naturally to me. On a regular basis, I express gratitude for all of the near misses in my daily life. My dog didn't chase that jogger? Check. Spilled beverage didn't ruin my paperwork? Check. Husband didn't bring up the topic I asked him to avoid at a party? Check. You get the idea.

This leads us right into spirituality. Research has shown that those with strong faith or spiritual beliefs are happier. If you are part of a faith that you like, you could delve deeper. If aren't finding meaning with your current method, you might consider changing congregations. If you

don't know what you believe, exploring different spiritual paths can be comforting as well as enlightening. The point is to connect with something outside of ourselves.

Another strategy to increase happiness is to think back on a time when you were happy or happiest. What were the elements of that time of your life? Can some be replicated now?

Suppose you recall being really happy at your cousin's wedding. What enjoyable elements were present? The people you were with? Staying at a hotel? Dancing? After identifying this, you can add these as "essentials" to be enjoyed regularly. If you have adult ADHD, you



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may need to create a reminder to scan your weekly schedule to ensure it includes joyful activities.

The bottom line is that you are going to a parent for a very long time. Your role will not end when your child turns eighteen, twenty-one, or even thirty, although your daily involvement will change. Making the effort to increase your happiness will maintain your health and improve your ability to problem solve, which will pay off for your entire family. 🧘

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Woodhouse & Vincent, 2006. Information provided by peers is often seen to be more credible than that provided by mental health professionals. Peer Support and Peer Providers: Redefining Mental Health Recovery, SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) ADS Center Archived training teleconference <http://promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov/teleconferences/archive/training/teleconference09212010.aspx>

Emmons RA, McCullough ME. Counting blessings versus burdens: an experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2003 Feb;84(2):377-89. <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/pdfs/GratitudePDFs/6Emmons-BlessingsBurdens.pdf>

OR <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12585811>

Attention connection, CHADD's online communities. Great place to connect with other parents facing similar challenges. <http://www.chadd.org/Support/Attention-Connection.aspx>

The Movement of Imperfection: Shut Up About Your Perfect Kid. <http://www.shutupabout.com/>



RADICAL SELF-CARE

What Is It?

Popular culture describes radical self-care as making a priority of stress reduction and engaging in enjoyable activities. It is moving self-care to the top of your to-do list. It means dropping everything and putting your needs first.

Why do it? It seems counterintuitive to do relaxing or interesting activities during a crisis. But radical self-care can break the cycle of obsessive thoughts and useless worry. It can restore balance to your thoughts and prevent erosion of your general health. Also, do you want your children to remember you as a depleted, frazzled parent with weak coping skills? Do you want them to think that is an appropriate response to life's difficulties?

Look online for examples. The most important aspect is that it is individualized. Don't just follow a list created by others. Do what speaks to YOU.