

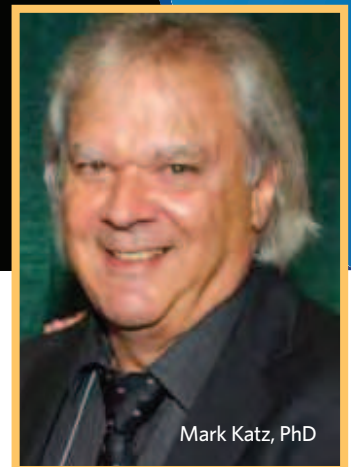


Channeling Your Inner MacGyver

An interview with Mark Katz, PhD, by Marie Paxson

WHETHER YOU'RE NEW TO ADHD OR YOU'VE BEEN AROUND THE BLOCK

a few times, one thing becomes clear: Successfully coping with and managing the disorder requires change. You've got to reset life's autopilot, revise your standard operating procedure manual, and develop a new auto-response.



Mark Katz, PhD

To complicate things, human nature resists change. Behavior experts caution against making sweeping changes to several areas of life simultaneously, as this is not sustainable, and you will often resume familiar habits within three weeks.

The best way to create new patterns is to seek guidance from experts as well as to discuss what you have learned with peers. Featuring more than eighty-five authors and experts in the field of ADHD, CHADD's upcoming annual conference in San Francisco will bring opportunities for both.

The keynote address by Mark Katz, PhD, will surely be one of the highlights. A clinical and consulting psychologist based in San Diego, California, he is the author of *On Playing a Poor Hand Well*, which details lessons learned by people who have overcome adverse childhood experiences. He

has served as the director of Learning Development Services in San Diego for the past thirty years. *Attention* readers know him as the contributing editor behind the magazine's Promising Practices column.

So, what will you gain from his message? Quite simply, an opportunity to look at your own life experiences to see how you've been influenced by them.

While we are all unique individuals, there are many common themes in the ADHD community. Some experiences have left their fingerprints on us and we might not even realize it. After all, when faced with making changes to our lives, we inherently resist these changes. Or we overdo it and create something so complicated it becomes impossible to stick with. It takes insight and reassurance to make changes that are effective and long-lasting.

Katz will encourage each of us to channel our inner MacGyver.

A condition sensitive to context

Throughout his career, one of Katz's main interests has been to "stay abreast of advances in our understanding of human resilience, and also advances in our understanding of the limits of emotional endurance."

"We now know that for those who managed to rebound from a difficult past, an important part of their successful journey involved their ability to see their personal challenges in a new light," he explained. "The meaning we attach to the challenges we experience often determines whether or not we see ourselves as resilient human beings."

Katz noted that this is not just an internal process: "But we also now know that the meaning others attach to the challenges we experience influences the meaning we attach to these same challenges. We see ourselves through the eyes of others, especially when we're young."

He warned that misinterpreting ADHD behaviors in others can have a strong negative impact on those individuals.

"If you believe that those struggling with ADHD are struggling as a result of some type of character flaw, or the result of laziness or personal weakness or lack of resilience, those with ADHD may come to view themselves this way as well," he said. "And what our misjudgments have done in the process is take away one of the most important ingredients we know of for rising above a difficult past—learning to see adversity in a new light. Human understanding plays a very important role in rising above life's challenges, ADHD included."

Increasing human understanding is a good starting point, but can be easier said than done. The very name of the disorder is confusing, "because people with ADHD pay attention so well when they're interested in what they're doing," said Katz. What researchers have learned about the role of executive functions has helped a lot. Particularly helpful is the growing understanding of how EF challenges can impact daily tasks and how strategies, tools, technologies, and accommodations can offset those challenges.

Recalling that a wise person once remarked that the beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right name, he said: "A lot of us in the field know that the name attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder doesn't truly capture the struggles and the suffering that so many people with ADHD have endured over the years."

"In helping people with ADHD, we focus a lot on finding or creating situations that maximize strengths and accommodate challenges," said Katz. "It's hard to find a condition more sensitive to context than ADHD."

"We know so many people who struggled in one work setting but succeeded in another, and so many children who struggled in one school but did well in another," he explained. "If you struggle with dyslexia we can see your reading problems wherever you try to read, regardless of the setting. With ADHD, on the other hand, it can be a very different story."

How one views oneself and one's abilities

"People with ADHD can often do difficult intellectual or creative things easily, but find what many other people think of as easy to be difficult," said Katz.



"Our misjudgments... take away one of the most important ingredients we know of for rising above a difficult past—learning to see adversity in a new light," said Katz. "Human understanding plays a very important role in rising above life's challenges, ADHD included."

"Think about this for minute: If we do difficult things easily, then shouldn't easy things be even easier if we just try harder? But what if that's not entirely true? What if it's not quite that simple? Actually, it's paradoxically uneven learning and behavioral profiles like these that got me wondering about the limits of emotional endurance."

Katz is keenly interested in the lives of people who struggled in school as children but are succeeding at life as adults. "I can think of one person I recently interviewed in particular, in his forties, doing very well, who also recently learned he had ADHD," he said. "If we put him back in seventh grade tomorrow he would have the same problems in school that he had thirty years ago. What's different about him today is that he feels like he has something important to contribute to the world."

"He didn't feel that he mattered much back in school," Katz continued. "Today he also believes that his actions control his outcomes. If he works hard, doesn't give up and learns from his mistakes, he believes that he'll achieve what he sets out to achieve. During his years in school he believed just the opposite. Back then, there was a disconnect between how he viewed his actions and the resulting outcome of his actions. In his mind at least, trying harder didn't result in doing better."

Based on such life stories, Katz began asking, "How can we provide people struggling with ADHD, school-age children included, access to experiences that this successful person in his forties experiences daily, so that people with ADHD can enjoy similar views of themselves and their abilities?" He will share during his address that, "in exploring answers, I think we've arrived at several important lessons learned, among them, *'There is never anything so wrong with us that what's right with us can't fix.'*" And this lesson will be the title of his keynote talk at the conference.

Reflecting on CHADD's twenty-fifth anniversary, Katz said he considers it "the organization that I look to for answers on how best to help those with ADHD learn to see ADHD in a hopeful new light. CHADD has probably done more to remove shame and blame from the lives of those impacted by ADHD than any other organization in the world."

"If anyone reading this also happens to be in the audience during my presentation in San Francisco and also has ADHD, let me pass on this final comment, one that I often make to those attending the ADHD meetings we hold at our center in San Diego," he said. "If, while you're sitting there listening to me, your cell phone accidentally goes off, you have to leave because you can't sit still for so long, you show up late, show up on the wrong day, or you happen to doze off, wake up and doze off again, it's okay—so long as you promise me one thing."

"When these things happen, promise me that you won't feel embarrassed or ashamed of yourself," said Katz, "not at a CHADD conference, and especially not at this presentation. Promise me that you'll focus instead on all the ways that people with ADHD, children included, are learning to carve out better lives. And there's no organization that I know of in the world better equipped to help you learn about these ways than CHADD." ●