



“You’re  
*Different,*  
Not  
Defective”

## Actress Wendy Davis Has a Message About ADHD

**B**est known for her portrayal of Colonel Joan Burton for seven seasons on *Army Wives*, Wendy Davis believes people can be wildly successful while living with ADHD. Her own life is proof. Yet many successful people who have ADHD are silent about it. Davis wants to shift this trend and encourage people to stand up and share their experiences.

“Having ADHD means you are different, not defective,” says Davis. As a child, she struggled through school without a diagnosis or proper educational interventions. While in college, she recognized a career path that complemented how her brain works, enabling her to thrive in her profession.

Davis grew up in Joppatowne, Maryland, a small town near Baltimore. She graduated from Howard University with a degree in theater, and is a member of Delta Sigma Theta, a sorority of college-educated women dedicated to public service.

The actress recently appears as reporter Kimberly Mitchell in ABC’s *Scandal*. Her other television credits include *Commander in Chief*, *Cold Case*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *The District*, *Angel*, *Coach*, *Between Brothers*, *Profiler*, *Smart Guy*, *High Incident*, and *In Living Color*.

In November 2013, Davis will be a plenary speaker at CHADD’s annual conference in Crystal City, Virginia. The organization recently declared her an ADHD Champion. Readers can follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @wendyDofficial. Wendy Davis recently shared her ADHD journey with Susan Buningh, executive editor of *Attention Magazine*.

### **SUSAN BUNINGH: What is your ADHD story?**

**WENDY DAVIS:** Well, it began the same way it starts for many people. I began to struggle in school and had trouble focusing on my work in class. Unfortunately, I wasn’t formally diagnosed with ADHD until I was well into adulthood. My grades reflected my inability to focus, which greatly affected my self-esteem in a profoundly negative

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIFETIME



Wendy Davis starred in Lifetime's *ArmyWives* as Col. Joan Burton, a decorated war hero, wife, and mother.

way. I secretly believed that I was stupid, and this disempowering belief hindered my attempts at academic excellence. I thought, "Why try? I won't succeed." Thus I didn't.

I struggled through primary school with Cs and the occasional D, and had absolutely no ambition for my future. Then, in my senior year, I was stage manager for the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*. I'll never forget the moment I thought, "What a magical world. I want to do this; I want to be an actress." You see, acting was active, animated, and always changing, which suited my ADHD mind. The idea of sitting behind a desk for eight hours a day horrified me. So, I chose to study theater in college, and my life changed.

I became obsessively passionate about acting and I began to excel. This was a new experience for me in an academic setting. I went from a kid who was in danger of giving up on school altogether to an honor roll student on an academic scholarship. My self-confidence began to grow. I found a profession that really utilized the creative side of my ADHD brain. Surprisingly, I had an easier time developing my acting skills than many of my classmates. It was exciting being at the head of my academic class. My self-esteem was growing, but deep down inside, I still secretly believed that I was stupid, so my ambition was dampened.

One day, after tearfully revealing to a close friend my deep dark secret that I was "not smart" (I laugh about it now), she said, "You're different, not defective." That simple phrase changed my life. In that moment I became whole and empowered. You see, before that moment, I believed I was defective, broken at the core. Afterward, I believed that I was different, and different is not better or worse, it's just different. "Different

not defective" restored my self-esteem. From that point on, I believed that I could be as successful as anyone else if I was willing to work hard. ADHD would no longer stop me.

#### **When did you first learn that you have ADHD?**

I didn't learn that I had ADHD until my daughter was diagnosed in the second grade. I was already working as a series regular on *Army Wives*, and I was doing well because I had found this amazing career path that really worked for me. I had developed strategies to work around my ADHD. Most of the time I could compensate for my challenges. However, sometimes I struggled with line memorization and focusing on the set when there was lots of action. My diagnosis had another big impact on my life: I found with medication, memorization and on-set focus was greatly improved.

Before my diagnosis, I would fear scenes with large crowds and lots of action. I would obsessively study my lines for days. But no matter how much I studied, I'd still get distracted and occasionally go blank on my lines. When that happened, everyone and everything had to be reset to reshoot the whole scene again. I felt horrible because I couldn't control it. It was frustrating and embarrassing.

Getting diagnosed and treated gave me the opportunity to utilize the medication when I needed to. I could take my medication on big shoot days and have the ability to focus. For me, this was nothing short of a miracle. I'm not a big believer in any kind of repetitive drug use; however, I'm a fan of thriving with ADHD and medication has helped me do that. It's greatly increased my ability to absorb material and focus on set even when there are lots of distractions. I take it when I need a

high level of concentration over an extended period of time. The rest of the time I manage without it. This protocol works well for me.

**How did your parents respond to the problems you had when you were in school?**

I’m so glad you asked that question. Raising a child with undiagnosed ADHD was challenging for my parents. I was a lot to handle. My folks wanted the best for me, but they didn’t know how to support me. Both of my parents come from humble beginnings. They pulled themselves up through education and believed academic achievement was the only way to success. As you can imagine my parents were disappointed with their struggling C student. They just didn’t understand why I couldn’t do better academically.

In elementary school I was labeled as learning disabled. This was a painful pill to swallow for my parents. I could sense their unspoken worry for me. How would their baby make it in the world? I now believe that people learn differently, at different speeds and different rates. That doesn’t make you disabled! Of course, hindsight is 20/20. As you can see, I turned out just fine. My parents and I occasionally laugh and joke about my primary school days as some kind of a bad adventure we all took together and how happy we are that it’s over.

So, for all those parents out there who are freaking out about their child being diagnosed with ADHD and/or with learning disabilities, it’s not the end of the world! Embrace that your child is different. Yes, sometimes that difference is going to be very challenging especially in a traditional school setting. Commit to being your child’s staunchest ally and make sure he or she gets the help he or she needs. Also know that your child is inclined to be very creative and athletically gifted, so focus on what your child is good at. The only reason I kept a C average in high school was so that I could play basketball and softball (I was awesome

that are correctly diagnosed with ADHD, the more support we can get with research, medication, and education.

Lots of people are in denial about ADHD. I’ve met parents who have shared with me about their child’s academic struggles and inability to focus. I asked them, “Hey, have you ever had your kid tested for ADHD?” Some say, “Oh no, no, no, he doesn’t have that,” and I say, “Well, I have ADHD, and I’m watching your son, he looks like he might be part of the family. Maybe you should check it out.” People don’t realize the advantage of diagnosis. Maybe if I come out of the closet, others will too, and together we can remove the negativity surrounding ADHD.

ADHD makes you different, not defective. I want to get that message out there, because often ADHD creates low self-esteem. I want to shift that. I’m not saying it’s an easy road. It can be challenging, but you can create magnificent things. It really boils down to your own paradigm about yourself and the limits you place on yourself. Novelist Richard Bach once said, “Argue for your limitations and surely they will be yours.” I want to show people that ADHD is highly manageable and the limitation we put on ourselves can be overcome.

**How have your colleagues in Hollywood reacted as you’ve disclosed or discussed your ADHD?**

Whenever I reveal I have ADHD to a Hollywood colleague, they often say, “Oh yeah, I’ve got that!” It’s a big secret, until I share with people, and then they feel comfortable sharing their own ADHD story. Hollywood is full of creative people with ADHD. It’s fun to be surrounded by ADHD energy in a creative setting. Never a dull moment, that’s for sure.

**What message would you like to share with adults who don’t understand the difficulties they had in their childhoods or in their lives?**

***Become an ADHD problem solver.***

at both). It sounds ludicrous to me now, but at the time sports was the only thing that kept me from checking out of school completely. Finally, know that your baby is going to be just fine in the world.

**How did your parents react when you became interested in acting?**

At the time I think they were very concerned. They didn’t know how I would make a living doing that. They wanted the best for me, but because of my early struggles in school, they had given up on my becoming a doctor or lawyer. After they warmed up to the idea, they thought, “Hey! She’s passionate. Let’s see where this goes!” If I hadn’t struggled so much in school, they would have been absolutely against it. It’s really not that I didn’t have the ability—I just didn’t have the passion to be a lawyer. And with ADHD, you’ve got to be passionate about whatever you’re doing. Sometimes my parents will joke and say, “Hey, can you believe this one?! This was the one we were so worried about, and she’s doing wonderfully well.”

**Why did you decide to make your diagnosis public?**

I want to be an example to people with ADHD. I want to help parents with kids who have ADHD. If a child is supported properly, he or she can be wildly successful. The key is getting diagnosed. The more people

I’d like to share the message that you’re not broken, and there’s nothing wrong with you. Often, because they struggled so much in school, people with ADHD just don’t believe that they’re capable of creating things or thriving. The ADHD mind is different, not defective, and the American school system is not set up to teach the way we think. So don’t beat yourself up about it.

If you’re passionate about something, I say give it a shot—give it a real shot. Many of the negative beliefs people with ADHD develop in primary school are no longer applicable, so go for it.

**How does your having ADHD help you to help your daughter?**

I understand exactly what she’s going through. Sometimes it’s a challenge. It’s heartbreaking for me to watch her struggle in school because I feel like this is something I passed on—she’s got my eyes and my ADHD. When I see her upset, I feel guilty.

The difference is that I know how to support her in a positive way. My daughter is very smart, but she struggles with focus in school—just like me. I understand her challenges firsthand, so I can help her more specifically. I understand the pros and cons of medication and how it affects her body. I know I’ve got to be her staunchest ally in school matters and make sure she gets every drop of support available to her. I also tend to have more empathy toward her, even after telling her to



and different brains work differently.” Now I must confess that there were days when I wished I had his brain because, hey, I’d love to just study the night before and have my lines memorized the next day, too.

After my diagnosis, the thing that helped me the most was the option to take medication if needed. The ability to take my medication and hyperfocus on my scene partner in the midst of all that action has been a game changer for me. That’s why I’m an advocate for diagnosis and medication if used properly.

#### **Do you have a final message that you’d like to give to people who have ADHD?**

Yes: You are not alone. Millions of Americans live with ADHD and have created successful lives. If you have not been diagnosed by a doctor, get tested. And if you do have ADHD, it’s not the end of the world. Trust me, my friends, it could be much worse. Once you know for sure that you’re part of the family, you can utilize medication if you choose. CHADD is a fantastic organization to be a part of because of the support, resources, and wonderful community. Teams work, and CHADD is a powerful team that’s all about supporting those of us living with ADHD.

You are not defective, but different, so embrace your differences. By doing so you choose to accept yourself for everything you are, and everything you’re not. Embracing my differences has given me the ability to leave the self-loathing behind to create a life I love.

Living with ADHD can be very challenging at times,

## **Come up with ways to get things done that work for your ADHD brain.**



and it’s easy to feel sorry for yourself. Yet pity will not make the situation better. What will help you during those challenging ADHD moments is a positive attitude about yourself.

When you do have a particularly frustrating day, go ahead and give yourself a moment to have a pity party, but don’t let that moment turn into days. Have a good cry, let those negative emotions out, and then remember all the things you do right.

Fill yourself with positive energy and then choose to learn from the challenge that just knocked you off your horse. You’ll be able to overcome that challenge when it comes around again because you actually took the time to figure out how to overcome it. Become an ADHD problem solver. Come up with ways to get things done that work for your ADHD brain. For example, I hate to write at length. My ideas get fractured, I get frustrated, and then I give up. To get around that I use dictation software. It helps me get my ideas on the page and then I can edit and expand from there.

Mark Twain summed it up best in a really wonderful quote: “It is a small mind that can only spell a word one way.” Living successfully with ADHD is all about figuring out what your challenges are, and then coming up with ways to overcome them. 🗣️

do something for the fifth time. Now some days, I’m totally frustrated, but it helps to know she’s not behaving this way on purpose.

#### **What has helped you the most in managing your ADHD, both before and after diagnosis?**

Anytime you have a difference, like ADHD, you adapt and create ways of running your life that will help you succeed. I became a ferocious studier. I would study two and three times longer and harder than anyone else. For example, one of my acting buddies would study his lines the night before and have them down perfectly the next day. I would have to start studying three days earlier than him just to create the same result. I’d just say to myself, “Hey, we have different brains