

# Encouraging Changes

By Ingrid Alpern, JD, LLM

**WHEN OUR SON BEGAN COGMED WORKING MEMORY TRAINING**, my husband, son, and I all wondered why we were trying yet another treatment for our son's ADHD. Were we fools? At age twenty-three, our son had been taking optimal doses of stimulant medication for fifteen years and was a veteran of rigorous behavior therapy. He'd even attended a college that offered the organization and time management skills he needed. But his sporadic work pattern hadn't changed much, and he'd struggled to earn his associate of arts degree.

Since graduating, he was taking two classes a semester at the local junior college to decide if he would attend a four-year college or take a different direction. He hoped to become a video game designer. However, to his great frustration, our son who had spent his life cartooning, writing scripts, even designing video games on his calculator during high school classes, found he couldn't finish any of the video games and 3-D monsters he tried to design. He had trouble getting started; and once started, he couldn't sustain focus long enough to finish anything.

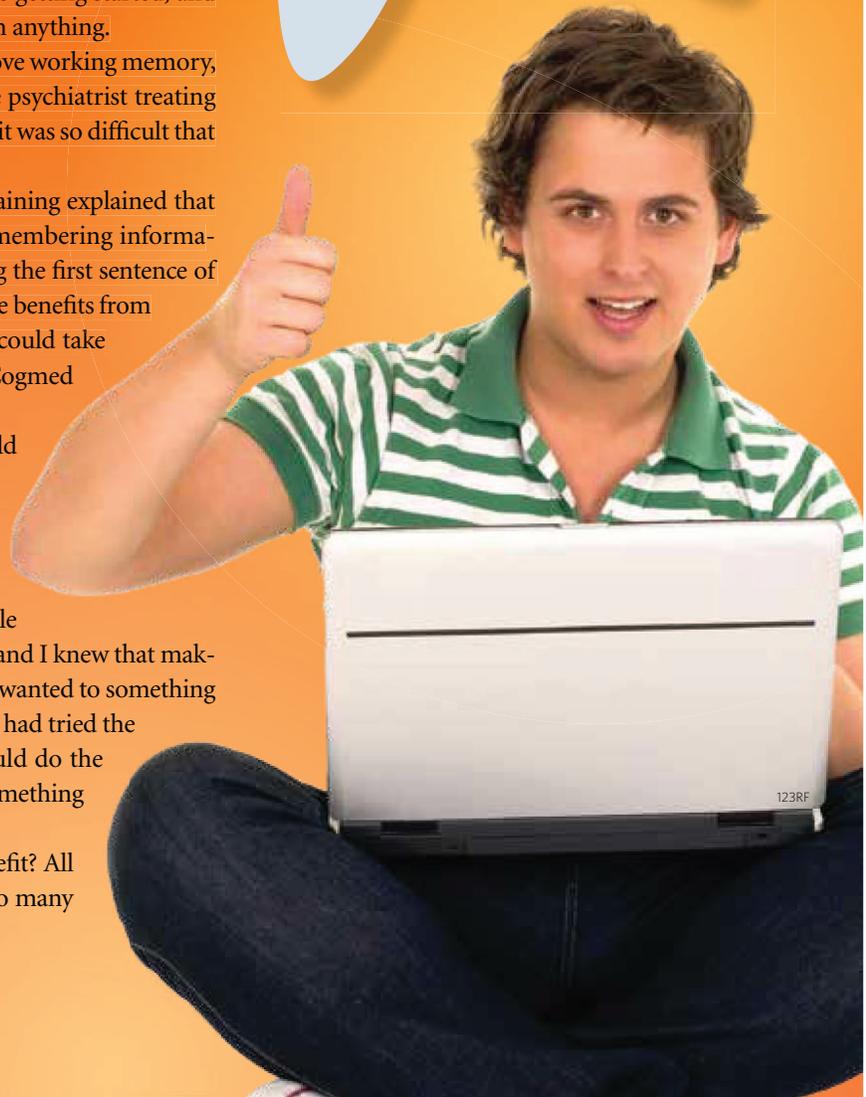
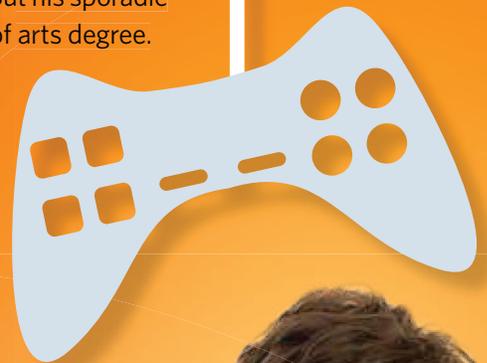
We heard about the possibility that Cogmed could improve working memory, a brain function impaired in individuals with ADHD. The psychiatrist treating our son's ADHD encouraged us to try Cogmed but warned it was so difficult that some people didn't finish.

The psychologist who would be supervising our son's training explained that Cogmed can improve working memory, which means remembering information to use it for something else; for example, remembering the first sentence of a paragraph so you can understand the second sentence. The benefits from Cogmed are subtle and build over time, she cautioned. It could take up to a year to see the full benefits. She also cautioned that Cogmed does not work for everyone.

She recommended that during the training, a parent should sit in the room to provide support and to remind him, if he's failing and frustrated, to take a break away from the computer for at least thirty seconds.

At my husband's request, our son worked out a schedule for when to do the training each day. But my husband and I knew that making the schedule was easier than sticking to it when our son wanted to do something less difficult than Cogmed. We wondered if he'd give up. He had tried the practice session on the website and was convinced he could do the training. He was willing to do anything, he told us, even something very difficult, if it would change his brain.

But even if he finished Cogmed, would he gain any benefit? All three of us were afraid to hope. We'd been disappointed too many times already.



## What is Cogmed?

Cogmed Working Memory Training is a five-week training program in which an individual completes exercises on a computer at home for about one hour a day, five days on, two days off. A trained supervisor receives computerized data indicating the individual's progress and phones weekly to discuss this progress, answer questions, and offer encouragement. For detailed information about Cogmed and for a practice session, visit [cogmed.com/cogmed](http://cogmed.com/cogmed).



The first evening, he started without hesitation. From a distance, I watched rectangular segments of the gray square on the screen turn orange as a voice called out a series of random numbers. He had to enter each number in the same sequence into the rectangle that had changed color when he heard the number. He sat up very straight, sideways on the chair, his entire body concentrated on the screen. Once, he groaned angrily at a mistake but continued past this minor frustration until the voice announced he was finished.

"I'm done!" he announced triumphantly. "It's hard." A huge smile lit his face. I was to see this smile after every session.

"I love this thing," he told us at the end of the first week.

Instead of avoiding training sessions as they increased in difficulty, he was anxious to start each one. During most, I sat nearby, but he completed a few before I came home from work. He said that every time he finished a session he was in a better mood and felt good about himself.

Three weeks into the training, his second semester classes started, and we saw an undeniable change. He was talking to more people in his classes than ever before. He said that talking to people "felt more natural." The psychologist confirmed that many people reported this benefit from Cogmed. She asked if I'd noticed other changes, but I was afraid to attribute anything to Cogmed. I didn't want to get my hopes up.

Two days before his training ended, our son told us he'd miss Cogmed. "It makes me feel good," he said, "and it works my brain."

When the psychologist called after the last session, I reported another change besides the socializing. Our son had taken initiative where before he'd procrastinated. He drove to a gym to discuss a job instead of leaving phone messages. Without my prodding, he requested his accommodations from the college disability office and picked up the letters for his teachers. I wasn't convinced these behaviors were anything, but the psychologist was.

"That's Cogmed," she said. "First the social connectivity, and now he's taking initiative. He's got it." She must have repeated five times, "He's got it." And I needed that repetition because I was too stunned and too afraid to believe it. "It's just going to keep building," she said.

"It can take a year to see the full benefit," she reminded me.

"I'm crying," I said. "I can't believe this. He deserves this so much."

"You're not the only one to cry," she said. "Many people cry."

The psychologist had reminded me to look for subtle

changes, and within days, I began to see them. After waking up, our son had always been irritable if anyone talked to him before he ate. A few days after finishing Cogmed, he began waking up cheerful and much more alert than usual. He talked to me right after waking up instead of immediately slinking off to eat breakfast in front of the computer. One morning, when he walked out of his bedroom, I asked him to open a jar for me. He laughed, made a joke about feeling weak, then opened the jar and pretended to spill the contents. Another morning, he drove to the store to buy milk before breakfast. On his way out, he grinned proudly and said, "I would have done *anything* to avoid doing this before Cogmed."

He became much more cheerful in general. He had often been moody and irritable. If we spoke to him while he was doing something, he would snap a short reply in an irritated tone or say, "yeah, yeah, yeah," to terminate the interruption. My husband pointed out that he was no longer doing this, and our son explained he'd reacted that way because he couldn't shift focus from one activity to another and didn't want to explain his frustration. I first noticed his new ability to shift focus one night when I interrupted him at his computer and asked for help burning a CD. He immediately stood up, tried to burn the CD on my computer, discovered it didn't work, and tried on his. He didn't hesitate in making these transitions and displayed no irritation. He beamed when I pointed out this behavior.

And what about successfully starting and completing projects using 3-D graphics? Within the first six months after starting Cogmed, he taught himself the tools of 3-D graphics: creating shapes, textures, colors, and animation. He was able to begin and complete whatever video game monster he envisioned. He solicited online critiques of his monsters and, in response, revised complex work that had already taken days to complete. The revisions often required more long days of complex work. After making the revisions, he received strong online praise for his graphics. He told us that before Cogmed, he just couldn't do the amount of work necessary to complete the video game monsters he envisioned.

One year after our son finished the training, the early changes remained, and we saw new ones. Among them, he took several out-of-state car trips alone without getting lost. Before Cogmed, he once headed twenty miles south of our house, only to end up forty miles north.

We are not going to offer a happily-ever-after ending. Cogmed is definitely not a silver bullet. Our son still procrastinates about doing tasks he dislikes both for his classes and in his personal life. We can only report that we've seen some definite changes as a result of Cogmed. Perhaps chief among these changes is his ability to make transitions easily from one activity to another. 🎧

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