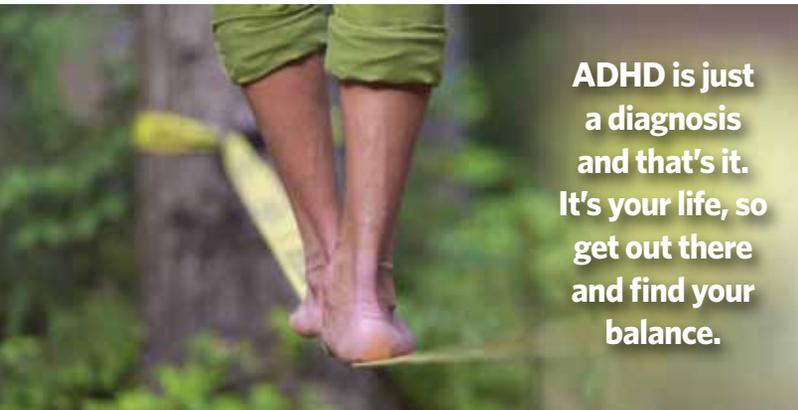


A Road Uphill and Windy as Hell

by Kevin Brown

LOOKING BACK on my childhood and adolescence, my life makes a bit more sense now. Well, it makes as much sense as it can to a then untreated and confused young boy who couldn't sit still. Classrooms were like torture chambers and the clock just seemed to tick at a crawling pace; the familiar feeling of "what's going on?" and "I hope they don't call on me!" echoing around my brain. The daily struggles of finishing homework, or even starting it were taking its toll and it was very demotivating to be so unmotivated.

I have ADHD. It took twenty years to get the true diagnosis, but there we have it. My brain works differently from other folks and I needed more attention in school than I got—okay, cool. Unfortunately, "needed" and "than I got" are past tense, so unfortunately the damage is done. It wasn't until I was a sophomore in college that I was told by a psychiatrist that I'm not stupid. That's all I thought I was since everyone else, including my genius twin brother, were excelling in school and they never seemed to get lost. What was wrong with me and why am I different?



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a diagnosis
and that's it.
It's your life, so
get out there
and find your
balance.**

I think the biggest issue with folks like me is that we flew under the radar. My parents were aware of my troubles in school, but ADHD wasn't a prominent diagnosis in the 1980s and 90s. "Try harder" and "study more" were the recommended medications; however, the outcome was still an "F." I can say this easily now at thirty-four years of age, but when I was going through all of this confusion, my days were horrible. It isn't until now that I realize this feeling was solely because of a lack of information and help from medical professionals for a legitimate disorder, and not something I simply created. The diagnosis in 2000 and further psychotherapy a number of years later made me realize that I wasn't alone and that it's a chemical disorder of the brain, not simply dramatic user error and something that was my fault.

However, as I mentioned before, the damage was done before my diagnosis. My self-esteem was shot. I couldn't walk down the hallway without doing my best to "look" like I had it all together. I'd hurry out of conversations before I got the chance to mess up or say something stupid. It's as though there were two versions of me walking around: One was the confused and scared boy, the other was a lifeguard that followed him around to save him from embarrassment. Throughout the years of living in my own head, I created a wall and safety zone whose job was to avoid all embarrassment and humiliation. All too often, though, that wall would be crushed by a lack of attention or impulsive comments in class, only to find myself building another. To say I was lost would be an understatement, but what's interesting is that I was still trying to find my way out.

This is the most amazing quality of those of us with ADHD. Although we may feel like giving up and throwing in the towel, either from the physical chemical imbalance or emotional experience of failure, we NEVER do. I've met so many other adults with ADHD who have a drive for success that's unparalleled to some of my "normal" friends and colleagues. We know not only how to get beaten down, but how to get right back up, even knowing it will happen again. We have a certain resiliency that is immeasurable and unbelievable, yet I believe it all lives in the balance of our ADHD.

Sure, we can't focus and we fidget a lot. At work, I randomly say things in meetings with my team that make them burst out laughing. The other day I told someone at work that I forgot to get dog food. The problem was, we were talking about digital marketing ideas for a sporting goods store, not about dogs. These are things that I've come to accept since these qualities all live in balance with things at which I know I'm good. Our resiliency comes from this exact piece. If I get lost in a conversation or find myself putting off chores, I know that listening to music will center me. The seesaw was tipped too far one way, so music will bring it back to level. I compensated for my "disorder" with order, and it's saved my life.

I challenge all those with ADHD who are either in the trenches of unhappiness, have found strength in a diagnosis, or are just reading this out of curiosity, to try something: What do you love doing? What makes you normalize your moods or even escalate your mood to pure happiness? What would you do for the rest of the day if you had no errands, work, or responsibilities?

Whatever your answers are, figure out a way to work them into your day *every hour of every day*. If you love going for a walk to clear your head, then put yourself in the situation where you

can do so throughout the day. If you love sports, then create a sport in your daily routine that satisfies your competitive edge. For me, once I discovered that music was my center, I engrained it into my life. To this day I can play six instruments solely by ear. I can't read music other than for the drums, but I can play five other instruments just through listening.

Once I realized that it was all about balancing what made me feel bad with the things that make me feel good, my life lit up and my heart felt balanced. Adderall works wonders, but intrinsic happiness and feeling connected is the greatest form of medication that our brains feast on. Sure, your mind will tell you that you don't want to go for that walk, or play that sport, or pick up the guitar. However, that's just a displaced learned experience with a chemical imbalance driving the train. You drive the train, so get out there and do it.

As I've gotten older, this all makes more sense to me and allows me to get a better grasp on ADHD. There are still bad days, but everyone has bad days regardless of their brain chemistry. I'm learning not to magnify my bad days by the worse days I went through growing up. I still suffer from significant stress and anxiety as a result of the humiliation I felt growing up and its effects on my self-esteem. I'm on Clonazepam and Adderall and go to psychotherapy twice a month for some "cleanup" of the past—however, life is great. I got married to my best friend in 2013 and we welcomed our beautiful baby daughter into the world last July. My career in advertising sales is going very well and I find a new challenge that keeps me excited every day. I've found comfort in the fact that I know how to add order to my disorder.

I write all this with sincerity and love for the ADHD world. It's not an easy road to travel, and it sure is uphill and windy as hell. However, I strongly believe that if you use it to your advantage you can excel way above an A+ on a math exam. You can create something truly beautiful in the world

that is genuinely you and at the end of the day, that's all that matters. Find the "you" that YOU want to be and not the one that is followed around by a lifeguard. ADHD is just a diagnosis and that's it. It's your life, so get out there and find your balance. 🎧

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