

“Please Look Before You Leap!”

Growing Up with Undiagnosed ADHD in Australia

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TEN YEARS OLD, my mum gave me a book called *Look Before You Leap*.

Although I didn't read the book (I couldn't sit still that long), the message was clear. She wanted me to stop being so impulsive.

Yep, from the moment I could walk I was constantly on the move; running, climbing, dancing, exploring. I was into everything.

I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I was one of those kids who touched everything, even if I wasn't supposed to, because everything was just so interesting. Which means, of course, I broke lots of things and lost lots of things too. Sometimes other people's things. (Please know I really didn't mean to).

Oh, and I didn't shut up.

I talked incessantly, without a filter and without paying much attention as to whether or not the person I was talking to was even listening, let alone interested. And I interrupted others constantly, for I just couldn't keep the thoughts that invaded my head at a million miles an hour, from coming out of my mouth.

I was also emotional and highly sensitive, which meant I couldn't cope with being teased or my sister being mean to me. And as a result, I would cry hysterically, scream at the top of my lungs or impulsively give my sister a side swipe due to frustration.

And I always made decisions on a whim, without thinking through the consequences. Decisions that caused me harm and sometimes... embarrassed my mum.

Which really hurt.

In fact, the hurt I felt in my core was excruciating, overwhelming and debilitating.

For I wasn't an innately bad kid. I actually was a really nice kid. I cared deeply about others, about our planet, about social justice. I wanted to do the right thing, to please people, to make people happy. And I wanted to be liked, wanted and appreciated—desperately!

But instead, I was always in the wrong. Always in trouble. Always rejected.

Overtime I started to believe that there was something wrong with me. That I was bad. That I was broken.

Gratefully, even though mum struggled with me and

often felt like she was banging her head against a brick wall, she also loved me. Hence she was hoping that by pointing out that if I could start to look before I leaped, things would get easier.

The problem was, I couldn't.

Not at ten years old. Not because I didn't want to, or because I refused to try... (God only knows how much I tried)... but because my brain was not wired that way.

You see I was born with ADHD or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The disorder that robs individuals of the ability to pause and to willfully exert self-control.

And the disorder many people refuse to believe exists. The one that's surrounded by stigma and false assertions—for example, kids with ADHD are just naughty and that their problems could all be resolved with a swift clip around the ear.

But they aren't. And they can't.

And the research proves this, as endless studies have found that the brains of individuals with ADHD are neurologically different to those without the disorder. And because of these differences, individuals like me do not develop the ability to self-regulate their thoughts, words and actions at the same time as their peers, or to the same degree.

Let me explain this in more detail. The ability to self-regulate is dependent upon one's executive functions. Executive functions are basically a complex set of mental processes that enable a person to pause and to override their instinctual or habitual responses. And instead, to willfully respond to a situation in a manner that will protect goal attainment, social standing and/or personal relationships, as well as result in the best possible short-term and long-term outcome.

For example, in order to exercise self-control an individual has to pause and:

- Turn their attention inwards.
- Pay selective attention to their internal state (i.e., their thoughts and feelings) and their external environment (i.e., sights, sounds, sensations).
- Self-soothe (if uncomfortable emotions have been triggered or they choose to delay gratification).





- Inhibit intrusive external thoughts and feelings, as well as internal stimulus to maintain focus.
- Recall information (i.e., their deep motivators, the social expectations of others [e.g., social norms, rules and guidelines], past responses to similar situations [their own and others] and the subsequent consequences of these responses).
- Analyze this information, generate and play with ideas, and contemplate the future.
- Choose and then action an appropriate self-determined response in the form of thoughts, words, actions.

Individuals with ADHD struggle with each of these mental processes. Which explains why they may:

- Not be able to pay close attention to detail unless they are really interested.
- Get easily distracted.
- Make careless mistakes.
- Struggle to listen.
- Not follow through with instructions.
- Fail to finish assigned tasks.
- Have difficulties organizing themselves.
- Avoid or seem reluctant to engage in tasks requiring sustained effort.
- Require more redirection.
- Lose things and forget things.

It also explains why just telling a child with ADHD to “look before they leap” doesn’t work. Nor does telling kid to “just try harder,” “sit still,” or “focus.”

Instead, requests like these, when combined with punishment and years of failure, can end up destroying an individual with ADHD’s self-esteem and self-worth.

The research indicates adults with ADHD often feel ashamed, inadequate, unworthy and/or regretful, and often believe they are fundamentally different, flawed or broken.

Together, they can also increase the risk of individuals with ADHD developing more defiant behavior, anxiety and depression, eating disorders, drug use, self-harm and suicide.

The suicide risk in individuals with ADHD is 1.8 times higher than it is for the general population. And the life expectancy of adults with the worst cases of ADHD, is twenty-five years less than the general population.

I count myself as being one of the lucky ones. As even though I was not diagnosed with ADHD until 47 years of age (and even though my own personal journey involved difficulties with maintaining friendships, getting into financial difficulty, being involved in multiple car accidents, putting myself at risk [which resulted in—let’s just say #metoo], experiencing depression and binge eating difficulties, becoming morbidly obese, and relying heavily on alcohol to get through life), I SURVIVED.

And thankfully, with a lot of hard work, I have been able to turn my life around and learn how to thrive with ADHD. (Yes, I now have strategies that help me to look before I leap, which work approximately 90 percent of the time.)

So I want to leave you with two messages.

Firstly, if you are an adult with ADHD who is struggling, I want you to know that you are not alone. Nor are you stupid, crazy, or lazy. The reason you cannot look before you leap, is because you are wired differently and therefore haven’t learned how to use your strengths, as well as tools and strategies that can support you achieve your goals—YET. But you can. For it is very possible to live a full and rewarding life with ADHD.

Secondly, if you are a parent of a young child with ADHD, please don’t ask your child to look before they leap. They can’t. Not yet.

However, as they mature and their executive functions develop, and so long as they are given the tools they need (which may include medication, opportunities to explicitly learn skills and strategies that externalize thought and support self-regulation), they can slowly learn to do so. But it will take time, patience and perseverance. And your unwavering compassion, empathy and support.

But it will be so worth it. Because it is easier to build up a child with ADHD than it is to repair a broken adult. **A**

Lou Brown is an ADHD coach, life coach, and wellness coach based in Perth, Western Australia. She specializes in helping individuals with ADHD and their families understand and accept an ADHD diagnosis, as well as develop the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage the disorder using a strengths-based approach. Prior to becoming a coach, Brown worked as a registered nurse for over seventeen years in a wide variety of specialties. A version of this article first appeared on her blog, www.thrivingwithadhd.com.au, where you can read more of her writing.