



# Uneasy in the Harness

by Jon Thomas, EdD, LPC

**F**OR KIDS GROWING UP IN FARM AND RANCH COUNTRY, work was always easy to find for willing hands. When it came time of year to work cattle, this often involved horses. For moving cattle, we had a special kind of horse known as a “cutting horse.” These brilliant animals were bred and trained to intuitively see, think, and anticipate movement of cattle and respond in the blink of an eye. They knew their job and could perform it with very little guidance. When one of these horses took off after a wayward calf and the rider wasn’t paying attention, the rider invariably wound up on the ground. I remember falls like that leaving some nasty bruises.

One of the ranchers we worked for had some very nice cutting horses. And, as a novelty, he had an old wagon that he would hitch up time to time with a team of Percherons—a gentle breed of large work horses. One boring and uneventful day, an equally foolish coworker and I came up with an incredibly brilliant idea. While the boss was in town for lunch, we would hitch the cutting horses we were riding into the wagon traces and go for an awesome run. We’d seen this done plenty of times in the chase scenes of old western movies. So that made it reasoned and proven science to us.

Fortunately, the rancher caught wind of this and intervened before our idea (and possibly our bodies) took flight. After he calmed down and we got over a bit of our shame, he patiently explained that we’d probably seriously damage ourselves, the horses, and the wagon with such a fool idea. “Boys, you just can’t do that with this kinda horse... they’re uneasy in the harness.”

**T**his idea of “uneasy in the harness” resonated with me over the years as I reflected on my temperament and that of the many young people with ADHD I worked with. I began to think of how much we are like the cutting horses—uneasy in the harness.

In early stages of life, “uneasy in the harness” shows up more as a temperament or personality characteristic. When problematic, it’s most noticeable in areas of structure and rule-governed behavior. These are the students whose drive for autonomy leads them to resist direction and hold to their own way of doing things and refuse advice. They may refuse therapy or coaching. When done actively, it may look like oppositional defiance, authority issues, or acute adolescence. When done passively, it may appear as self-sabotage—like shooting yourself in the foot.

However, beneath this apparent dysfunction lies the drive for successful independent functioning and even blossoming leadership. With matured executive function skills and tools of success, these students often become entrepreneurs and leaders. It is therefore no surprise that ADHD is highly represented in these areas.

Seen in this way, the quality of “uneasy in the harness” is a forerunner of entrepreneurial motivation. Think of the motivation of entrepreneurs who tirelessly work long hours (Elon Musk claims 120 hours per week) in service of their personal vision and goals and for the autonomy to pursue their own agenda. Without entrepreneurial motivation, the sheer weight of this work would seem like meaningless toil and servitude.

Taking it out into the world, become aware of and embrace this “uneasy in the harness” quality within you. Learn and develop executive function skills and other tools of management. When entrepreneurial motivation is not paired with requisite skills and tools over the lifespan, the results can be spotty and disappointing. **A**

---

**Jon Thomas, EdD, LPC**, is the founder and CEO of the ADHD College Success Guidance Program and a therapist in private practice in Fairfax, Virginia. This article is adapted and reprinted from *Thriving at the Edge of Chaos* by permission. Learn more at [ADHDCollegeSuccess.com](http://ADHDCollegeSuccess.com).