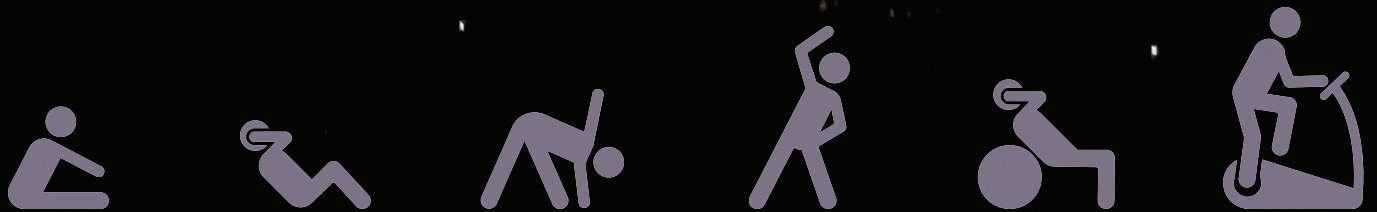


# CHASING DOPAM



## Erik “Doc” Anderson, AAC, and Doug Snyder

**A**S AN ADULT WITH ADHD, my relationship with exercise is simple. I hate it. It’s a decades-old demon I pretty much gave up defeating. My best friend, Doug Snyder, shares my struggle.

So how did we manage to exercise regularly over 250 times in 2022 and 150 times the year before?

The short answer is, we followed the dopamine and we stopped trying to do it alone.

Before I get into how we did that, let’s set the stage.

The exercise deck has always been stacked against me. My ADHD is the primarily inattentive presentation, meaning the hyperactive component is inwardly focused and mental-emotional in nature.

Barbara Luther, one of my ADHD coaching instructors, told me that, where physically hyperactive adults with ADHD are driven to move, primarily inattentive types like me often don’t want to. That makes exercising much harder.

On top of that, I have cerebral palsy. It affects how I walk and makes it physically difficult to move. And I turned sixty this last

year. So I’m also dealing with age-related muscle loss on top of everything else.

Doug has also struggled with regular exercise. Unlike me, Doug had a model of success he was trying to copy. “When I was in the Navy,” he said, “it was easy. I just showed up and did what I was told to do. The Navy has a system for everything. That structure worked well for me.”

What Doug took away from this was the power of systems. But he got caught in a perfection trap. He thought if he got the plan just right—the right steps, the right metrics—it would just work. Instead, he was stuck in an endless input loop. He was unable to stick to the plan, marinating in the shame of it all.

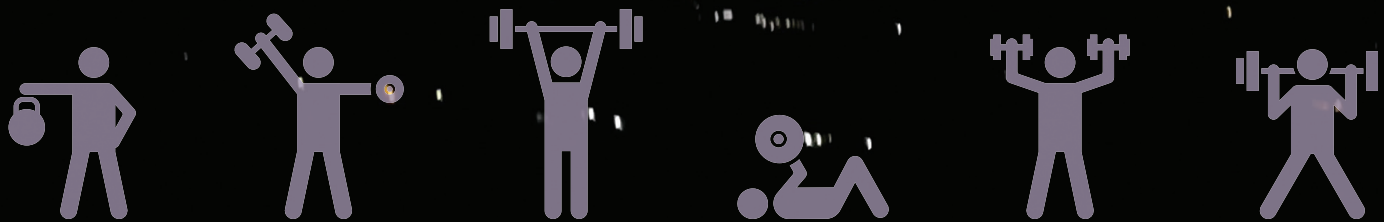
This made both of us the poster boys for not exercising.

Sure, we both knew we should exercise, and we knew how regular exercise benefited both our bodies and our ADHD brains. We even told ourselves we wanted to exercise.

But we didn’t exercise.

There was always something getting in our way. Sometimes we were behind on a few zillion things, and we didn’t have time.

# INE IS EXERCISE



Other times it wasn't a priority because of whatever was in front of us at the moment. Then there was the whole, "out of sight, out of mind" thing. To be honest, we liked the idea of exercise a lot more than doing it.

So a couple years ago, I was in a meeting with a bunch of other adults with ADHD. During one of the inevitable sidebar conversations, people were talking about a "Couch to 5K" group they just started. This is where Doug enters into the story. He was one of the group facilitators. And because it was a system with goals and metrics, it was just the thing he was looking for.

They were talking about exercising regularly and doing it voluntarily. It was like they were speaking a foreign language. But somehow I recognized these adults with ADHD were able to do something I hadn't been able to.

That was the moment I swallowed my pride and admitted maybe I couldn't do this exercise thing alone.

I'm sure a big part of it was FOMO, because it sure sounded like they were having fun. I started wondering what would happen if they let me in too.

The problem was I didn't feel like I was even worthy to ask.

After all, they were working toward doing a 5K run. There was no way I was going to physically be able to do that. But I did have a new exercise bike that sat unused in the corner judging me.

I spent the rest of that meeting getting up the courage to ask if I could tag along. I even had an argument ready for why I should be allowed to join them.

When I finally made the ask, I was unprepared for their response. Without any hesitation they all said, "Sure! We'd love to have you."

So for six weeks on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings we got together on Zoom. They would be running, and I would be on my exercise bike. And the whole time we would talk and joke and vent and be together in this space while we did our thing.

Then the most miraculous thing happened. Somehow, I was riding my exercise bike three times a week! And I was able to do it for thirty minutes or more. I'd never before been able to do more than five or ten minutes max before my brain would die of boredom.

As we got close to the end of the six weeks, I realized I didn't want this thing to end. I asked Doug if he was interested in continuing, just the two of us. Doug gave me an enthusiastic yes. Later he admitted he wasn't too crazy about still getting up at o'dark-thirty, but what he heard was that his friend needed him, and he





was all about supporting his friend.

“What’s important to me,” he said, “is to help people. That’s the habit I’m always going to be able to stick with.”

So that’s what we did for the rest of the year. And when the new year came, we kept doing it. We even increased it to five days a week.

Exercising together has become an incredibly important part of how we start our day now. The time we spend talking and processing as we exercise changes our brain space. It changes how we are able to move forward through our day. Doug has noticed that he’s less reactive and has more physical and mental energy for the things in front of him when he exercises.

Later, Doug told me he finally realized why the systems he tried to build didn’t work. It wasn’t the system that was important. It was the community. What really worked for him was the experience of doing things together; the value of showing up to help your buddy and how that deepens relationships.

One thing hasn’t changed. We still don’t like exercise. But we don’t feel like we’re exercising. We’re spending time together every morning.

And that’s the secret... at least for us.

We know why we should exercise. We know how it will improve our quality of life. We know that we will be healthier. And we know that it will help us remain strong, mobile, and flexible as we get older. But those are conversations about our future selves. And as adults with ADHD, that’s not something we connect with easily.

**Y**es, Doug and I recognize our future selves, but we’re not close friends with them, so we’re not going to go out of our way for them.

What we will do almost every time is whatever gives us dopamine; whether that’s something we’re passionate about or something in the moment.

A good example of this is how Doug and I both love photography. It’s something that allows both of us to take action in the moment. But it works differently for each of us.

For me the dopamine is in the creative process. There’s nothing like the feeling I get when I’m able to capture in my camera what

my hamster brain sees. So about as close as I get to my future-self is the knowledge that to do this thing I love, I have to be able to walk. And because of my cerebral palsy that requires deliberate exercise. In short, I love photography way more than I hate exercising.

Doug’s dopamine is in exploration and discovery. It’s what powers him up the hill in time to capture a beautiful sunrise, or walk just a little farther to see what’s around the next bend.

For me, the story is about acknowledging that my ADHD means I’ll almost always follow the dopamine. What’s changed is realizing I have the power to choose between high-quality dopamine and the low-grade distraction stuff I have a history of settling for.

For Doug, the story is, “a funny thing happened on the way to help my friend exercise.” He said, “I learned a framework for how to develop habits. And this habit is instrumental in my day. And I know this habit-building requires iterations; doing with others, honoring the dopamine in the moment, making it so it’s valuable right then and there and not this magical, ‘there I fixed it’ thing anymore. It’s a process and I need to keep doing it. And that’s something I could never access before.”

So now, both of us are exercising regularly. We’ve made peace with the fact that we are going to follow the dopamine pretty much every time because we have ADHD. But we also discovered that, with a little bit of attention, we can choose quality dopamine experiences that serve us.

And the funny thing is, all that other stuff—how it will improve our quality of life, being healthier and remaining mobile and stuff—we still get all those long-term benefits whether or not that’s what we’re thinking about. **A**



**Erik “Doc” Anderson** is an ADHD coach who specializes in helping people become the hero of their own story. He is a lifelong advocate with decades of experience working with people who are differently brained—people who don’t fit the middle of the bell curve. His approach to coaching uses narrative advocacy to leverage the power of play and story to help people create real, meaningful change. Doc also has ADHD. That means he not only knows how to work with ADHD, he understands the struggle. He also has cerebral palsy. So he learned early how damaging limiting stories can be, both to ourselves and to others. He realized he could either listen to those stories and live in a very small world, or rewrite them and live in a much larger one. As a result, he’s done impossible things; the kinds of things many other people only dream of and shows others they can do impossible things too. Find out more at [CoachingForCreativeBrains.com](https://www.CoachingForCreativeBrains.com).



**Doug Snyder** is the founder of NeonBrain LLC. His life history is filled with wide-ranging experiences that include designing business software, custom car fabrication, serving on a submarine nuclear engineering team, and learning to pilot airplanes, to name just a few. He has been unknowingly exploiting the gift of life with ADHD. After being diagnosed as an adult with ADHD, he has focused his energies on learning how to make the most of it. For several years he participated in small group coaching and peer mentoring with intelligent, like-minded adults. This experience of learning with and from other adults with ADHD has given him great insight into the possibilities of excelling with ADHD.