

AMIR

Are the Gifts of ADHD

Cynthia Hammer, MSW

I BELIEVE THAT TALKING ABOUT THE “GIFTS” OF ADHD started with physicians and therapists who were uncomfortable telling a child and her parents that she had ADHD. They wanted the diagnosis to be less scary, less awful sounding. They wanted to say something positive so the child and the family would not be downhearted and discouraged by the diagnosis. However, even for children, the talk about “gifts” rings hollow. They know they are different; they know they have struggles; and they don’t understand why.

But then calling ADHD a “gift” got out of hand. Beyond bolstering the ego of a child with ADHD, it took on a life of its own. Anyone, no matter their age, was urged to find the “gifts” of their ADHD. The gifts most frequently mentioned are hyperfocus, creativity, empathy and compassion. Yet no valid research demonstrates that people with ADHD have these “gifts” to a greater degree than people without ADHD.

While the “gifts” of ADHD might ring true for a few adults, for most, the “gifts” are a mirage that only adds to their feelings of inadequacy. “Gifts to this disorder? What’s wrong with me? I don’t have any gifts. I’m too bogged down by the minutiae of life to discover my gifts!”

Adults don’t need to be told about gifts to their ADHD; we don’t need to be coddled. We have lived the ADHD life. We know firsthand that the gifts are few and far between, especially when we have lived for years with our ADHD undiagnosed. We are told, after our diagnosis, that life will improve, but only if we practice new behaviors and acquire new habits.

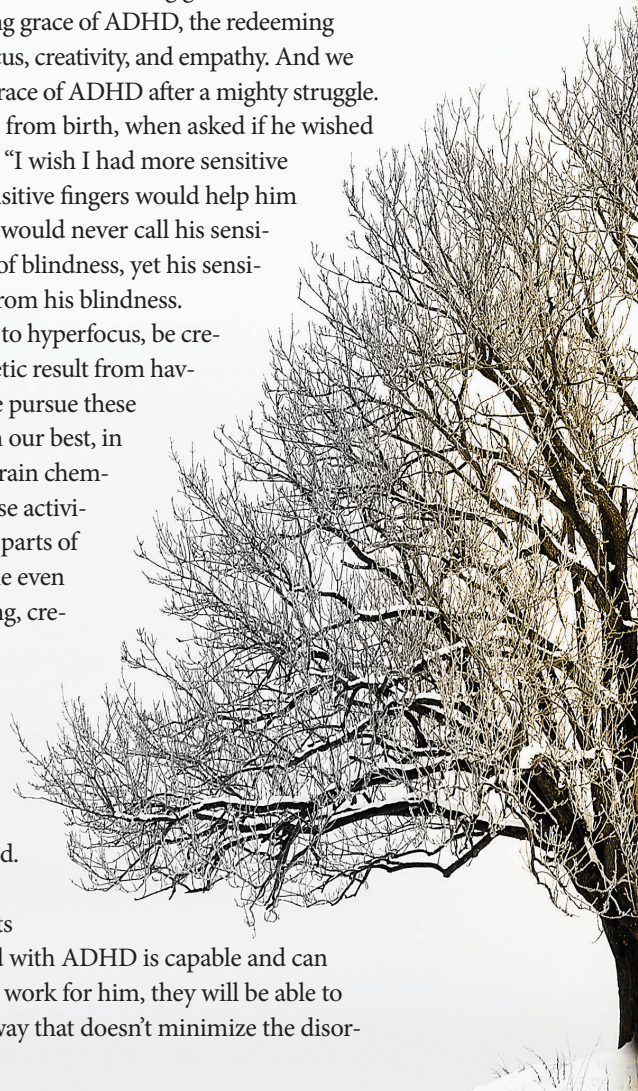
A friend calls the gifts of ADHD that adults work so hard to find “hard-won compensations.” I prefer to call them ADHD’s “saving grace.”

Imagine someone who drives a beat-up Ford truck that looks and drives like hell, but the owner would never part with it. He exclaims, “The truck’s saving grace is that it always starts.” The saving grace of ADHD, the redeeming qualities, are hyperfocus, creativity, and empathy. And we only find the saving grace of ADHD after a mighty struggle.

Louis Braille, blind from birth, when asked if he wished he were sighted, said, “I wish I had more sensitive fingers.” He knew sensitive fingers would help him live an easier life. We would never call his sensitive fingers the “gift” of blindness, yet his sensitive fingers resulted from his blindness.

Perhaps our ability to hyperfocus, be creative, and be empathetic result from having ADHD. When we pursue these activities, we function our best, in spite of our atypical brain chemistry. By pursuing these activities, we enlarge those parts of our brain, and become even better at hyperfocusing, creativity, and empathy. Our brains have an interest-based nervous system, according to William Dodson, MD. We do well when we are interested.

When physicians, therapists, and parents truly believe the child with ADHD is capable and can function in ways that work for him, they will be able to explain ADHD in a way that doesn’t minimize the disorder.



RACE?

der but also doesn't sell it as bringing "gifts." We do children a disservice if we do not let them know we recognize their hardships and are there for them. We will be their cheerleaders.

A metaphor I think would help explain an ADHD diagnosis to a child is that he or she is like a race car. The car can have top performance but only if everything is perfectly tuned. Many mechanics are needed to keep the car performing at its highest level, just as a child with ADHD can perform at a high level when given the necessary support and accommodations.

Here is an excellent way to talk with a child about their ADHD, written by Liz Adams, PhD, of Minnesota Neuropsychology and shared with her permission.

For adults talking with their child:

- Hold it in your mind that your child has a differently wired brain that needs different ways of learning and interacting to be most successful. That together you can help him be successful.
- Remember and connect with your confidence in your child's ability to overcome challenges and limitations.
- Approach the conversation by believing that

you and your child will feel relief with this new way of understanding herself.

- Remember that your child already knows she is struggling. Even young kids have a gut sense for this, though they may not articulate it yet.
- Realize that talking about it will help them to know they do not have to hide it and are not alone.
- Let them know that there is no one "right" way to act and learn, and that sometimes those who learn differently discover the most incredible things.
- Make it clear that you know they are trying their best, and tell them you have found ways to help.
- After talking about the ADHD diagnosis with your child, circle back to highlight their natural strengths.
- Create positive experiences where they can show off that natural flow, sometimes called hyperfocusing, that occurs when a child with ADHD has a deep interest in a topic or activity.
- Focus on providing ongoing positive experiences of flow and success at home and advocate so that your child experiences it at school as well. 📌



Cynthia Hammer, MSW, is executive director of the Inattentive ADHD Coalition, a nonprofit organization with a mission that children with inattentive ADHD are diagnosed by age eight and adults with inattentive ADHD are readily and correctly diagnosed when they seek help. The website is www.iadhd.org. She is the author of *Living with Inattentive ADHD: Climbing the Circular Staircase of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder* (Hatherleigh Press, 2023).