

What is it like to have ADD?

an abridged article by Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.

What is the feel of the syndrome? First of all I resent the term. As far as I'm concerned most people have Attention Surplus Disorder. Life being what it is who can pay attention to anything for very long? In my opinion many people without ADD are members of the congenitally boring!

Some people say the so-called syndrome doesn't even exist but believe me it does. Many metaphors come to mind. It's like driving in the rain with bad windshield wipers. Everything is smudged and blurred and you're speeding along and it's really frustrating not being able to see very well.

Or it's like listening to a radio station with a lot of static and you have to strain to hear what's going on. Or it's like trying to build a house of cards in a dust storm; you have to build a structure to protect yourself from the wind before you can even start on the cards.

In other ways it's like being super-charged all the time. You get one idea and you have to act on it, and then you've got another idea before you've finished the first, and so you go for that, but of course a third idea intercepts the second and pretty soon people are calling you disorganised and impulsive and all sorts of impolite words that miss the point completely. Because you're trying really hard. It's just that you have all these invisible vectors pulling you this way and that which makes it really hard to stay on task.

You're spilling over all the time; drumming your fingers, tapping your feet, humming a song, whistling, looking here, looking there,

scratching, stretching, doodling, and people think you're not paying attention or that you're not interested, but all you're doing is spilling over so that you can pay attention. I can pay more attention when I'm taking a walk or listening to music or even when I'm in a crowded, noisy room than when I'm still and surrounded by silence. God save me from the library reading rooms!

I love art. I'll get into the world of the painting and forget about everything else. In these moments I, like most people with ADD, can hyperfocus, which gives lie to the notion that we can never pay attention. Sometimes we have turbo-charged focusing abilities; it just depends on the situation.

I'm almost incapable of waiting in queues; I just can't wait. Impulse leads to action. I'm very short on what you call the intermediate reflective step between impulse and action. That's why I, like so many people with ADD, lack tact.

Tact is entirely dependent on the ability to consider one's words before uttering them. We ADD types don't do this so well.

Many of us with ADD crave high-stimulus situations. In my case I love the racetrack. Obviously this tendency can get you into trouble, which is why ADD is high among criminals and self destructive risk-takers. It is also high among the so-called Type A personalities as well as among manic-depressives, sociopaths, violent people, drug abusers, and alcoholics. But it is also high among creative and intuitive people in all fields, and among highly energetic, highly productive people.



Which is to say there is a positive side to all this. Usually the positive doesn't get mentioned when people speak of ADD because there is a natural tendency to focus on what goes wrong. But once the ADD has been diagnosed and you learn how to cope with it, an untapped realm of the brain swims into view. Suddenly the radio station is tuned in, the windshield is clear, the sandstorm has died down, and you start doing things you've never been able to do before.

Often ADD people are highly imaginative and intuitive. They have a 'feel' for things, a way of seeing right into the heart of matters while others have to reason their way along methodically. This is the person who makes million dollar deals in a catnap and pulls them off the next day. This is

the child who, having been reprimanded for blurting something out, is then praised for having said something brilliant.

These are the people who learn and know and do and go by touch and feel, and ADD people can feel a lot; they can produce answers out of the dark. It is important for others to be sensitive to this 'sixth sense' that many ADD people have.

Treatment can be anything that turns down the noise: building structure into your life, breaking tasks down into smaller tasks, working in small spurts, making lists, getting support, exercise, medication, education. ADD is a way of life, not just a collection of symptoms and diagnosis provides the chance for real change and accessing latent abilities.

