

Adult ADD Career Alternatives

--the Psychological Factors for Success

Special Report:

By Dr. Rick Blum

This report is organized into five parts:

- I. Why we're here - how come 5 percent of the population thinks differently than the rest
- II. Adding Insult to Injury - the diagnosis trap
- III. The major challenge - boredom and why it hurts us so much
- IV. The Personality Challenge - coachability
- V. Improving Concentration

Part I: Why We're Here

If you include all the versions of ADD ("Attention Deficit Disorder"), the category includes about one out of every twenty people, or 5 percent of the population. This is interesting, because unhealthy variations are almost always less than 2 percent of the population.

When there are so many people in a minority, it has a purpose. Consider sickle-cell anemia, a curvature of red blood cells and certainly a serious challenge to afflicted Africans, again over five percent. So, why so many? It is better to be tired and anemic than to get malaria, especially in the days before modern medications. Since sickle-celled people do not get malaria, the affliction had a purpose.

So, what's our purpose? As a group, we are useful to have in the world because we tend to be creative. We are divergent thinkers, with imaginations that cannot help fanning out in many directions. So, "attention deficit disorder" should be called "Attention Divergence Difficulty." This contrasts with convergent thinkers, who most of are much better at linear thinking, more task oriented, and less annoying. Yes, we sometimes annoy people, because divergent thinkers come up with new ideas without end, when most others would rather be left to go in their current direction. The multiplicity in our minds makes us distractible to a point that drives others to distraction. We also can look irresponsible because we cannot stand routine, boring tasks; but more about that later.

Ever hear the bean counter story? If you have, skip this paragraph. Otherwise, imagine we all live in a small town in rural Iowa. (I'm not picking on Iowa. I lived there for awhile,

and things grow well in Iowa.) The closest town is several miles down the road, and what they do there is grow soybeans. All we do in our town is count the beans they grow. There are only 100 of us, and we all work in the bean counting factory. Well, no one likes it much, but 95 of us do okay with it. Meanwhile, the other five of us go stir crazy. Of these five, three run away impulsively and are never heard from again. Another one of the five is now in jail because he flipped out and punched the bean-counter supervisor. As for the last of the five, well, that person has just invented a much better way to count beans. That's why we are different. We think outside narrow categories (the "nine dots") whether we want to or not.

So, being a divergent thinker gives us attention divergence difficulties, and challenges us in completing school or finding a career. Most of us would rather be the last one of the five, the one who succeeds, if we have a choice in the matter. That is what the rest of this report is devoted to.

There are three central challenges to ADD success: being misunderstood, intolerance for boredom, and defensiveness. In the sections to come we will meet each of these challenges. Then, we'll finish with a case example of a career alternative.

Part II: Adding Insult to Injury

Look at the traits used to diagnose clinical ADD (in the DSM-IV), officially six of the following:

- poor attention to details and careless errors
- wandering attention in activities
- being a poor listener, even one-on-one
- poor follow-through on responsibilities
- disorganized in tasks
- avoids tasks that would require sustained mental effort
- loses things often
- often distracted by unimportant stimuli
- forgetful

In the last section, I pointed out that we are divergent thinkers, that our minds insist on producing an array of directions at once. Further, I noted how we are useful, which is why there are so many of us. But, do you see unusual creativity in the above list? How about fascinating company? No? Well, what about enthusiasm and fervor? Uh-uh. In

fact, when we've got too much of that enthusiastic energy, it's time to move us onto the "hyperactivity-impulsivity" list.

Now, to be fair, the diagnostic manual seldom speaks of positive traits about any condition, since it analyzes disorders, which are the troubles people get into by being different. So, ADD is not unfairly singled out. However, my guess is that you were not raised by one of the doctors who wrote the diagnostic book, so you may have received further labels.

How about "lazy?" Does "stupid" ring a bell? Of course, "irresponsible" goes without saying. My teachers said I was too "talkative" in class. To me, it was emotional survival. So, let's take apart these labels. Does my calling you "lazy" mean that you do nothing? Nope, it means that you are not doing what I want you to do, and I want you to feel bad about it. Does my calling you "stupid" mean that you learn nothing and pay attention to nothing? No, it means that you are not attending to learning what I want you to learn, and I want you to feel bad about it. "Irresponsible" means that you get distracted and I want you to feel bad about that.

In these ways, "Attention Divergence Difficulty" folks get misunderstood. This adds insult to the injury of the challenges that we would already face. After all, we do many of the things on that list at the beginning of this section. We struggle with all that and more. Boredom drives us to distraction, literally. In the next section we'll see why -- but you already know how it feels. It is literally painful, kind of like being tickled in the brain, only you cannot even laugh to discharge the frustration.

We know what it is like to miss the point of a conversation because we cannot focus on it. We know the embarrassment of not completing what seems like the easiest part of a task. We struggle to organize the most trivial parts of life. These challenges need work for any of us, and we would do so, but we are too busy with those labels.

The insult of lazy-irresponsible-stupid, on top of the injury of being different, distracts our already distractible minds away from using our extensive creativity to solve these challenges. Then, when the stakes get high, when it is time to choose a career, all the confusion multiplies.

So, we must meet this first challenge. Redefine yourself. You are a divergent thinker. It is not easy, but very few of us, even if we had a button that could transform us into convergent thinkers, would press it. Once you saw the whole package, would you give up your unique imagination, the great company of the show inside your head, your ability to turn conventional reality upside down? Yes, we must master our boredom challenge and our defensiveness, but the first step is knowing who we are, that we have a gift.

That gift is not always easy, but it's always interesting. We can transform it into a talent. We can temper it into an exciting career. The journey continues in the next section on meeting the challenge of boredom.

Part III: The Major Challenge -- Boredom

I pointed out in the previous section that boredom is literally painful for us. Just sitting in a classroom can be a nearly unendurable torment for attention-divergent kids. As adults, we feel the same way in college classes and office meetings. Ever notice that you are the only person in a meeting of adults who is fidgeting in your seat or daydreaming? Of course, no one likes boredom, so calling it painful might sound a bit like whining. In fact, people without the condition might think I am overstating the problem.

This is no exaggeration, however. The explanation of our boredom reaction involves the nature of divergent attention. Rather than "attention divergence difficulties" causing inattention, they cause either diffuse attention or hyper-focus. In other words, we either attend to several items at once, or we become absorbed fully in one. We love the latter state, since it is such a relief to us. When we become engrossed in activity, whether the computer, reading, or sports, we feel exhilarated and don't want it to end. In fact, we can be rather irritable when interrupted during hyper-focus. The startle out of this type of engrossed attention is a jarring experience for us.

What does this have to do with boredom? Well, adult ADD means that your awareness is not particularly limber. You don't have full control over where it goes and how it divides. You are either flitting from item to item or absorbed in concentration. This is a problem during routine, boring tasks. Other people are better at paying partial attention. They could sit in class, as kids, think about some afternoon activity, while keeping half an eye on a boring lesson. When called upon, they could return their full attention and respond. You and I, on the other hand, were hyper-focused in reverie when we were called upon. We did not need to pay the consequences of that embarrassment many times before we learned the cost. We must either pay full attention or almost none at all. Those of us afraid to offer none at all were forced into the drip-drip-drip torment of the slow flow of uninspiring information presented by an unenthusiastic teacher. So, we learned early to hate boredom.

This does not change. Our adult attention is not much more limber than it was as a child. Routine tasks (and boring parts of interesting tasks) present the same torment over and over again. Unfortunately, no career can be mastered, no credential can be won, and no business can be built without some very boring aspects. So, we must meet this challenge head on.

Method number one: small chunks. If we break a boring task into little pieces, sometimes very little pieces, it gets done. This is especially effective when you intersperse the boring activity with some activity that is interesting, but somewhat self-limiting. For example, if you intersperse 30 minutes of studying with 15 minutes of watching a video, then it is better to make it a network show with commercials. This will naturally help you not hyperfocus for too long on the video.

Method number two: play games. Make a game somehow out of the boring task. For example, time yourself and keep trying to improve your time. Or, invent a system to do the task so that you can ultimately learn to put the activity on automatic and not think about it. Or, learn to use a meditation-in-motion technique like "mindfulness."

Method three: drugs. Take a whole day (not more than once a week) to get all the boring tasks that await you done. People who do this describe it as "getting on a roll." Use a legal drug like caffeine (unless you are addicted and unaffected by it) or Ritalin, if it has been prescribed for you. Make ABSOLUTELY certain that you are in perfect cardiovascular health before you try this method, or it will worsen your physical symptoms. Do not use any combination remedies or overdoses. For example, people have been hurt with Ephedra by using preparations from irresponsible companies that combined unstandardized dosages with caffeine.

Method four: social facilitation. Pair off with someone, especially someone like you. Having people around makes activities more interesting if these are people that are not usually around. People that live with us, like spouses and roommates, become part of the background, unfortunately. So, they are not candidates for this method. Use this to get the boring tasks out of the way. Experiment to see what works for you. Does the other person need to be paying attention to what you are doing, or can both of you be getting things done at the same time? If it is the former, you may trade time, so that you both benefit from the social facilitation.

If you practice any of these methods, it will improve your follow-through. This is one of the crucial factors in career success, especially for those of us with attention divergence difficulties. Follow-through is the willingness to do what you say you're going to do. When you pick a career, you believe it has benefits or else you would not choose it. Perhaps many people would like such benefits. On the other hand, how many people are willing actually to do something to achieve these benefits? Let's say you went into sales, or wanted to market yourself as some form of consultant, or perhaps started your own home based business. Any of these can be exciting for someone with adult ADD because of the freedom combined with a good income. But, you cannot expect to feel excited and motivated every day. Nonetheless, with the above methods, you can do the correct, success-generating activities, once you learn them. This creates a positive spiral where the correct activities bring success, which in turn creates excitement and motivation. Learning the trait of follow-through is thus essential for anyone. And, for us, learning to deal with boredom allows follow-through.

In the next section, we will deal with the final major challenge we face, which is the defensiveness that prevents our being effectively coached.

Part IV: The Personality Challenge -- Coachability

In my career as a psychologist, I have met some financially successful people. Several of them began with no special financial advantages. Most of them had few advantages as kids, and sometimes they came from very unsupportive homes. But they built

impressive career success. I appreciated that about this handful of people, but I paid little attention to it since people come to me to discuss that which does not work in their lives. No one makes an appointment with me to work on his or her surprising economic success. Since I hyperfocus on their areas of challenge, I only peripherally noticed that they each had something fascinating in common.

The first time I worked with one of these people, I wondered how the session would go. After all, I was meeting him in duress, and he was accustomed to being a master of his universe. I knew this because of his public accomplishments. I needn't have worried. He was completely open to me, and once he saw that I had skill in my field, openly craved my input. This was a relief, but I have good relationships with almost all of my clients, so I thought about it no further. The second person had extraordinary wealth, even by wealthy standards. So, once again, I wondered whether he would use this as a barrier to working with a decidedly non-wealthy therapist. Again, it was no issue. His nickname for me was "coach." The third such person had built a very successful company single-handedly. When I noted with delight that he had the same receptivity, I finally saw the pattern.

These were all men, you'll note. Men are not the most likely gender to admit confusion and allow someone else to be the expert. These men were the most lacking in defensiveness of any male clients I had ever met. A friend of one of them once shared how he had leaned to become so successful. Without prompting from me, she confirmed what I now suspected. He had shown the same wide-open receptivity, the same "coachability" in finding mentors who could show him how to make money.

In fact, these are the two main factors in success. One must develop follow-through, as we discussed in the previous section, and one must learn to lose one's defensiveness. However, like the first challenge, overcoming defensiveness is easier said than done for attention-divergence-difficulty folks.

Remember all those names we are accustomed to being called? That stupid-lazy-irresponsible label is a deadly triad when it comes to staying open to coaching. We are certain that "they" are wrong about their negative judgments about us, and so they are. In order to succeed, however, we have to become just as clear about the areas where we have a lot to learn.

For instance, I never needed to learn how to talk to groups. The first time I stood and gave a report in elementary school, I loved the attention and the class thought I was funny. Score one for me. On the other hand, I did not know how to change rigid patterns of behavior, and when dealing with people one-on-one, I often became tense. I wouldn't have made much of a psychotherapist. Well, this is exactly what I eventually decided I wanted to be. While I could be arrogant about a lot of things back then, I knew better than to fool myself about this. So, when I found the right mentor for me, Tom Sargent, I was as responsive to his coaching as the above group was to their mentors in business. Once I developed expertise, I recognized it and then, with Tom's blessing and encouragement, I grew my own style. But, I began by "doing" Tom, pure and simple.

That is what coachability is. You first attempt to completely duplicate your coach, and only later do you put your personal brand on it, maybe improving on the original learning.

So, this part takes an attitude change. Become like my wealthy clients. After you choose an area to learn, find a teacher or teachers. Feel worthy of their attention, since you are not stupid- lazy-irresponsible, but unusually creative and intense. Know what you don't know, and let someone else know what you don't know.

Part V: Improving Concentration

The previous sections are a good start to improve focus for getting things done and developing the traits for success. People with attention divergence difficulties also have problems in solving their problems, that is, thinking through things. In this last section, I have specific steps to help mental focus and to help problem solving:

1. Pick one subject at a time to work on. This is essential and can be accomplished with practice. To start, you can write down all the other problem areas nagging at you so that you can focus on one without fearing that you will forget about the rest.
2. Look at what's good, or at least less bad than it could be, in the situation. This helps reduce distress and thus improves concentration.
3. Look at what's missing, incomplete or distressing about the situation. Ask yourself what could go wrong, or could go more wrong?
4. Make it concrete: take the previous step and make it as specific as you can. In other words, describe what is missing or the worst that could happen in words that make pictures and sounds, like a script. Describe it like you are explaining a video-tape to someone over the phone.

5. Correct the picture: now make the script the what you would prefer it to be.

6. Come up with a single step: ask what next act would move things toward that desirable end and when you would like to do it.

This ends the special report. Hope you found it helpful.