

The AD/HD Brain Feels Like This: One Woman's Personal History

I must have been among the first children in North America to take Methylphenidate.

In 1963 or so I was identified as a kindergartener with a problem. I couldn't lie still on my nap mat, I interrupted, and could not focus on tasks at hand. My mother made a chain of safety pins for my mat so I would have something to do at that time.

I was cared for by our pediatrician who was just out of med school. He diagnosed "hyperactivity" and prescribed Ritalin. He felt that a child's self esteem was of primary importance to development. Success, achievement, and fitting in with others for the sole purpose of having positive social experiences are what self esteem is made of and as important as the content of the curriculum at hand.

It was helpful to me. I knew it helped me to be a better student. I don't know what my grades were as a youngster. I did not perceive it as a negative thing at the time. I believe the young pediatrician was correct. I had a loving and supportive family to boot. I felt supported by those decisions.

I took Ritalin until the fifth grade. At that time, the thinking was that kids grew out of the disorder. I then discontinued the medication as was the practice. My fifth grade teacher noticed that I had changed immediately. I seemed distracted and unable to sit still. I did not like displeasing a teacher I admired. I did not like being a problem to anyone. I'm sure I decided I should be special to people on purpose. It is a good thing I was extroverted by temperament; an introverted child would feel more shame than I did.

In junior high and high school, I was a mediocre student academically. I avoided classes that required focused concentration, like math, physics, biology, history, literature, etc. I excelled in visual art and theater. I made many mistakes of judgment as a young person. It was also a difficult time for parents to raise teenagers. I hung around with kids who were not participating in "the system." I looked for the creative, kinetic alternative to anything the educational system offered me. I was voted the most popular girl in my class, etc., successful as a person but not well prepared for a higher academic education, nor was I interested. I graduated from high school with a 2.7 GPA, and proud of my lack of interest in academics, I decided to pursue art seriously (as if they were unrelated).

I was accepted at a prestigious art college. Graduated second in my class, won a Governor's medal, etc. Did well in an artistic educational community where my way of moving through the world was rewarded. I became a textile designer, then a graphic designer. A "creative professional."

However, I ended up with a 9-5 day job in an office environment in which I have corporate clients, serious deadlines, creative angst on a schedule, employees, one chair, a big window, lots of fires to put out, phone ringing frequently, etc. I was coping well

enough but always felt way behind schedule, dependent on my partner, and not very good at what I do—which isn't true.

About 6-7 years ago, I realized I was living in constant fear of my inability to think during the day. My list of things to do remained undone at noon and at 5:00. I spent many years of my adult life staying up late to make up for what I had not accomplished daily; every weekend vowing to catch up everything I did not do during the week; and every summer, that which I did not do last winter, and so on. I did not realize that nearly every important life decision I made as an adult was influenced by my lack of trust in myself. Later I became aware that it was my brain I did not trust. I knew I could not rely on my thinking process to focus, make decisions, follow a path of craftsmanship that would result in something that was finished and closed up. I was miserable.

During a physical that year my long-time family practitioner asked how I really was. I confessed fears about my brain. My father was dying slowly of Alzheimer's; I was hypersensitive, was afraid that I was losing my mind or aping my father's deterioration. I was afraid that I was truly incompetent even though I felt like an intelligent, curious, appreciative and creative person. He helped me to identify that I continue to suffer ADD.

ADD has been a serious learning disability for me all my life. Ritalin has helped me at any time I have ever taken it. As an adult it has made a critical difference in my performance and my self esteem. I do not experience side effects. I do not always take it on weekends or on vacation, or even on light days at work. It is a drug; I respect and use it, and am aware of the distinction.

I can share what it feels like to live with a brain that lets you down. For me, the ADD brain feels like this; some metaphors:

A constant state in which fast-running rivers of ideas can't be grabbed with the fingers—real accomplishment left like a wet film on the hands.

Time is like a big, white, open space, no structure to the future, no benchmarks. At 9:00 am I have to work very hard to organize goals in 3 hour blocks. Sometimes I do not succeed. Imagine the week ahead with everyone's appointments to sort out. Or as a young school child, sorting out the backpack every day, sorting reading goals from that long-term bird report.

Disorganization is the enemy, consumes huge amounts of concentration to battle it daily. I am very unsettled by messy, cluttered spaces, feels like first sorting five gallon buckets of junk mail before I can attend to any kind of work. Have to clean it all up just to think.

Any event outside oneself—the phone, a window, a breeze, a scent, offers as much interest as the task at hand, even as you make a living or take a test.

Opportunities may offer fear of failures, and will require daunting investments of energy in comparison to the next person—why bother if you won't get it done on time or in budget? I have to be positive—be positive or die a professional death!

For some, social situations offer frequent embarrassment, it isn't polite to interrupt or to digress in a random way. If I were not a creative person, and not extroverted by temperament, I would skip socializing—too much trouble, and relationships can be too much trouble, too.

Keeping it specific to each unique person's experience is the best policy for decision-making. I hope that this personal history helps some one.