

### **THE KEY TO TREATING ADD: FIND THE BURIED TREASURES**

The best way to think of ADD is not as a mental disorder but as a collection of traits and tendencies that define a way of being in the world. There is some positive to it and some negative, some glory and some pain. If the negative becomes disabling, then this way of being in the world can become a disorder. The point of diagnosis and treatment is to transform the disorder into an asset.

Most treatment focuses on what goes wrong in the world of ADD. But, if treatment is to be as transformative as possible, it must look for the treasures. It must ferret out the hidden strengths, the potential talents. It must discover where the brain lights up.

No matter how old a person is, if she has ADD she has more talent than she thinks she has. Don't shudder at this diagnosis. Take it for what it is: an opportunity to make life better. Some diagnoses—like cancer or heart disease—herald the beginning of hard times, but the diagnosis of ADD should mark the end of the worst times and the start of better times.

Especially in adults, by the time the diagnosis finally gets made, a lot of bad years may have piled up. The diagnosis of ADD tips all that to the good. When this diagnosis is made, right on that very day, right at the moment of diagnosis, the diagnosis shifts the bad that has happened into the light of science and out of the darkness of moral condemnation.

“What are ADD people good at?” My answer is, “You never know. But whatever you do, don't stop looking.” You can't predict what your talent will be. Maybe we should call it mining, rather than treatment. Whatever you call it, the development of talent is a crucial but often neglected goal of the process.

When you first receive the diagnosis, you may feel afraid. This diagnosis may sound ominous, containing the words deficit and disorder, but you need not be afraid. All the diagnostic terms that have ever been used suffer from one serious flaw: they all emphasize what's wrong and state nothing about what's right. This is the tradition in medical diagnosis, of course. Try to counteract that if you can by asking whomever makes your diagnosis to point out the strengths in you. If he does not do that, do it yourself, or speak to someone who will.

### **STIMULANT MEDICATION**

People often wonder how a stimulant can help someone who has ADD. After all, people with ADD often seem *overly* stimulated. But the term stimulant is misleading. A good way to think of what a stimulant does is that it stimulates the brakes in the brain. It stimulates the inhibitory circuits. People with ADD tend to have trouble inhibiting incoming stimuli hence they are distractible. And they have trouble inhibiting outgoing stimuli hence they are impulsive and restless or hyperactive. Stimulant medication helps them curtail both distractibility as well as impulsivity and hyperactivity by stimulating their braking system, their inhibitory neurons. Like the brakes in a car, stimulant medications allow the brain to slow down enough to gain control.

When stimulants work they improve mental focus and bolster executive functions (e.g., planning, prioritizing, organizing). They sharpen mental focus the same way eyeglasses sharpen vision. With improved mental focus comes improved performance, greater patience, reduced irritability, better organization, more effective use of creativity, and a host of other benefits. If properly monitored, the side effects should be minimal.

## **PHYSICAL EXERCISE: A GREAT TREATMENT FOR ADD AND A MAGIC TONIC FOR YOUR BRAIN**

Especially important for those who have ADD, exercise also promotes mental focus, making it an excellent treatment for ADD. Regular exercise promotes sustained attention, the ability to stay alert and remain on task. Regular exercise builds mental endurance and reduces mental fatigue.

Not only does physical exercise provide preventive maintenance against ADD, it also is an excellent treatment in an ADD emergency, what I call a mental meltdown. Lets say you are paying your bills and you are starting to get spacey, or you are working on an important presentation and you are starting to daydream, or you are studying for an exam but you are starting to forget what you are reading. In all of these acute situations, exercise will help. Instead of going to the refrigerator or grabbing a cup of coffee, first try getting up from your chair and doing twenty-five jumping jacks or running up and down a flight of stairs a few times. A quick burst of exercise is like pushing the reset button on your brain. It totally changes your brains chemistry and leaves you feeling refreshed and focused.

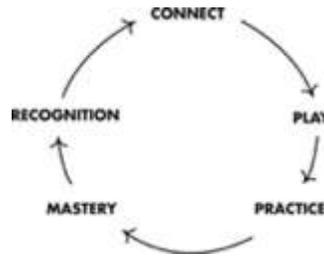
### **POWERFUL EXERCISES FOR THE BRAIN THAT IMPROVE ATTENTION**

1. Position one blank sheet of paper to your right and another to your left; then take a pencil in each hand. Simultaneously, draw a vertical line on the right sheet and a circle on the left sheet. Repeat three times, alternating figures on the right and left sheets.
2. Draw a triangle on one sheet while drawing a square on the other. Then switch: draw the square on the first sheet and the triangle on the other.
3. Draw a circle on one sheet while drawing a triangle on the other. Switch figures and do it again.
4. Draw two circles on one sheet while drawing one square on the other. Then switch.
5. Draw two squares on one sheet while drawing one triangle on the other. Then switch.
6. Draw a triangle on one sheet while drawing a square on the other and also tracing a circle on the floor with one leg. Then switch hands (and switch to the other leg).
7. Draw a circle with one hand and a triangle with the other while tracing a square on the floor with one leg. Then switch all.
8. Draw a triangle with one hand and two squares with the other while tracing a circle on the floor with one leg. Then switch all.
9. Draw a triangle with one hand and a square with the other while tracing a circle on the floor with one leg and nodding your head twice forward and twice backward.
10. Draw a triangle with one hand and a square with the other while tracing a vertical line with the leg on the same side as the hand that is drawing the triangle, and a horizontal line with leg on the same side as the hand that is drawing the square. Then switch all.

These are extremely difficult but dont despair. Do as many as you can in ten to fifteen minutes. Just like when you go to the gym, the key is to keep at it. Gradually you will see results. Your attention will improve.

## HOW TO FIND THE BURIED TREASURES: FIVE STEPS

To thrive in life you need to find out what you are best at, then build upon those talents and skills. You need a plan. I developed a five-step method that can be used in childhood or adulthood. This method helps lead a person to a deeply satisfying, joyful life.



### 1. CONNECT

The starting point is the feeling of connectedness. This is the most important part of the cycle. You want to create a feeling of being a part of something positive, something larger. Creating a connected life is the key to happiness and health. But what do I mean by a connected life?

- *Family.* This is the core connection for most people. But don't worry if you don't feel connected there, you can find connectedness elsewhere. And remember, connection and conflict go hand in hand. If you have conflict in your family, that means it is connected. The opposite of connection is not conflict; it is indifference.
- *Friends and community.* For many people, their circle of friends becomes like an extended family.
- *School or work.* If you feel welcomed and treated fairly at school or at work, and if you have one or two friends there, you will do much better than if you don't.
- *Activities.* If you can find a few activities that you really love to do, chances are that you can build joy, confidence, and self-esteem by doing them, even if they do not relate to school or work.
- *The arts.* Music, painting, literature, movies, dance, sculptures all these and more. The arts offer a connection that almost everyone can derive great joy from.
- *Groups, teams, organizations.* Whether it be a club or a team or a committee in an organization that you believe in, these kinds of connections convey a feeling of purpose and being needed.
- *Pets.* Some of the deepest feelings of warmth and positive energy come from our pets.
- *Nature.* This connection offers strength, joy, and inspiration As well as places to play all our lives.
- *Ideas and information.* What matters here is that you feel comfortably connected in the world of ideas and information. Fear and shame are the great disconnectors here. Make sure shame and fear do not contaminate any learning environment. They are the truly dangerous learning disabilities.
- *The spiritual world.* Whatever your connection might be to what is beyond knowledge, it is worthwhile to cultivate it, in whatever way your beliefs or traditions suggest.

- *The past.* By developing an awareness of your heritage, your traditions, and the stories of your ancestors, you gain a clearer sense of why you are here now, which in turn connects you to the deeper meanings of life.
- *Yourself.* People who have ADD often feel quite uncomfortable with themselves. The best remedy is to bolster their connections outside of themselves.

Creating a connected life takes time, and it requires work to maintain it over a lifetime. But if you tend to it regularly, you will find that many of the stresses that afflict other people do not affect you nearly as severely. A balanced, connected life leads to a sturdy kind of joy that hard times cannot easily strike down.

## **2. PLAY**

The connected individual of any age naturally feels safe and secure enough to go to step 2 in the cycle, which is play. By play, I mean something deeply and profoundly formative any activity in which you become imaginatively involved. The opposite of play is doing exactly what you are told.

When you play, your brain lights up. This is where you could find joy for the rest of your life, so take note when it happens. You will not be able to play at everything you do. But when you do find an activity you can play at, an activity where your brain lights up, you have found the gold. The best way to mine the gold in any brain is to play.

When you play, you are likely to enter a state of *flow*. In flow, you become one with what you are doing. You forget who you are and where you are. Your brain glows. The more activities you try, the more likely you are to find one where your imagination kicks in and you play, and maybe even enter into flow.

## **3. PRACTICE**

Once you find some activity in which you can play, you want to do it over and over again. This is called practice, which is step 3. Practice that emerges out of play is practice you want to do. You don't have to be hounded to do it; you want to do it. Here is where habits of discipline develop that will last for a lifetime.

## **4. MASTERY**

As you practice, you naturally achieve mastery, which is step 4. By mastery I do not mean that you are the best, just that you are getting better. This feeling of making progress is the key to self-esteem and confidence, as well as motivation.

People with ADD often suffer from low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and little or no motivation. The best remedy for that is to lead them through these steps to mastery. It is on these islands of competence, as psychologist Robert Brooks calls them, that self-esteem, confidence, and motivation take root and grow.

## **5. RECOGNITION**

As you gain mastery, other people notice and value what you are doing. This is step 5, recognition. Recognition not only consolidates the feelings of self-esteem and confidence that mastery engendered, it connects you to the people who have recognized you. This is the root of moral behavior.

This cycle will develop talents and strengths, as well as naturally provide the desire to achieve without resorting to fear or nagging as motivational tools.

The most common mistake people make is to jump in at step 3 and demand practice. That may work in the short term, but over the long haul it usually peters out. You should put your most concerted efforts into steps 1 and 2. The rest will flow.☐