

An Honest Discussion about ADHD and Self Medication

A little story with a big boogeyman

I've been diagnosed with ADHD more times in my life than I've stubbed my toe or hit my funny bone combined. Quite often people will comment that I also have a bit of OCD (more on that later). I wanted to take some time to explore how I have turned my so called "disorder" into positive adaptations that have brought me success and an interesting life. I also wanted to examine how my failed attempts at self-medication has caused destruction of those successes and held me back. All told, when I am thinking clearly I can honestly say I would never trade this so called "disorder" for anything.

I'm going to start by framing the view of ADHD I have come to adopt, it was once explained to me that ADD, ADHD, and many other similar so called disorders are in fact nothing more than different evolutionary types of "brain wiring". The tag "disorder" is merely a societal method of coping with a version of personality that may not fit the present view of "normal". To be more detailed as it relates to ADHD vs. "The Norm" it was described as a hunter / farmer relationship. It is not so much that we have developed disorders as it is that society itself has changed.

The hunter (being ADHD) has to maintain a high level of alertness and be ready to snap into quick hyper focused action during a hunt, or dangerous situation. The farmer (current norm) has to maintain a great deal of routine planting, watering, sowing crops on a clockwork schedule. This made perfect sense to me and I have built on this theory since it was first presented to me as a young man. Centuries ago the hunter could have been considered the norm or, in the very least the respected ones in society as survival required the natural skills to respond and react to danger for protection as well as prey for sustenance. Whereas presently in most modern cultures systems are in place to provide our protection, food, materials, and services for us without the need to hunt them down. Society itself has changed to a more routine mindset and over a great number of decades this mindset has become the norm pushing other thought patterns out into the fringes that we label "disorders".

So now that I have described my viewpoint on ADH (omit the D) let me go back to the OC (again omitting the D) has come to play in my life. I have always been incredibly disorganized (a common trait for ADD / ADHD of course) often late, forgetting commitments, masterful at procrastination, quick to panic (and often get flash angry) when things spiraled out of control. Over time I began to **force** myself to organize, keeping things "just so" and religiously using alarms, lists, and stacks of notebooks to "normalize" my life. I ***Made*** myself OCD! Did I need to go to such lengths? Probably not, but the structure put me in a position to be incredibly superior in what I did, efficient and effective.

Well, hooray? One of the dynamics of ADHD is that of extremes, extremely distracted, extremely focused, extreme emotions, and so on. As I began to **achieve** my personality changed immeasurably, often cocky and egotistical, opinionated, boisterous, argumentative, and overly driven, I became an ass. I developed a fear of failure and a need for achievement that was so intense that success itself became an end game that meant I would no longer have something to do. This end game had to be avoided at all costs, add to this a deep seated emotional view that I didn't deserve success, and a self-destructive cycle that would inevitably devastate my life as I knew it began.

Something happened to me, I became human. I had injected myself into a lifestyle that was hyper paced with little to zero room for a recharge. I had stormed castles that were beyond my ability to protect after capture, pillaged items that I had no means of transporting, I had overextended myself without consideration for anything, completely reckless. I began to self-medicate, drinking at first to relax and calm down, or in many cases to wine and dine a potential client, to be social, nothing too heavy.

Moderation and judgement were short lived, as soon in the same ways that I had trained myself to be obsessive / compulsive about my organization I had trained myself to be a highly functioning alcoholic. I could perform the most complex and intricate tasks perfectly while under the influence. This combination of achievement mixed with self-medication worked for me, until it didn't.

I very quickly began making mistakes, forgetting to do things, losing my edge. The emotional distress caused by failure, or sometimes just **perceived** failure brought me to my knees. I began drinking to black out and numb myself no longer did I care about the buzz or enjoyment. Socially having a few drinks gave way to hiding in my workshop drinking vodka straight by the gallon with passing out being the only thing that would stop consumption; coming to and restarting the process at the wee hours of the morning.

I had crossed a very thin line from a treacherous path directly into absolute obliteration of my life as I knew it. I spent the next several years in a repetitive cycle of clawing my way to recovery only to fall right back into the pit of relapse, soon I had torched all but my own mere existence. At the time of this writing I am sober, slowly and carefully working to reconstruct my life. I say reconstruct rather than rebuild as I have come to the realization that in order for me to continue I must work towards something that does not resemble what I was.

I originally started this article thinking that I might do a list of "tips" on ADHD self-management; I had a pretty good start until I began to truly examine my experiences over the long run. Lucky for me there is this wonderful invention called the backspace key! I decided instead to illustrate my view of ADHD and the plight I experience that is self-medication and perhaps finish off with some positive lessons that I have learned. I am a firm believer that mistakes are nothing more than learning opportunities that begin with a negative consequence. This does not make mistakes bad, in fact it is probably more beneficial to start with the negative and end with the positive rather than the other way around (this thought may be a topic for another discussion).

So, in many self-improvement and recovery programs there are aspects of creating "lists" if you will of ideas, goals, accomplishments, dreams, mistakes, etc. 12 step groups often refer to this as an "inventory", many of the RBT (rational behavioral therapy) or CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) types use "lifestyle balance" tools. In any case I thought it important to look over some of my own past "lists" to continue this article. Below is a small cropping of notes I took while going over several journals and lists that I have created (the types of tools I used will be in the footnotes):

Positives	Negatives
Serial Entrepreneur	Flighty and aloof

Self-taught high level IT	High strung
Flexible in task shifting	Low frustration tolerance
Successfully built business	Poor time management
High level of economic understanding	Poor personal finance management
Ability to learn new things very quickly	Bored with new things very quickly
High level of analytics	Overly critical at times
Incredibly fast at accomplishing tasks	Often cannot say no
Able to talk to anyone	Sometimes present false masks to protect myself
Driven	Low self esteem

This is in no way an exhaustive list, in fact creating this list was exhausting!! The good news here as I see it is that ***I'm examining my strengths and weaknesses***. Again I must state that I am program agnostic however, the 12 step program has a very immaculate way of describing this in the terms of "taking inventory" and "defects of character". My personal experience is that it is all too easy to get lost in the negatives when taking such an intensive look at myself and with my new goal of reconstruction I decided to focus on the positive aspects and try and narrow what has become a 2 page list of sometimes incoherent ramblings down to a simple sentence.

I am a flexible individual who is highly energetic, driven, curious, and capable of attacking new challenges while maintaining a high degree of integrity, honesty, and open communication.

That simple statement took me hours to come up with, and I am seriously considering writing it on my bathroom mirror with a dry erase marker much like I used to write my to do list when I first started my career in IT. My point for this whole long explanation of my history with ADHD and self-medication is that self-medication in itself is not always bad; *it is the way in which we choose to self-medicate that defines the results.*

To further explain my theory on this I would like to describe my new methods of working with my so called "disorder". With my reconstruction I have really put a lot more effort on living a healthier lifestyle, my sleeping habits, my morning routines, the food I eat, beverages I consume, my activity as a whole. In the past I kept myself so busy with my drive that I often forgot to take care of myself, I have found that changing this dynamic has helped me to become a lot more rational and has opened a window of opportunity for me to learn a better way to control my shifting of focus.

While this method of self-management is new to me, I can attest that even in these early stages I feel much more centered, focused, at peace with my history, and overall I am happy with the direction I am going. It has been a long time since I could say that! And yes I am still driven, excitable, inquisitive, energetic, and scatterbrained at times but I am back to learning how to harness those traits rather than shutting them out with alcohol. Since beginning this journey of attempting to write a positive article for each day I have noticed an overall general calm about myself, I've experienced no cravings, no urges, not even a thought of my affliction as it relates to today or tomorrow.

My hope is that I can maintain this forward progress and become a better human being I owe it to myself as well as my family and friends; and I would like to think that maybe, just maybe my smattering of words into the internet might help someone else.

Take it out of park,

~Joe