

# My ADHD Journey

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My ADHD journey starts with my diagnosis in March of 2006 at age 15. I felt different throughout my childhood, but I didn't know why. I had a wild and crazy imagination which took me to vibrant worlds waiting to be explored. It was hard to leave those worlds to live in the present. As a toddler, I spent hours playing alone with Hot Wheels cars. I created complex stories where there was a massive traffic jam that a late-to-work father had to navigate, or where I drove to the grocery store to shop or got into car accidents. I entertained myself for hours. This was my normal.

I was a good student in elementary school, quiet and conscientious. There were signs, however, that I had difficulties with attention. On my kindergarten report card, Ms. Cappelletti, wrote that I "was a pleasant young boy who enjoyed playing with puzzles. His ability to focus remains inconsistent, however."

In middle school, I continued to do well. The structure at school and home masked what lurked beneath the surface. I had a difficulty making and keeping friends and developed a social anxiety as I struggled to make meaningful friendships. I wanted to be liked by others and this desire only worsened my anxiety.

High school was difficult from the first day. My social anxiety increased and my grades plummeted. I couldn't pay attention in class. I couldn't take good notes. I was unable to keep up. With social pressures growing and stress at home from parents on my case, my self-confidence evaporated. I kept thinking, "What is wrong with me?" "Am I stupid?" I could no longer mask my attention deficiencies and my parents had me see a psychologist.

He conducted numerous tests. His conclusion: I operated on a 9-12 year old level, although I was 15. The test results suggested my performance wasn't due to intelligence but rather to a "failure to attend appropriately." The psychologist wrote, "On a number of occasions David failed to successfully meet rather basic task demands, but then exhibited far greater skill when encountering more complex expectations." This is something I've learned about the ADHD brain; it

performs best when faced with challenges. We want something that excites our brains, something stimulating, that challenges us to find a solution to a complex problem. I was diagnosed with "Significant Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder of the Inattentive Type." The psychologist recommended that I take medication and learn coping strategies.

As a side note, I never saw the results of the tests until a couple of years ago when I finally became interested in my brain and my ADHD. At the time of the tests, I was simply told I had ADHD. I didn't even know the result of the IQ test, which would have reassured me that I had potential and wasn't "stupid." If I was told, which is possible, I missed it because I wasn't paying attention!

How did I respond to my diagnosis? I believed something was wrong with me. It was something I needed to hide and cover up. Others with ADHD often feel the same way when they get diagnosed. Perhaps it is the way the diagnosis is presented to us and how others react when they learn of our diagnosis.

Throughout high school and college, I did my best to cope, never admitting to myself that I had ADHD. As a result, I didn't seek help or assistance. I refused extra time on tests, wanting to prove I wasn't broken, that ADHD didn't define me, that I could overcome it. I agreed to medication, which partially helped, but I didn't put any coping strategies in place. I waited until the last minute to do papers and projects. I studied twice as long and twice as hard as others to get B grades. Because I was never consistently "present" during classes, I learned the subject matter, essentially for the first time, alone, in the college library where I hunkered down and to absorb the information.

The most painful area in my life was athletics. I was a good soccer player. I hyper-focused on technique and got lost in the joy of improving my skills. Playing pickup soccer was my favorite activity. The freedom to express myself through soccer made me incredibly happy.

However, it was a different story as a player on my high school soccer team. Because of my inability to pay consistent attention, I frequently messed up the practice drills. Then the coach criticized me for not paying attention. I was sensitive and his criticism, which was routine, was intensely painful. When the coach explained a new drill, I tried my hardest to pay attention, but it wasn't enough. My poor working memory caused me to mess up the drills and get called

out for not paying attention. One unforgettable day, my coach called me “retarded” in front of my teammates. I struggled with self-confidence and couldn’t stand up for myself. Instead, this hurtful moment flooded through my veins. I sat down and replayed the event over and over, wondering why paying attention and remembering was so hard for me.

I developed a severe anxiety about going to soccer practice. I wondered if I would be called out again. Thinking of that coach and how he treated me are my worst ADHD memories. Why didn’t I quit the team? Why did I put up with it? Why didn’t I tell the coach I had ADHD? I don’t have the answers. I loved soccer and I was not a quitter. I had overcome adversities in the past, and I thought I could do it again, even though it meant additional battle scars.

I share my painful memories to help others who have painful experiences because of ADHD and decreased self-confidence and self-worth. Dr. Edward Hallowell's writes about the feelings of shame associated with ADHD. He writes about how shame develops due to repeated minor traumas while growing up--- all the times teachers called you out for not paying attention, coaches berated you, friends poked fun at you, and relationships were lost. These add up. When I thought of all the minor traumas in my life, it hit me like a brick. I had wrongly attributed my bad experiences to my failings as a person, not to my poorly treated ADHD.

I finished college with a B average and a degree in Business and Economics. My first job was as a mutual fund accounting analyst at a large investment company. I excelled. My interest in investing, coupled with a work environment well suited for someone with ADHD, (there was structure and a clear definition of my job) allowed me to shine. I was promoted within six months to Senior Accountant.

I decided to pursue the gold standard designation for financial analysts, a CFA. To earn it, you have to pass three notoriously hard exams. Looking back, I believe my main motivation for pursuing the CFA was to prove my capabilities. I channeled my hyper-focus into studying for the first exam and passed. And it did feel good! But I didn’t take the next two required exams. Passing the first exam, which only 26% of applicants do, was enough of a win for me and boosted my self-confidence.

I became a financial advisor in my father’s company. It took me a long time to develop the confidence to manage other people's money. Even though I provided

excellent service for my clients, I felt like an imposter. Am I cut out for this? What if I make a huge mistake? Can I exude confidence to new prospects and clients when I am insecure and uncertain? To make matters worse, I didn't manage my personal finances well. I spent money impulsively, trying to make myself feel better. I had built up a crippling amount of debt. I was not practicing what I preached. This added fuel to my internal voice telling me, "You aren't qualified for this work."

Fast forward a few years to my big aha moment. Listening to *Delivered from Distraction* was life-changing. It was the first time I came to grips with my ADHD. It was eerie how this book understood me. Reading it was therapeutic for me. I began piecing together the story of my life and realized how many of my hardships were linked to my ADHD. I read every book on ADHD that I could get my hands on and developed a deeper understanding of my brain.

It is crazy, and sad, that I was diagnosed for 13 years with ADHD before understanding what it meant and how it impacted me. I wasn't stupid, dumb, braindead, or a moron. I am a dreamer. I'm creative. I'm driven and persistent and have ingenuity. Learning about ADHD was like being "re-diagnosed." I experienced the relief many feel when they get their diagnosis. Today, I am proud of my progress and my ADHD traits.

I realized there are many with ADHD who have experiences similar to mine. Whether they are diagnosed or not, I know there are people who will relate to my story. While I am not a doctor and not a life coach, I do have something to offer those with ADHD. I know about investing and personal finance. I know effective money management is difficult for people with ADHD.

I needed to practice what I preached—good personal financial management. Through trial and error, I created a system that works for me and, I know, will work for others. I happily found my mission in life -- helping others with ADHD create secure financial futures.