

Attention Deficit Disorder and “Artistic Temperament”

by Bonnie Mincu

Understanding ADD

Artists have often been stereotyped as having an “artistic temperament.” This phrase has been used to explain many traits, including moodiness, quick temper, chronic forgetfulness, disorganization, jumping from one project to another, and obsession with one’s work. These are also typical traits of a person with Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD.

ADDers are usually highly intelligent and creative. It is not surprising that many successful artists have ADD, since the characteristics of ADD lend themselves to excelling in the arts. However, it would certainly be a mistake to say that all artists have ADD. And while some aspects of ADD work in the artist’s favor, other aspects can create challenges to achieving work and life success.

ADD is a genetic, neurological disorder involving the brain functions that govern attention. Because an ADDer’s neurotransmitters aren’t functioning efficiently, a person who truly has ADD finds it difficult, if not impossible, to focus and sustain attention on activities that don’t interest them. Conversely, if an ADDer is very interested in something, he or she has great difficulty shifting attention away from the interest and onto something else. This is referred to as “hyper-focusing.”

For example, if you had ADD, simply knowing that you should be interested in sending out marketing letters to galleries doesn’t mean that you are genuinely interested in this task. Therefore, you may find it very difficult to get started on researching gallery addresses, composing the letters, and getting them out.

Hyper-focusing, for a painter, could mean that once you start a painting you lose all track of time, forgetting other responsibilities. You may find yourself neglecting to have dinner, return phone calls, pick up the cleaning -- or attending to many other aspects of everyday life. ADDers who get caught up in their work to this extent can create friction in their interpersonal relationships, unintentionally hurting the feelings of family and friends who feel forgotten.

The first step for anyone wanting to create strategies for their life around ADD is to determine if they actually have it. ADD used to be considered primarily a disorder of hyperactive little boys. It is now known that hyperactivity need not be present. Girls are at least as likely as boys to have ADD, but more likely have a “hypo-focus,” or day-dreaming kind of ADD rather than hyperactivity. This means that their attention wanders, but they aren’t necessarily jumping out of their chair. People with the hypo-focus kind of ADD are less likely to have been diagnosed as children, since they often can do well in school or organizational structure.

People do not outgrow ADD. If you had ADD as a child, you still have it as an adult. Physical hyperactivity usually does ease off with adolescence.

ADD runs very strongly in families. Many adults only get diagnosed with ADD when it is brought to their attention that their child has it. They then reach new insights into many things about their

own life that has puzzled them. They often realize that their parents and/or siblings had traits of ADD as well. It is common to find different kinds of ADD within families: for example, a brother with hyperactivity ADD and a sister with hypofocus ADD.

The 5 “P’s” to Identify ADD:

The traits listed below are typical of ADD. To suspect ADD, a person should have several of these traits, and be affected by them in the following ways:

1. Persistence - the trait is present more often than not, from an early age
- Pervasiveness - the trait is present in many different areas of a your life
- Prohibiting quality of life - disrupting work success, relationships, self-esteem
- Processing - affecting brain functions such as memory, organization, judgment, and ability to prioritize.
- Progress- can't seem to progress, despite high IQ and creativity

Typical ADD Traits:

Ask yourself the following questions, testing your answers against the “5 P’s:” If you answer “YES” to at least 10 of these, you might want to get a proper diagnosis for treatment.

- Are you constantly distracted by thoughts or stimuli that interrupt actions or conversations?
- Are you often spacey or daydreaming, and have trouble concentrating?
- Do you have a preponderance of thoughts, with many ideas all coming at once?
- Do you focus so avidly on an interest that you forget about everything else?
- Have you been accused of being tactless, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time?
- Do you miss social cues, behaving or speaking inappropriately?
- Do you need to write or doodle in order to pay attention?
- Do you have trouble concentrating or sustaining focus on reading (not dyslexia)?
- Is your short-term memory poor?
- Are you chronically late, or do you have poor time judgment?
- Are you unable to work within the rules of a corporate or bureaucratic structure?
- Do you have difficulty working effectively without imposed structure?
- Do you live with chronic clutter and disorganization?
- Do you find it difficult to prioritize, or decide what should get done first?
- Are you unable to get started on tasks such as bill-paying, laundry, mundane paperwork?
- Do you usually procrastinate?
- Are you considered a perfectionist?
- Are your projects usually left uncompleted?
- Are you often angry, hurt or defensive, placing blame on yourself or others?
- Do you have a history of fractured relationships, misunderstandings?
- Do you think in black / white terms; things are either all good or all bad?
- Do you often take on more than you can realistically accomplish?

- Do you enjoy risk or thrills?
- Are you intolerant of boredom; have you often changed jobs, or the way you work?

Strategies for ADD Artists

If you answered “yes” to at least 10 of the questions above, you may believe that you do have Attention Deficit Disorder, and that it has created some challenges in your life. Now what?

The most effective treatment for ADD is medication, after being properly diagnosed by a knowledgeable diagnostician psychiatrist who can prescribe medication. When properly prescribed, medication is highly effective in treating ADD in more than 80 percent of ADDers. However, it is most important to work with a diagnostician who really understands ADD, and the other psychological conditions that often go along with it. Many ADDers also have conditions such as depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and learning disabilities. This makes it essential to be diagnosed by a psychiatrist who is familiar with the most current ADD medications.

While medication makes an immediate difference in helping to focus and sustain attention, “the pill won’t give you the skill.” So coaching with a trained ADD coach is designed to help you understand exactly how ADD is operating in you, and to create strategies for helping you thrive with your ADD rather than be defeated by it.

Here are some strategies for artists that have been effective in coaching clients. Individual coaching would help focus on particular strategies for you.

Pay attention to what you pay attention to.

Think about your attention regarding objects (paper and things), information and time. Determine which of these pose particular challenges for you.

Clutter - Is your home and work environment usually cluttered? Do you notice the mess, or does your eye pass right over it? Do you have to spend time looking for things, or do you know where everything is? Do you pick things up and put them down in another place unconsciously?

Information - Do you suffer from “information overload?” Do you forget what people tell you? Do you need to write things down to remember them?

Lateness - Are you chronically late? If so, is it because you are distracted in getting places? Do you have a good sense of time: can you sense how long five minutes is, or an hour?

- Strategy: A client was jeopardizing business and personal relationships because of his extreme lateness. We determined that he had no internal sense of how much time had passed: he had trouble telling the difference between five minutes and half an hour. He also had a poor sense of time strategy. For his appointments, he began writing out each step involved in preparing and getting to the appointment, and how long it would take. He

checked each step with his coach and his wife for a “reality check.” For instance, to get to a downtown meeting from his suburban home, he needed to plot out the time it would take to get materials ready, load the car, get to the highway, get downtown (figuring for traffic during that time of day), park the car in a paid garage, walk from the garage to the office building, take an elevator to the office for the meeting. By doing this exercise regularly, he began to realize how much he was underestimating how long each step took. Gradually, his time sense improved.

Pay attention to how you best function

Everyone has one or more modalities that are strongest for them, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (touching or movement). Understanding what works best for you to focus your attention will help you plan your strategies for functioning in all areas.

- *Strategy:* A person who usually doodles or must take notes when listening to a lecture or discussion is using the kinesthetic modality to focus. If you were to take the pen away from her, she might daydream, fidget, or have trouble concentrating. In situations where note-taking or doodling is inappropriate, having something tactile to rub in her fingers that can be kept in her pocket helps focus attention. Someone who has trouble remembering what he is told unless he sees it written down is operating with a visual modality. For this person, it would be wise to always carry a notepad and pen to jot down information immediately upon hearing it.

Pay attention to what interests you

We'll assume you are interested in your art. But within that, what kind of art projects really excite you? What kind bore you quickly? How much variety do you need to sustain your interest? Do you prefer to focus on one painting until it's finished, or do you like to start several and have them in various stages of completion?

- *Strategy:* If you find that you begin many projects without completing them, perhaps it is the “beginnings” that interest you most. Sustain your interest by constantly having a work in a beginning stage. Spend your day alternating between starting a new painting and working on an existing one.

Pay attention to what you procrastinate on

What kind of tasks do you know you should do, but have trouble either getting started or finishing? How important is it to do them? Are they important to your business or personal success, or are they taking up mental energy because someone else wants you to do them?

- *Strategy:* Write down everything that you feel you should do, but have not done, in a column. Next to each, write a U for Urgent, I for Important, and N for Not Important. Then create a visual 12-month calendar where you'll put each item. The Urgents should probably be

done in the next week, or even sooner. The Important tasks will be placed according to their time schedule, probably within three months. The Not Important tasks will be given a new determination, whether to “Do, Dump or Delegate.” For each Not Important task, decide whether you will do it, delegate it to someone else, or not do it at all.

- Review the Calendar you’ve created at least weekly, adding new items as necessary. For every task that doesn’t get completed as scheduled, determine why and look for patterns.

Pay attention to what distracts you

As an ADDer, when you are not in a heightened state of interest, you are easily distracted by stimuli. These may be physical (sights, sounds, smells), actual interruptions (people, phone calls, pets), or your own thoughts and ideas. ADDers are particularly challenged by distractions when they need to get mundane tasks completed.

Keep a journal of every distraction, and whether or not you act on it.

Determine patterns of the kinds of things that distract you and the way you deal with them.

Brainstorm ways you can deal with the distractions differently.

- Strategy: A musician found that he was distracted from completing his projects because he felt that he should answer his phone every time it rang. An investment in voicemail assured him that he wouldn’t miss any calls, yet gave him “permission” to ignore or shut off the phone. He also noticed in his “Distraction Journal” that he was jumping up to deal with thoughts of possible actions as soon as he had the thoughts. In the middle of practicing the piano, he would think of an email he needed to send and would go to the computer and send it. He felt compelled to do so for fear of forgetting to do it later. So he began keeping a small notebook in his pocket and writing down the thought as part of a “TO DO” list. He then made a habit of looking at the notebook between each planned activity. This allowed him to stick to a schedule of completing tasks in the time allotted.

Pay attention to your self-talk regarding your vision and goals

People with ADD have often grown up hearing judgmental opinions of themselves from other people who didn’t understand why the ADDer wasn’t performing as expected. If you have incorporated negative messages into what you believe about yourself, you may be sabotaging your chances of achieving your goals. If you catch yourself giving yourself messages of “I can’t” rather than “I will,” you may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Performance anxiety causes ADDers to freeze up, creating a situation where you fail only because you believe you will!

- Strategy: If you believe that you will not be able to achieve a vision or goal, ask yourself what’s the proof that you will fail. Most likely, there is no proof at all, only doubts and fears begun by other people. Behave *as if* you will succeed, and you’ll create the energy to do so. Confidence attracts; doubt repels. You may need to think about the messages that come to you from other people in your life: spouse, parents and friends. If these messages are negative, you do have the choice to mentally reject them.

Thomas Edison is generally recognized to have had ADD. Before succeeding in inventing the light bulb, he failed 10,000 times! When a reporter asked him if he wasn't discouraged with his failures, he answered that he didn't consider them failures. Rather, he had found 10,000 ways not to do it. This ultimately led to his success.

Bonnie Mincu is a Business and Personal Coach, specializing in coaching adults with ADD. She does coaching in person and over the phone with individuals, ADD couples, and coaching groups and classes. She is on the Board of the International Coaching Federation-New York Chapter, and does public speaking and training on Coaching and Leadership matters. She is also a painter.

Her website is www.bonniemincu.com. She can be reached at 212-614-7317, or bonnie@bonniemincu.com.