

Is Your Christmas Tree Still Up in July?

by **Bonnie Mincu**
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My Christmas tree is the first thing you see when you enter my apartment. It stands in front of the entrance hall, all four feet of it, in its permanent dried-silk glory.

I refer to it as a “non-denominational holiday shrub,” as there are no religious icons hanging from its branches. Prior to last Christmas, I had last put it up five years ago, promising myself that I would take it down by Valentine’s Day. February progressed into June, then September. When a friend pointed out that Labor Day was eight months past December, I decided to let the tree remain and make an eccentric statement. I took it down on Thanksgiving, vowing that I would not put it up again without a good reason. Considering that I am a single woman without children, who does not generally have company during the holidays, I figured it was safe in the closet for a while.

This year I had a dinner party on Christmas Eve for a miscellaneous collection of friends: Christmas “orphans” with out-of-state family and Jewish singles seeking reinforcement. It was time for the tree to make an appearance once again. But now, months later, the tree is still in my living room, the first object that greeted my mother’s eyes when she visited from Chicago. And it has become the refrain for her every phone call.

As a coach specializing in working with clients with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) traits, it is critical for me to notice what my clients pay attention to. The point is, the Christmas tree doesn’t grab my attention. It has faded into the woodwork of my vision. My eyes skip over it. I don’t notice it anymore.

The word “deficit” in ADD is a misnomer. A more accurate term might be “difference.” ADDers pay attention differently, and can be very different from each other. The most relevant factor is the way each ADD person filters information. My client, Sherry, for example, shuts off her attention from peripheral distractions that aren’t important to her at the moment. These include noticing misplaced Christmas trees, the color of the room she’s in, or even the details of familiar surroundings. She probably couldn’t recite with certainty the stores on her block. When she’s lost in thought, an acquaintance could walk right by her and she wouldn’t see them.

My friend Mike, conversely, has a filtering mechanism that doesn't function enough to shut out any distraction. He has a more classic type of ADD. He was the hyperactive child who, even now, notices and remarks upon everything. A conversation with Mike is constantly interrupted by his exclamations of excitement over things outside that catch his eye: an attractive woman, a barking dog, a waitress serving a dish three tables away.

Coaching Sherry and Mike requires not only helping them pay attention to how they pay attention, but also helping them to enlist other people's understanding. People with ADD-type attention issues have gone through their lives unwittingly frustrating and annoying people. Sherry has caused hurt feelings by "shunning" others whom she actually didn't notice as she passed them. Mike has made his conversation partners feel unheard when he breaks off their remarks mid-sentence to comment on an extraneous and irrelevant occurrence in his line of sight.

For people who genuinely have Attention Deficit Disorder, it is not a matter of "trying" to pay attention – their brains simply don't make connections the same way as other people's do. Correct diagnosis and medication brings about improvement in the way an ADDer's attention filter operates. Coaching helps the ADD individual realize how they've been accustomed to compensating in the world and in their relationships.

Once Mike began taking the medication Adderall, his distractibility was significantly lessened. Not only could he give his full attention to his conversational partner, but he was able to focus on completing projects as well. Working with a coach helped him set goals that were realistic and attainable. He realized that completing a thorough report was something he now could do in a concentrated day, rather than write it in inefficient snatches over two weeks.

As Sherry's coach, I worked with her to prepare a mental game plan for noticing more of a big picture. As an exercise, Sherry made herself consciously focus on what she saw around her for specific five-minute periods. When starting conversations with people she knew, she mentally refreshed her memory about previous conversations she had had with them to keep in mind what was happening in their lives.

Deciding to deal with my own overlooked clutter, I create an exercise of deliberately stopping, looking and reflecting on small areas of my apartment, one at a time. In doing so, I notice, not only the Christmas tree, but also a box of light bulbs, a roll of picture wire, and my laundry machine card sitting out on the hall table. These have been there for weeks. I decide to put them away, one at a time.

As for the Christmas tree, I conclude that it makes a festive whimsical statement. I'll make a point of consciously enjoying it for a few more weeks. And I enter a "TO DO" entry in my Palm Pilot to take it down on August 30.

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Bonnie Mincu is a business and personal coach specializing in working with ADD adults. Her clients include adults who have been diagnosed with ADD and those who simply have ADD-like traits – as well as people who have close interpersonal relationships with ADDers. Bonnie works with her clients to help them bring out their special strengths and gifts, and to understand exactly how their difficulties in attention have played a role in their lives. Through coaching, she helps them develop strategies for thriving with their ADD qualities in all aspects of their life going forward.