



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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LIVING WITH ADULT ADD

I always knew that I was smart, but I also knew that I had certain “idiosyncrasies” in learning and in dealing with deadlines. These idiosyncrasies manifested themselves from the very beginning of my legal career. I graduated cum laude from Harvard Law School in the early '70s and took an associate position with a prestigious firm. From day one I had trouble juggling assignments. When I enjoyed the subject matter of a research project, I would spend hours tracking down minor points of law and writing memos replete with largely irrelevant academic footnotes. However, if I found an assignment boring or difficult to tackle, I'd let it linger in my in-box until the assigning partner exhausted his patience and stopped giving me work.

In areas I enjoyed, such as civil litigation, depositions, and administrative hearings, I was creative in conjuring legal theories and very intuitive. I used my combative intensity well. I took on a court-appointed pro bono criminal case everyone else had abandoned. The senior partner was elated when I found unique grounds to appeal and won a favorable decision before the D.C. Court of Appeals, the first such success in the firm's history.

Despite my successes, or perhaps because of them, my uneven performance perplexed the firm. I was one of their “remedial troubled” associates, although I was considered bright and personable. With the negative feedback, I started doubting my skills and wondered if I had chosen the wrong profession. I, too, saw myself as a “remedial associate.” Several

missed deadlines and sloppy work on assignments that didn't interest me fueled a self-fulfilling spiral of disappointment. One day I asked for meatier projects, but the firm had had enough and suggested that I look for work elsewhere.

So I left the firm but, unfortunately, not my substandard work habits. I opened a litigation firm with two litigators and no structure. Free from unwanted supervision, I experienced the excitement of being in charge of my own cases. I also realized, however, that I was now responsible for the results of these cases. With little oversight, my bad habits remained, and I continued to doubt my skill as an attorney.

When my firm broke up after just one year, I went through a series of job changes, dragging my “idiosyncrasies” along with me. In seven years, I was an associate with three different firms; and in the subsequent fourteen years, I became a partner in four different firms. During that time I continually questioned my competence, despite having built a well-respected civil litigation practice. I had graduated in the top 10 percent of my class, yet I wondered if I was smart enough to make it as an attorney. My colleagues remarked on the inconsistency of my performance, which routinely ran the gamut from brilliant to dismal.

Mercifully, those years of erratic performance have been relegated to the past. I've been at my present firm for an amazing eight years, and I'm pleased with my ability to maintain a consistent level of performance that has increased the personal satisfaction I derive from practicing law.

The turning point came through hap-

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penance when my seven-year-old son was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD). I knew that ADD was hereditary, and I recognized many of his “symptoms” in my “habits.” After that initial self-diagnosis, I went to see my doctor, and I’ve been taking a form of Ritalin since 1995 with very positive results. My dosage is small, but the difference in my life is dramatic.

I have since learned that many adults and children are never correctly diagnosed with ADD. One reason may be that the main symptoms are often inattention and impulsivity, rather than physical hyperactivity. In addition, many people with ADD use their high intelligence and determination to mask ADD symptoms, although at great emotional cost.

Many undiagnosed but high-functioning individuals with ADD harbor feelings of poor self-worth. They often see themselves as failures and feel that they are constantly disappointing others. Over the years, an individual adapts to his or her ADD condition. The adaptations (both positive and negative) become part of the individual’s personality, layered over the ADD symptoms.

The ADD symptoms are many. Adults with ADD tend to be bored with detail-oriented, repetitive tasks. They also frequently have trouble planning ahead and initiating organization. Procrastination is common. Their impulsivity may result in frequent job changes, troubled romantic relationships, financial problems, and a tendency to interrupt others. ADD often leads to addictive behaviors, such as gambling or drug or alcohol abuse.

I now realize that my ADD was a negative factor in my law career from day one. I was unknowingly acting out many of the usual symptoms of adult ADD. On the standard questionnaires used to diagnose ADD tendencies, I always score very high. I’m still easily distracted, and I still seek high levels of (healthy) stimulation. While intuitive and creative, I have trouble following through and completing tasks. I multitask to the extreme and am still easily bored, but now I know how to channel my energies.

In the years following my diagnosis, I have made significant changes that have greatly improved my ability to function as a lawyer. I no longer dread pre-

paring answers to interrogatories, and I no longer put off tasks that I previously avoided. My relations with my partners and staff are much more cordial. I listen more and don’t feel the impulsive need to interrupt. I can plan ahead and work toward filing dates without turning a looming deadline into a crisis. A simple deadline is not the chaotic event of previous years. Remarkably, I can do simple things that were once impossible, like sitting through a partners’ meeting without squirming or stirring up a controversy by insisting on some minor point.

I have learned to structure my workplace to help manage my tendency toward distraction. I limit taking calls to the hour before lunch and the last hour of the workday. I keep a number of calendars and use scheduling software. In managing deadlines, I’ve learned to delegate and rely on others, as well as to accept my own limitations. I frequently remind myself of the old adage: The wiser I get, the more I realize how little I know. While there are still days when the siren call of the Internet distracts me from client matters, I am aware of my tendency to procrastinate and can now hunker down and complete matters that I used to leave hanging until the last minute.

I am also fortunate to work in a supportive setting where my strengths are maximized. I am a plaintiffs’ attorney, which fulfills my need for excitement, yet I’m supported by a traditional law firm with competent partners who view me as their brilliant, slightly eccentric “pit bull.” The upside of my ADD is my ability to “hyper-focus” in taking depositions or in preparing briefs. I try to use my creativity wisely rather than impulsively.

Learning that I have adult ADD has been empowering, because knowledge is power. I now have the power to anticipate my reaction to certain situations and to seek expert assistance. Rather than feeling the compulsive need to know and do everything myself, I’ve learned to ask for help. My 30 years in private practice have shown me that I am not alone with my learning disability. Resources are available to help attorneys recognize and address their ADD or similar learning issues.

If you think you might have ADD, call one of the attorney counselors at the Oregon Attorney Assis-

tance Program, at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227. They can discuss your concerns with you and make any appropriate referrals.

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