

Leveraging ADHD: One Instructional Technology Professor's Journey

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Abstract

This session chronicles the journey of one instructional technology professor's journey from diagnosis and surviving with ADHD to thriving by leveraging ADHD. The highlight will be techniques for leveraging distraction and focusing the mind.

How Did I “Get” ADHD-Inattentive Type

Like many ADHDers, I found out that I had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as an adult in a round about way. While browsing in the self-help section of a bookstore, I came upon *ADD-friendly ways to organize your life* by Kolberg and Nadeau (2002). I always wanted to “add” more organization to my life, so I read further. I soon realized that the “ADD” in the title actually stood for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and that the descriptions of people in the book with ADD sounded a lot like me. Just like them, I was easily distracted, forgetful, late, etc., so I ended up buying the book. The tips were very helpful, but I never really accepted the fact that, like those described, I might have ADD.

Fast forward a few years, and I was struggling to write my dissertation. In desperation, I enlisted the assistance of the director of the Writing Center at the University of Toledo, Dr. Carol Nelson-Burns. She suggested that I spend some time writing at the table in her office so that she could observe my writing process. After our session, she said to me, “As I watched you, you were listening to music on your headphones, moving along to whatever you heard, looking out the window at what was going on outside, AND typing away! Multitasking seems to be what helps you focus...and THAT seems classic ADHD—have you ever been tested for that?” At first, I was in shock; then, I came around and realized that it could be true. She suggested that I get tested to be sure of the diagnosis. After a number of sessions with a psychologist who specialized in ADHD testing, it was official—I had ADHD-Inattentive Type.

Looking Back

When going through the ADHD testing process, I was asked if I had any ADHD characteristics in childhood. While I am the opposite of hyperactive, I did have other ADHD-Inattentive traits as long as I can remember, such as staring into space, inability to concentrate, difficulties reading long passages or works, and needing music to concentrate on mental tasks. Beginning when I was about five, my brothers and sisters nicknamed me “the absent-minded professor” because I had trouble remembering everyday things but could recite volumes of information about whatever I found intriguing. Much to my parents' chagrin, I tried a plethora of hobbies, only to leave them abruptly when my interest waned.

After the Diagnosis

I would love to say that after the diagnosis, I changed drastically and became a fully-functional member of society. However, that was not the case. The Ritalin I took gave me

amazing focus, but it only lasted for around five hours, and then I would crash. Timing was key. I had a short window of productivity for the day. I managed to complete my dissertation, but I realized that this would not be a long-term solution. That began a 14-year journey to explore ways to minimize distractions and build focus-friendly techniques. Each ADHDer is unique. What follows are some of the techniques that work for me.

Characteristics of ADHD

Although every ADHDer is unique, there are some characteristics that most of them share: porous short-term memory, an inconsistent sense of time, inconsistency of attention (distractibility and hyperfocus), a strong sense of adventure, and an aversion toward boredom.

Porous Short-term Memory

For some reason, the connection from short-term to long-term memory can be porous with only some information making it through the transition. This makes it easy for me to forget details of conversations and meetings. I use several techniques for increasing what I remember. Periodically, during conversations, I will stop and recap what was said. At the end of conversations, I summarize the key points, especially my next tasks. When possible during conversations and meetings, I take notes, which I process upon returning to my office computer.

Another time when my porous memory affects me is when transitioning from one location to another. For example, sometimes I have to park in different lots around my building. After years of searching for my car, I developed a little whiteboard where I mark my car location when entering the office. I also have a list of items to remember upon leaving (keys, phone, jacket, etc.). When I arrive home, I take a moment to put things for the office on a shelf on a bookcase near the door that I call my takeoff zone.

Inconsistent Sense of Time

It can be very difficult for ADHDers to sense the passage of time. I personally can not tell how much time has passed—what I think has been one hour, sometimes is just a few minutes and vice versa. It is very easy for me to get caught up in a 5-minute task and find I am late for an appointment. Therefore, I use the alarms and timers available on my cellphone to remind me of my appointments, meetings, classes, and other events throughout the day. I find that I have to change the sound I use every periodically or I will turn them off absent-mindedly and return to what I was previously doing. Habits can also be helpful. To keep my daily reminders clear, I have trained myself to look at my calendar and to-do list each time I switch tasks.

Distractibility

Many ADHDers have sensory processing challenges. Therefore, they can be sensitive to distractions to their senses. I personally find that sounds, smells, touches, and sights can distract me while I work. For many decades, unfruitfully, I searched for distraction-free locations to work. However, about ten years ago, I found that I could create my own purposeful distractions to keep my senses occupied so I can concentrate better and focus on my work. I play music or movies (depending upon the task), burn a woody scented candle on my desk, wear clothing that is soft to the touch; and have minimal visual distractions in my work zone. These purposeful distractions keep my senses occupied so the rest of the environment does not distract me from my tasks.

Hyperfocus

One of the greatest strengths of ADHD is the ability to hyperfocus. When we are motivated and free of distractions, ADHDers can enter a state of heightened focus where we can do tasks requiring intense concentration for an extended time. However, it is very difficult to maintain these periods consistently without following distractions like moving from searching for articles to transitioning to surfing the web.

I have found that the extent of my productive hyperfocus is approximately 15 minutes. I use a modified Pomodoro Method with 15-minute tasks. I plan four to five pomodoro periods each day. Within each pomodoro, I have five 15-minute tasks. Following each 15-minute task is a 5-minute break, in which I do an activity like stretching, speed cleaning, or refreshing my drink. After completing all five of the pomodoro tasks, I take an extended 25-minute break to do something recreational, like taking a brisk walk, playing a computer game, eating lunch, watching TV, writing a personal letter, etc. Woven in the list of tasks for the pomodoros are time for meetings and appointments. I try to match my pomodoros with my workload with one pomodoro daily for research, teaching, and service with remaining pomodoros wherever needed most.

Sense of Adventure

Since one of the characteristics of ADHDers is their adventurousness, I try to be proactive and front-load adventure in my week so that I acknowledge and support my sense of adventure. For example, I try to drive home by a different way; I plan new experiences weekly; and am always saving for something special. Likewise, when I acquire some unexpected money, I have found Dave Ramsey's philosophy of save some, spend some, blow some works best for my ADHD nature; otherwise, my sense of adventure will take over and I will spend much more than is wise.

Aversion toward Boredom

As an ADHDer, I also share an aversion toward boredom. When faced with a boring task, my instinct is to do something else. However, I can find that playing music or listening to a movie while I work can make monotonous tasks more palatable. I can also increase my adrenaline by setting a timer to induce me to speed up. When faced with a task that takes more time or effort, I resort to getting a person as a body double to help me stay on task. I always find it more fun to work with another person rather than alone.

Give Myself a Little Grace

I think the most important breakthrough I have made with my ADHD shortcomings is to give myself grace. I have learned to be gentle with myself and forgive the times I fall short by forgetfulness or the struggle to get things done. It is great to be able to step back and remember that I can choose to approach things with depression or a giggle, with pain or accepting that I am making progress, with guilt or grace.

My Team

Throughout my ADHD journey, I have had a team to support me. The biggest supporters have been my family. Many articles and books have been written on that topic, so I won't dwell on that here. In addition, I have a psychiatrist, who has matched me with medication that helps me focus. I also have an outstanding ADHD coach who matches me with techniques and

strategies to get unstuck from inattention and anxiety, to set priorities, and to increase my focus. Since I live alone, I also have an extra helper (body double) who assists me with tasks around the house that have extreme distractibility and need concerted focus, like organizing the garage, doing spring cleaning, and my annual office organizational readjustment. My helper is an extra pair of hands, but she also keeps me on track by saying things like, “What is your goal,” “You’re taking too long...hurry up,” “What are you thinking,” “Do you *really* need that” or “You are digressing.”

Conclusions

I love my creative, adventurous, challenging ADHD brain. It allows me to be the unique and bright person I am. The key to being a professor with ADHD is working with my strengths to overcome the challenges with a large dose of grace.