

Another Life Damaged by Unrecognized Inattentive ADHD

Edited by Cynthia Hammer, MSW

My name is Grace. I was diagnosed with inattentive ADHD when I was 42. I know my life would have been different if I had been diagnosed during childhood.



As a child attending a Montessori school I pursued subjects that interested me and advanced at my own pace, unless I fell too far behind, then I was given help. I excelled at math and mastered simple addition, subtraction and division when five years old. Math made sense and I liked manipulating physical objects to learn. Reading was difficult for me and I only learned when my first grade teacher sat beside me and didn't give up until I could read. If teachers guided me and gave clear instructions, I learned quickly.

In middle school and high school, I felt different and isolated, although I still have a few childhood friends that I see or speak to almost every day.

I was an intelligent but erratic student. My grades in high school and college were mediocre, although I tested out of some high school subjects, i.e. there were some required classes I didn't have to take. I started each semester strong, but as time passed, I got behind and couldn't catch up. Procrastination was my first, middle name and last name. I didn't understand why I put off doing my school work. **I wanted to do well but procrastinating caused me to be anxious and sad.**

When in middle school and high school, **I dictated my assignments the night before due.** My mom stayed up, time and time again, typing my last minute efforts. Hyper-focus, a symptom of ADHD, served me well sometimes; but other times, my hyper-focus didn't kick in and I was unable to complete the assigned work. I was ashamed to function this way, and I was often told, "Just apply yourself." Classmates thought I was uppity because I did my work at the last minute. They thought I was showing off, trying to prove I had a superior intellect. If they only knew how I suffered!



Photo by Pavel Danilyuk at Pexels.com

I attended college and went onto graduate school. There, I got incompletes in several classes because of procrastinating and not getting the work done. I was asked to take a year off and reapply. On my second go round, I graduated, but it took me twice as long as the other students. I had to repeat five classes where I had incompletes. However, repeating classes helped me learn the material. It's as if the first time through I don't truly understand the material, but the second time through I get it.

In addition to procrastination, I had difficulty understanding and following directions. I misheard or misread assignments. During my second year in graduate school, a committee that assessed my appropriateness for the ministry, had given me an assignment. When I appeared before the committee, it was obvious that I completely misunderstood my assignment. Instead of being understanding and forgiving, the committee members criticize my presentation and said things that destroyed me physically and emotionally. I still haven't recovered from their dressing-down.

I started my third year of graduate school but was unable to persist in going to school. I had a nervous breakdown and thought, "I have to learn what is wrong with me." That is when I sought professional help.

The psychiatrist diagnosed me with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety and depression. He prescribed Prozac which I have taken ever since. I was 23 years old. Now I think the physician missed my inattentive ADHD and incorrectly diagnosed me. I strove for perfection, thinking it was the only way to be accepted. Trying to be perfect caused me to be anxious and depressed. **Trying to be perfect took all my energy. I got worn out hiding my struggles from others**

For 15 years I tried and failed to become ordained as a minister. The application with 42 questions that require extensive answers was a nightmare to complete. The second time I submitted the application, I asked others for assistance and enlisted accountability partners. I learned to not delay, i.e. not procrastinate. I knew I needed to work on something immediately if I wanted to get it done. My second application was accepted and I was ordained.

Last year I heard a mother on NPR explain how she helped her son with ADHD get ready for school every day. She made a chart with pictures that showed him what to do. I thought “Wow! Pictures of what I needed to do would have been so helpful to me.” Listening to that radio program was the impetus to finally get diagnosed with ADHD.



My parents were shocked and saddened when I told them my ADHD diagnosis. My mother was a professor of education and my dad is a psychotherapist. They thought that how I performed in school and other areas of my life was my personality! I didn't fit the common picture of a child with ADHD. Even though I was hyperactive, disruptive in class and got into trouble, I was a girl, not a boy. Few people were aware that girls can have ADHD.

Do I wish I had been diagnosed as a child? I'm not sure. Would it have stigmatized me and my parents? Would the diagnosis have been explained in a way that didn't diminish me?

I value my ADHD diagnosis; it enables me to understand myself and how my brain works. Having ADHD isn't a problem; not knowing I had ADHD was the problem

In the past thirty years, we have learned a lot. ADHD is more widely recognized and understood. Now I am comfortable telling others, “I have ADHD.” I don't have to keep it a secret.

My future feels so much brighter.