

Attention deficit and the introverted child

I remember seeing the title of a book, "I found my car keys, and now where is my car?" I felt as though someone had walked into my life.

There is often a misconception that people with attention deficit disorder are not capable of achievement, or higher learning. This cannot be further from the truth. We might however be found walking in a haze of preoccupation, completely unaware of our surroundings.

I have stopped at green robots, driven at 40 km/hr on a freeway, tried to unlock the wrong car and have found that searching for car keys has become an art form.

Many people do not believe that I have an attention deficit problem, until I walk out in the middle of a conversation, stop in the middle of a sentence or change topics for no apparent reason.

Like many introverts with attention deficit disorder, school life was far from easy.

The introverted child with attention deficit problems is very likely to fall through the cracks. They may be very proficient at underachievement, and because they are not making a nuisance of themselves, they tend to go unnoticed. These are the children who bring home reports that say, 'Derek could try harder', or 'Susan must stop daydreaming and pay attention'.

The long term effects of attention deficit problems lies mainly in self esteem. The child knows that something is wrong, but has little understanding of 'what and why'. An area that has not been adequately explored in attention deficit problems is the difference in presentation between the extrovert and the introvert.

The extrovert is typically more at home in the world. They can walk into a crowded room and feel comfortable. They often have a remarkable ability to take in the moment. The extreme extrovert often feels less anxiety, at least consciously. This is why they can be so good at sales and persuasion. They are not plagued by a hundred thoughts buzzing through the head. Typically the more extraverted child with an attention deficit problem is going to have much more intrusive behaviour. They might talk out of turn, interrupt continuously and, in many cases, create chaos when bored or excited. These are the children most likely to be sent for assessment and treatment.

The introvert on the other hand is ruled by what happens inside, the world of thought and ideas. The less expressive introvert can hold his/her cards very close to the chest. They might be judged unfairly as snobs or aloof. People just do not know what is happening behind the curtains of the mind. The more expressive introvert needs time to feel comfortable in a social setting, or they need a professional role to assist them in developing confidence.

Some truly great leaders have been introverts, but have needed the role to give form to their words and ideas.

There is a lot of controversy around treatment of attention deficit disorder. Much concern is well founded, but has more to do with indiscriminate medication than the treatment itself. Anxiety and behavioural disorders might have the same presentation, but need very different treatment. A serious attention deficit problem will, however, respond well to the correct medication, but the treatment needs to be monitored. The side effects of the medication can be extremely severe and this alone can indicate a misdiagnosis.

The introverted child will benefit from appropriate treatment. This might not show in behaviour change, as the behaviour is often not a problem, but it should show in school marks and confidence.

I sometimes ask myself, had I gone onto Ritalin, or just known that was wrong, how would it have affected me? The most important benefits would probably have related to self esteem. This is possibly the most damaging problem affecting people with attention deficit problems.

I do not advocate medication for everyone. There are many ways of dealing with the problem. Just knowing that there are attention issues goes a long way to managing the disorder. Mild attention deficit problems can be managed with behaviour modification and awareness.

I always hesitate to use the word disorder. In certain situations it is a benefit. The extraverted sales person thrives on the buzz, the thrill of closing a deal. People who work in the bush often need to be super aware of every noise at all times. That is one of the main characteristics of attention deficit problems; the ability to filter out intrusive or distracting sights and sounds is not properly in place. A person who does not have an attention deficit problem is able to focus for reasonably long periods and place a mental curtain around the surroundings. The attention deficit person is easily disturbed and distracted by the slightest disturbance. Once this happens, refocusing becomes very difficult.

I was completely unaware of my own attention deficit problems through most of my school life. Like many introverted children with this problem, I was labelled as dreamy, dopey, or lazy. Later on as a professional, I started to join the dots.

I went onto Ritalin as an adult, more out of curiosity than anything else. That is another attention deficit trait, risk taking. However, I will never forget the first dose and the effects. The world seemed to suddenly come into focus. The biggest change was the lack of agitation. It had been so much a part of my internal world that I took this feeling as normal. I was able to sit still, focus on one person at a time and the biggest advantage was the ability to cope much better with boredom.

I once heard someone describe attention deficit as an itch that you can't scratch. For me, the itch was suddenly gone.

Even though I had such dramatic results from medication, I remain cautious about its uses at all times. I found that my thinking slowed down. This was not always a bad thing, as I tended to think in fast forward mode. I did sometimes feel a sense of frustration though when I had to give a presentation, or do work requiring quick and spontaneous answers. For this reason I take medication only when I need to stay focused for long periods.

My concern at this point is for the many young people, muddling through school, never quite reaching their potential. I am focusing here on the more introverted child who is more likely to slip through the cracks.

How then can one recognise such children?

The introverted child with attention deficit may, like the extrovert, have hyperactivity, in which case they will be fidgety, restless, find it hard to sit still and become easily bored. It is usually not a school issue, but a behaviour issue though, as the child does not act out in the classroom.

If a child is excessively shy, daydreams and often withdraws. If they have big discrepancies in marks from teacher to teacher, or from subject to subject, it is worth investigating. Some teachers do seem to cope better with attention deficit children. It might be that they tap into their creativity, or just motivate them more effectively.

Some children who are on the introverted side might start to show signs of school phobia, as they feel overwhelmed and often left out. They might have problems keeping up with their school work, even though they are clearly quite bright.

If a child has difficulty following orders, is easily distracted and seldom finishes a task, have it checked out. They might also find simple tasks, like packing school bags, quite difficult.

Learning disabilities often have an attention deficit component. I usually advise parents to see a professional if there is a problem with spelling or sequencing. This often shows up in arithmetic. Because mathematics is more conceptual in nature, children with sequencing problems sometimes don't cope.

Left handed children are more at risk and children with very untidy handwriting should be watched for other problems. Attention deficit children can have problems with their core muscles and they tire easily. They quite frequently slouch badly in their desk.

What then causes these problems?

There seems not to be a 'one size fits all' answer to this. One hypothesis is that there are problems with dopamine, a neurotransmitter in the brain. The fact that people with attention deficit respond by calming down when given a stimulant, indicates just how much this is a physiological problem.

If adults or children are to be medicated, it is so important that they are monitored for the correct dose. Medication is often stopped because of undesirable side effects. This might be because of the wrong diagnosis, but it might equally be because the medication dosage is

incorrect. I once took a double dose by mistake and nearly fell asleep at the wheel of my car. A person without attention deficit would have been bouncing off the walls.

A timely intervention can make all the difference in a child's life. I often find that people are afraid that it might hinder creativity. Many attention deficit people can be extremely creative and are often lateral thinkers. I am not going to deny that it does slow down thinking. This is why dosage is so important.

For those not wishing to go the medication route, behaviour modification is important. Steering away from sugar is also advisable. Sugar highs are a reality for people with attention deficit. The highs might be very nice, but the subsequent lows are just horrible.

Most children with attention deficit problems do not cope. They often leave school with marks that do not reflect their potential. Many drop out altogether. If there is any suspicion that this might be an issue at school, it is worth seeing a professional for a thorough assessment.

Doing nothing, is the worst possible route for a child who is struggling. Merely acknowledging that there is a problem without blame and negative labelling can bring about a shift in self acceptance. The child is able to give the problem a name and work at managing the issues that arise.

Parents too are able to deal more realistically with the day to day challenges. Once a parent is able to manage their own expectations, their frustration can decrease. This is an opportunity to work towards a positive, more problem-solving way of facing the unique challenges of an attention deficit child.