

The Path Forward: From Avoidance to Acceptance

by Matthew Turcotte

This is about the fifth time I've sat down to write this out. Perhaps this is the time I'll get it finished-but more likely I'll get started on it before getting distracted by something around me. Maybe I'll jot down an incoherent ramble I can pull apart and place into some discernable article for you. The good news here, is that I finally managed to sit down and start-and that's half the battle. I've never been able to get around to doing what I know I need to do, to live up to obligations. I know in the end, I'll be writing this out at the 11th hour while the stress builds and I live in terror of each passing second. Such is my life with ADHD. Constantly starting things, jumping from one task to the next and putting off anything that looks remotely like work for as long as I can until it has to be done with the very real anxiety of failure. I hate it. I love it. This is the schism in my personality that constructs my reality. The rush of impending doom and racing the clock to get something in.... fear is a great motivator. Then comes the complete emotional drainage when I'm done. I swear I'll do better next time. I'll plan ahead. I'll start earlier. I'll get better. I'll learn. I swear. It's only the nth time I've promised myself that it won't be like this again. What's the definition of insanity again? Isn't it doing things the same way and expecting a different result? Maybe there is a certain insanity to the resilience those with ADHD come by naturally....to try and try again expecting things to go differently. They seldom do. There's always a degree of uncertainty when attempting anything. You never really know how it will go. Maybe that's half the fun of it all...the thrill of the unknown. Maybe I'm sick and enjoy all the chaos deep down. Either way, this is my reality.

It's only relatively recently that I came to accept this disorder as a major hindrance to my ability to function. I've always had difficulties being productive and getting tasks done. It's only when I sought out treatment as an adult that I realized how difficult it really was. This is when I truly began to accept that this disorder is the root of the issues. I always knew that at some fundamental level there is something different in the way I interact with the world, something drastically different in how I function. And you know what? That's just fine. I literally have no ability to change that. However, it took a long time for me to reach this acceptance. Perhaps it was the openness and critical thinking

brought on by a liberal arts degree? Yet how did I come to accept the disorder and face the demons I had hidden so long? It was a long and perilous journey.

For the longest time I vehemently denied having ADHD. I refused to be labeled as functioning different than my peers and denied that there was anything wrong with me. The logic went somewhere along these lines: if I'm different from my peers then I'm not normal, ergo there must be something wrong with me. Why else would I have had to take a pill as a child so often for 'behavioral issues'? It's hard to remember exactly when I rejected my diagnosis, but let's call it somewhere before high school. At this time, I truly believed that if I ignored the condition that I had been labeled with as a child that it would go away. Rather than accept this reality, and seek out information and educate myself on the disorder and find treatment, I stubbornly rejected the idea that something was different about me. I didn't want to hear it. I was so incredibly stubborn - there was nothing wrong with me. I could handle this- and for a while, it worked. Yet this ignorance of the disorder was a pyrrhic victory against myself. The symptoms of ADHD persisted, unyielding and obfuscated from view- I just didn't know it yet. I had constructed a reality where if I ignored it, then this label, this disorder wouldn't be there- it wouldn't affect me.

At some point, I stopped taking medication entirely. I don't fully recall when I made this decision. I was finally free of the chain of medication that I was stuck on so long as a child. I always dreaded taking that pill. It seemed like the solution to everyone else's problems when dealing with me. I didn't see any benefit to myself at the time, rather something imposed on me by outside forces. It was something done for other people's benefit. Not my own. As a child I didn't see the benefits of it, I certainly did not notice that I had a wavering focus when I tried to sit down and do work. If anything, I complained that these pills made me feel funny, and I had an aversion to taking them. I felt like a zombie, I felt different. I felt like I didn't fit in. The pill was the physical manifestation of everything that was wrong with me- I never really understood why I had to take this, and why it was to be such a big secret from everyone- just that it was for my ADHD and it was something to be snuck in and hidden from my peers. Maybe this reveals something about the stigma of mental and cognitive disorders in wider society- that they are something that has to be hidden from all of those around us. The implications of this on the psyche of a child are vast and jarring, as one can imagine. The

stigmatization of having to take a pill for a disorder, all the secrets, the knowledge that no one else has to do this- this was deeply ingrained in me. I resented it. I wanted off. I felt different, and did for a long time. Childhood was spent feeling like an outsider and different than others. And I safely guarded this dirty little secret of mine- that I was sick and had to take medication every day.

Yet the symptoms continued, unbaiting and growing in intensity. It wasn't until University that I began to really notice an asymmetry in my ability to focus, and executive functions as compared to those around me. Of course there were other signs earlier on. With the impulsively quitting jobs out of sheer boredom, putting off responsibilities till last minute and the unyielding anger, but I never had to face any of them. Not like this. I made a commitment to getting a degree, I worked too hard to get here. Failure was not an option, and I couldn't run from this. I would never forgive myself for that.

The first issues appeared in lectures: they were three hours long of an individual talking at the front of a room. I noticed that I had a complete inability to pay attention to a full lecture that runs three hours long. I would find myself tuning out the professors, oddly finding myself sitting in the back of my mind, having an inner monologue with myself completely unrelated to the topic. No matter how hard I would try, I could not pay attention for the entirety of the lecture. Furthermore I noticed that I couldn't sit down and focus on a book long enough to tackle all the reading required to be prepared for class. I noticed that I completely lacked the focus and self-discipline required to schedule in large amounts of reading and get through them on time. No matter how hard I tried I could not sit down and focus on reading like it was my job.

I couldn't keep up. I needed help. I was overwhelmed, drowning in a sea of books and a torrent of words, crushing me beneath the weight of the reading that needed to be done. I had worked too hard to get here...struggled too much. I needed this. I had to be successful. The stress and anxiety began to build. Yet the distractions were immense at University, and several mistakes were made by myself. Not seeking help soon enough, not admitting to myself there was a problem sooner. Ignoring all the signs that were there - and there were many. I struggled throughout all four years of my undergrad. There were a lot of resources available through the university in terms of learning services to provide reasonable accommodations. Yet I was stubborn and never engaged these because for the most part, I

had completely forgotten that ADHD was an issue- I had ignored it for so long. Somewhere amongst my time in University I admitted I had a problem, it was a turning point. I had to admit that something was wrong, I couldn't function as well as my peers. I needed a solution to this, and if medication could help me blast through all of this reading, and level the playing field- I'll take it. It was this that kick started me down a path of research regarding the disorder, forcing me to confront myself and numerous bad habits, and some less than admirable traits.

The issues I faced persisted as I transitioned into the workforce in a deskbound office job in an IT company as a project manager. A long day with varying amounts of stimulation and a complete loss of control over workflow. I couldn't cope, having to meet the demands, the paper work heavy, process driven banality of corporate IT management. I would watch the time bleed away while unsure of what to do. Emails, so many emails and non-stop phone calls, day and night. Again I was drowning in a sea of paperwork organizing other people's tasks and issues. I can organize myself out of necessity- as such I'm highly organized: it's a coping strategy. All bets are off when it's other people. However, this position drove me up the wall, and even starting causing me health issues from the stress.

Now as a graduate and an adult, I know I have difficulty: I have recently started becoming serious about finding and developing a treatment plan, admitting that I was overwhelmed with everything relating to executive functions. As any former University student would, I hit the books, hard, researching and studying anything on ADHD to construct my outline and develop a coherent plan. The more I read, the more I realized there was a lack of accessible resources and that this was going be difficult. The more I searched for ADHD specialists, the more it became apparent that, for the most part, medical specialists tend to focus on childhood ADHD. There is a complete gap in treatment options available for adults- let alone comprehensive, publically funded treatment. How I wished I would have confronted all this earlier and gotten treatment as a youth, let alone as a University student, covered under my student health plan with mental health resources available. Finding accessible treatment as an adult is difficult. It feels almost impossible. When I did manage to find a specialist, it was strictly about finding a medication that works, then it's pretty much a boot out the door. My experience so far hasn't been overtly positive in finding and working with specialist clinics

and mental health professionals. ADHD is so much more than just providing a pill and releasing the patient into the world. New habits need to be learned and old one's broken.

This leaves me in a catch 22, that I'm sure a lot of other adults with ADHD face: without treatment I'll never be that productive, or successful in the traditional workforce, yet without a suitable career I'll never be able to afford the required treatment. This leaves me in an interesting bind, and a peculiar dilemma, one that I am working vigorously to overcome and find solutions to. Part of my solution is to work through the titration period to find a medication that works for me: that can assist in the damage control regarding the disorder. ADHD cannot be cured, rather its detrimental effects on executive function can only be mitigated and managed. It's never going away, and the best that I can do is manage it effectively, but I know that now. I can't just outright ignore it and pretend that everything is okay. Cognitively I'm different than my peers, and that's just fine. I've admitted this to myself and I don't see the problem. In the end I have absolutely no control over this, so why deny this and not tackle it head on.

My journey doesn't end here, not by a long shot. Rather this recent admission of my disorder is the beginning- now is when I seek out appropriate treatment and literally deal with it. Untreated ADHD is incredibly stifling to my development, full stop. I have all this untapped potential and ability, yet I can't seem to harness all of it. I can't focus when I want to, can't perform when I need to and am at the whim of it all. But I'll keep struggling, and I'll get through this. If there's one thing I am it is incredibly resilient and persistent in the face of adversity- this is a trait innate to all those who suffer ADHD and I will overcome this, and start to get better. Over time I'll learn to be less distracted, I'll focus on what's in front of me. I'll get things done on time and I won't procrastinate. I might even finish what I start out to do. And maybe next time, I'll only have to sit down four times to start writing.

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