





From chaos to calm

For adults who have struggled with aspects of everyday life, a diagnosis of ADHD can spark a seismic shift in their wellbeing.

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LOOKING BACK AT JUDITH BULES school reports, it's obvious she was smart. It's also obvious she struggled to concentrate. "Every school report was the same," she sighs. "I kept thinking, if only I could try harder and focus. If only I could keep my mouth shut. If only I could fit in."

Age and maturity didn't improve the situation. She made impulsive business decisions that failed, interrupted people and blurted things out without thinking and then, two months short of her 50th birthday, she went to see a psychologist. "After the third session she said, 'Did you know you have ADHD?' It was a light bulb moment. Finally, I could see a reason for my behaviour."

Sydney-based Judith saw a psychiatrist and was prescribed Ritalin, which belongs to a class of drugs known as stimulants that can help people with ADHD stay focused. The resulting calm enabled her to put measures in place to improve her life and university studies. "I've learned to stay on task, keep my desk tidy, have my clothes ready. My life is now very regimented."

Now 55, the diagnosis also enabled her to power through degrees in business management, accounting and IT. She's planning a PhD on ADHD in the workplace and has become president of ADDults With ADHD, a charity dedicated to improving the lives of adults living with the condition.

ADHD, which stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, has been a battlefield in the mental health arena, often dismissed as a behavioural issue rather than what it is – a neurodevelopmental disorder. It's characterised by symptoms of inattention, impulsivity and sometimes hyperactivity. It can be managed, but there is no single known cause or cure.

It was once presumed children grew out of the condition, but some Australian experts report that at least 50% still have ADHD symptoms as adults. A new paper published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* goes further, concluding that 90% still struggle with at least mild symptoms as adults.

However, hyperactivity seems to decrease and, instead, adults struggle more with inattention, disorganisation, memory problems and restless fidgeting. The inability to keep track of time and possessions may become more problematic with age as they no longer have parents to organise their lives, and may be parents themselves.

Joy Toll, 78, has been advocating for people living with ADHD since her children were first diagnosed. Now a director of the ADHD Foundation, she currently runs a helpline for adults. "We receive 20-35 calls



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JOY TOLL
Director, ADHD Foundation

a day, plus emails from people aged from 18 to their 70s. It's relentless," she says.

It's also a crisis. "We don't have enough psychiatrists who treat adults with ADHD and they're [almost always] the only ones who can write scripts for medication trials. Until sufferers are on medication, they don't feel calm and can't organise their thoughts and complete tasks. We take some very distressing calls.

"I recently spoke to an older man who was desperate to get his script renewed because his wife had dementia. He had to manage her medications and their business affairs but couldn't without his own medications.

"Others go through a form of grieving for all the lost opportunities – jobs, study, failed marriages. Some need counselling they're so affected."

Frustratingly, it's difficult to know how many Australian adults live with ADHD, although the Foundation believes it's as many as 5%. Some need support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Some struggle to remember their health appointments, says Joy. "Others may be unemployed, incarcerated, homeless and don't have the skills to negotiate with government departments. There's a 70% overlap with ADHD and literacy problems, so they can't manage the paperwork and just give up.

"Most of us have a filter so we choose what we take in," Joy continues. "People with ADHD don't have that. The noise, talking and information comes in and their brains never stop. Often they can't sleep because their brains still race at night. They're exhausted and these are constant problems, not things that happen now and again. That's why we started the helpline – so there is somewhere to ring, whether to talk or find professional help."

The ADHD Foundation has a wealth of information available, but while people wait for an official diagnosis, Joy often recommends starting the day with vigorous exercise, which can provide a few hours of calm at least – that worked for champion American swimmer Michael Phelps, one of the many people living with ADHD who are also high achievers.

Clinical psychologist Edwina Birch, 74, is a founding director of the ADHD Foundation, and often suspected she had the condition herself. "The problem was that diagnosis for adult ADHD only started in the 1990s," she says.

As a high-achieving professional with a raft of strategies in place to keep her organised – such as a week to a page diary – she struggled on until she was 69. "As the brain ages, the attention system isn't quite as efficient. I wanted to continue working but it was becoming more

stressful to manage,” she explains. “Also my husband was getting worried about my memory and said I was getting like a family member who has severe ADHD, so I thought it time I did something about it.” Diagnosis and medication, she says, has made all the difference. Now, instead of using all her energy on managing her ADHD, she breezes through her work.

Edwina currently sits on a diagnostic guideline and treatment committee for ADHD and is part of an adult ADHD peer review group. “We’re interested in getting a standardised diagnostic protocol. There is an unwillingness or inability amongst health professionals to even consider a diagnosis of ADHD for adults. We need to realise the importance of training for everyone from paediatricians to gerontologists.”

Edwina has a number of concerns about older people with the condition. Even when diagnosed, she says, there’s a reluctance to prescribe stimulant drugs for the over 70s. Unless there are other health concerns, she believes there is no reason for that. “In fact, the literature says it can be very helpful.”

In addition, people with ADHD need to be kept busy and to enjoy novel and new



“Once my ADHD was treated, life was so much better. I got things done 75% faster and they were 50% easier.”

MARK BRANDTMAN, 65
ADHD coach

experiences. “If you aren’t doing that and haven’t planned your retirement properly, you’re a candidate for depression.”

Another person working to improve the lives of adults with ADHD is Mark Brandtman, 65, who learned he had the condition 25 years ago after his son, then eight, was diagnosed with it. “I sat there

listening to the paediatrician and found myself wondering, ‘How does he know me so well?’ Once treated, life was so much better. I got things done 75% faster and they were 50% easier.”

Mark went on to become an ADHD coach, providing clients with strict structures and routines in place for activities as simple as putting away their clothes or taking medications. “I start simple, they need a win!” he says. He believes there aren’t enough coaches in Australia – after a TV appearance talking about his work, he received 800 requests for help.

Like Edwina, Mark has no plans for retirement. In fact he’s busy completing a number of TAFE courses on the side. “I’ve done upholstery, cabinet making, furniture finishing. ADHD people don’t do boring!” ●

FOR FURTHER HELP

The ADHD Foundation *has a library of excellent resources, research and advice. Go to adhdfoundation.org.au or call 1300 393 919.*

To contact ADDults With ADHD, go to adultadhd.org.au. The charity also has a popular Facebook page.

ADHD SUCCESS STORIES

FAR FROM being an impediment, many people diagnosed with ADHD thrive in life. In fact, it’s been described as an “entrepreneur’s superpower”, and high profile business people including Richard Branson, 71, and the late Ikea founder

Ingvar Kamprad, have been diagnosed with the condition.

“It’s worth noting that some of the trait’s most common characteristics – creativity, multi-tasking, risk-taking, high energy and even resilience – are, in fact, strengths when leveraged in

the right way and in the right career,” says psychiatrist Dr Dale Archer. “It’s why so many high-profile achievers are beginning to publicly embrace their diagnoses of ADHD.”

Actors Woody Harrelson, 60, and Jim Carrey, 59, have spoken about their ADHD,

and actress Cameron Diaz, 49, explains how she has adapted her career. “I have no interest in directing movies or producing movies. I have ADHD. I would never be able to spend two years making a movie or even one year. I’d be someplace else within a few short moments.”



Richard Branson



Ingvar Kamprad



Woody Harrelson



Jim Carrey



Cameron Diaz