



Raising the Bar

In the years following his ADD diagnosis, a high-powered attorney made remarkable changes that improved his professional career. All of us can learn from his example.

INTRODUCTION BY SANDY MAYNARD,
ADDITUDE'S COACH ON CALL

When I first opened my coaching practice in Washington, D.C., I was surprised by the number of high-powered attorneys with ADD who sought my help. Sitting in her spacious corner office, one of my clients said, "Yes, I have finally arrived. But how can I remember to take my cell phone out of the diaper bag?" Another attorney, who practiced at several prestigious firms, said, "I have no problem getting great jobs, I just can't keep them." A third attorney called me to seek help after having booked a flight to the wrong conference in the wrong city. All three had doubts about their profession because they were unable to manage the ordinary details of their careers.

"Lawyers face the same life problems other people do—problems that can adversely affect one's ability to live and work at full capacity," says Lynn Phillips, founder of the District of Columbia Bar Association's Lawyer Counseling Program, and the inspiration for a weekly support group for AD/HD lawyers. The attorneys in this group are facing their condition, and finding ways to thrive professionally. Here, you'll read a stunning example of this, in the words of one D.C. attorney who chronicles his career before and after being diagnosed. You'll also find strategies that can help anyone manage work life more effectively.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: ONE LAWYER TELLS HIS STORY

BY AN ANONYMOUS D.C. LAWYER, AS TOLD TO LYNN PHILLIPS

And the Verdict Is...

The turning point came when my 7-year-old son was diagnosed with ADD. When he was put on medication, I said I would take it as well, to ease any stigma he felt. But I also knew that ADD was hereditary, and I recognized many of his symptoms in my habits. After that initial self-diagnosis, I went to see my doctor, and I have been taking a form of stimulant

I always knew that I was smart. But I also knew that I had certain idiosyncrasies in regard to learning and meeting deadlines.

I graduated cum laude from Harvard Law School in the early '70s and took an associate position with a prestigious Washington, D.C., firm. From day one, I had trouble juggling assignments. When I enjoyed the subject matter of a research project, I would spend hours tracking down minor points and creating memos replete with largely irrelevant academic footnotes. But if an assignment was boring or hard to get started, I'd let it linger until the assigning partner exhausted his patience and stopped using me.

In areas that I enjoyed, I was creative in conjuring legal theories and very intuitive. And I used my combative intensity well. For example, I took on a court-appointed pro bono criminal case everyone else had given up on. The same senior partner who later canned me for missed assignments was elated when I found grounds to appeal and won a favorable decision before the D.C. Court of Appeals on unique grounds, the first such success in the firm's history.

My uneven performance perplexed the firm. I was one of their "remedial troubled" associates, although I was considered bright and personable. With the negative feedback, I started doubting my skills and wondered if I had chosen the wrong profession. Several missed assignments, along with sloppy work product on matters that didn't interest me, created a spiral of disappointment. One day I asked for more meaty assignments, but the firm had had enough and it was suggested that I look for work elsewhere.

I bolted to the opposite extreme and started a litigation shop with two litigators and no

structure. With the excitement of my own cases and the freedom from unwanted structure came the realization that I was now responsible for results. My bad habits remained, and I doubted my skill as an attorney. The firm broke up after one year.

There followed a series of job changes—in seven years I was an associate with three different law firms. In the next 14 years, I was a partner in four others. During that time I continually questioned my competence, despite the fact that I had built a well-respected civil litigation practice. My colleagues would remark on my unevenness of performance, which ran the gamut from brilliant to dismal.

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medication since 1995, with very positive results. My dosage is small, but the difference is dramatic.

I have subsequently learned that many adults are never correctly diagnosed with ADD, and that recognition of the condition is frequently missed in childhood. Many children use their high intelligence and determination to mask ADD symptoms. This compensation occurs at great emotional cost. Many high-functioning individuals with ADD harbor feelings of poor self-worth. They often see themselves as failures and feel that they are constantly letting others down. Over the years in which an individual adapts to his ADD situation, the adaptations (both positive and negative) become part of his personality, layered over the ADD symptoms.

In the years following my diagnosis, I have made remarkable changes that have greatly improved my ability to function as a lawyer. I no longer dread preparing answers to interrogatories, and I no longer put off tasks that I previously avoided. My dealings with my partners and staff are much more cordial. I listen more and don't feel the impulsive need to interrupt. I can plan ahead and work toward filing deadlines without making a looming deadline into a looming crisis. I can do simple things that were once impossible, like sit through a partners' meeting with-

Should You Tell?

Most professionals in the AD/HD community recommend that you not disclose your condition at work. Instead, ask your supervisors and/or colleagues for accommodations that will help you be more productive—a door to your office, organizational software, flex time, and so on. To smooth your way in the workplace:

- ▶ Frame the request in a positive way. Say, "[This accommodation] would really help improve my productivity."
- ▶ Ask for a daily check-in with your boss. This accommodation provides accountability by having you commit to goals and will help you learn how to prioritize.
- ▶ Trade responsibilities with a co-worker. Man the phones for an hour while the co-worker who usually does this enters data in a spreadsheet for you.

out squirming or stirring up a controversy by insisting on some minor point.

I now realize that my ADD was a negative factor in my law career from day one. Without realizing it, I was acting out many of the usual symptoms of adult ADD. On the standard questionnaires used to diagnose ADD tendencies, I always score very high. I'm still easily distracted and I still seek high levels of (healthy) stimulation. While intuitive and creative, I have trouble following through on tasks. I multitask to the extreme, and am still easily bored, but now I know how to channel my energies.

Working It Out

I have learned to structure my workplace to help manage my tendency to distraction. For example, I will limit taking outside direct calls to the hour before lunch and the last hour of the work day. I keep a number of calendars and use scheduling software. In managing deadlines, I've learned that I have to rely on others as well as to accept my own limitations. I frequently remind myself of the old adage: The wiser I get, the more I realize how little I know.

Learning that I have adult ADD has been a huge help, because knowledge is power, and I now have the power to anticipate my reaction to certain situations and to seek expert assistance. Rather than feeling a compulsive need to know it all and do it all myself, I've learned to delegate to others. The upside of my ADD is my ability to hyperfocus when taking depositions or preparing briefs. So I try to use my creativity wisely rather than impulsively.

I am a plaintiff's attorney, which fulfills my need for excitement, yet I'm supported by a traditional law firm, with competent partners who view me as their brilliant, slightly eccentric "pit bull." While there are still days when the siren

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6 Work Tips from Top Lawyers

A group of D.C. lawyers with ADD meets at lunchtime every Friday to eat—and to support one another. Here are six strategies they use, as any working professional can, to manage day-to-day business.

BOOKENDING: To use this tool, partner up with a peer professional. Each morning, you and your partner talk on the phone and commit to meeting certain goals by the end of the day. You report back to one another on your progress and use of time at the end of the day. Being accountable in this way will help you stay on track.

TO-DO LIST REVIEW: Frequently go over your to-dos with a supportive colleague. This will help you keep deadlines and appointments on your radar screen and avoid procrastination.

TIME LIMITS: Temper hyperfocus by setting a limit on the amount of time you will work on a designated task. This will help you avoid lingering over issues that are not central to the project.

PRE-DEADLINES: Set ahead-of-time finish points for projects. This way, you'll have built-in time to make revisions.

MEETING PREP: Get ready for a long, potentially boring meeting by eating a high-protein meal, then taking a brisk walk to ward off sluggishness.

TICKLER FILES: Use this easy system to stay on top of paperwork. Set up monthly files, with the current month broken down into days. Sort this month's paperwork into the daily files according to due date. For example: If you'll be attending an event, place the ticket in the file for the event's date. Go through your tickler file daily. Use it for items such as:

- ▶▶ Meeting agendas
- ▶▶ Airline tickets
- ▶▶ Itineraries
- ▶▶ Theater tickets
- ▶▶ Directions to a meeting or party
- ▶▶ Dry-cleaning stubs
- ▶▶ Letters that require a response
- ▶▶ Birthday and anniversary cards

call of the Internet distracts me from client matters, I am aware of my tendency to procrastinate, and can now hunker down and complete matters that I used to leave hanging until the last minute.

My 30 years in private practice have shown me that I am not alone with my

learning disability. Regardless of the work setting, there are resources available to help attorneys recognize and address their ADD or other learning issues. Skilled counseling is readily available.

Mercifully, my years of uneven performance have been relegated to the past. I've been at my present firm for an amazing eight years, and I'm pleased by my ability to maintain a level of performance that has increased the amount of personal satisfaction I derive from the practice of law.

Excerpted with permission from "Finding the Solution," by Lynn Phillips, from Washington Lawyer, May 2003.