TADD Talk 2020: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Better Health and Well-Being

Linda Roggli:

It's October 2020, and even in the midst of a crazy year, it's still ADHD Awareness Month. And we're still here with TADD Talks from ADDA, the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, nine minute, short, pithy soundbites on living with adult ADHD. Stay tuned here it comes.

Linda Walker:

Hello, this is Linda Walker. You spend more than a third of your waking hours each week working. If you're an entrepreneur, you likely spend more than two-thirds of your waking hours at work or preparing for work. And I'm not even including the hours you spend thinking about your business even when you're away from it.

Given the time we spend around work-related activities, it makes sense not to neglect the important role work plays in our well-being.

Our work can contribute to better health. Work provides us with revenues that gives us the necessities of life: food, shelter, heat, lights, and so on. It also provides benefits like medical insurance, dental care, and medication. And it's not just the money. When we think of our Health, we must also think of our Well-being, which includes mental health.

Our work has the power to enrich our lives. Of course, it can also make us miserable.

A 2019 survey examining psychiatric conditions among entrepreneurs revealed that 49% of entrepreneurs reported having a personal history of mental health issues. 30% reported a history of depression and 29% had ADHD.

Well, personally, I believe, the number of entrepreneurs with ADHD is probably closer to 50%, given that 80% of adults with ADHD are still undiagnosed and untreated.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as not merely the absence of mental illness, but also, as a state of well-being in which every individual:

- Realizes their own potential,
- Can cope with the normal stresses of life,
- Can work productively and fruitfully, and
- Is able to make a contribution to their community.

All of these can be difficult to achieve if you have ADHD.

Unfortunately, entrepreneurs with ADHD also struggle with focus, distractibility, and impulsivity that may lead them to make poor decisions. They procrastinate. They can't get started, and they struggle to finish projects. It also makes it hard for them to manage stress, make plans, follow the plans that they do make, and so on.

All these challenges make you unproductive and make it tough to realize your potential. This leads to dissatisfaction with your work, your business, and your life.

In a recent survey, 15% of entrepreneurs in start-ups struggled with burnout and 30% struggled with depression. And this was before the pandemic!

Your mental health affects how well you do almost everything, so it's time to make it one of your daily priorities.

Certain work characteristics have a huge impact on your experience of your work and how satisfied you are with it.

To feel fulfilled at work, workers—including entrepreneurs—need to do work that matters. You need a job you find demanding (although not more demanding than you can handle), and that requires a variety of skills to accomplish. Then you also need autonomy, the freedom to tackle the work how you see fit.

For ADHDers, who are interest-based performers, two characteristics stand out. You get much more satisfaction from work that requires you to use and develop a variety of skills and gives you room to grow. And, no surprise here, you need a lot of autonomy around when and how to get the work done.

If you're stuck in a job where you struggle to meet the demands of work, or work that doesn't allow you to reach your potential, you, like many ADHDers, are likely to struggle with burnout or depression. It's why many ADHDers decide to become entrepreneurs.

After all, as an entrepreneur, you create your working conditions. You take on a variety of interesting tasks. And you are completely autonomous. You decide when and how you'll accomplish your work.

Studies show that for entrepreneurs in general, job satisfaction comes more from satisfaction with life, family, and self than from the money they make.

Research (Arnold and Seekins 2002; Hagner and Davies 2002) shows people with health-related limitations, including people with ADHD, often choose entrepreneurial careers because they perceive barriers to advancement in jobs and because they require more flexibility in schedules at work to improve their health.

Various studies on ADHD and entrepreneurship show that not only are ADHDers much more likely than non-ADHDers to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors but also scored higher in the "need for achievement," "need for autonomy," "creative tendency," and a higher tolerance for risk, all positive entrepreneurial characteristics (Dimic and Orlov).

So, it might seem that working as an independent professional or entrepreneur would be the perfect career choice for someone with ADHD. Ha, but there is a caveat.

While your own business may satisfy your need for autonomy, and demand the skill variety that makes work interesting, you usually continue to struggle with getting organized, planning, focusing on the work, often jumping from one task to another, and feeling like you are still not achieving your potential.

You may do well at the beginning. Everything is new and interesting. Business hasn't taken off, so you have time to learn the tasks and the freedom to do them when you "feel like it."

But, as the business grows, clients, customers, investors, and lenders become more insistent on immediate results. Your level of autonomy dwindles as you put out one fire after another. Before long, you cut back on "luxuries" like sleep, exercise, and activities that provide the quality of life you want, such as family and leisure time.

Does that mean there's no hope? You can't find the right job, and owning a business isn't for you either? Not at all.

To succeed as an entrepreneur, just remember to address your challenges with ADHD. There are ADHD-friendly strategies that can help entrepreneurs with ADHD improve their productivity, focus on what's important, plan and organize the work, create streamlined processes that support your business, and let you carve out time for the lifestyle you crave—which was the whole point!

Three critical factors affect your ability to manage the high demand and lack of structure that comes with a new business. You must optimize your ability to focus by building self-care into your life. You must master planning using an ADHD-friendly approach and develop the skills to follow through on your plans. And you must organize and streamline your business processes so you can delegate and scale the business.

Only then will you have the freedom to create the life you crave.

Good ADHD symptom management is always founded in good self-care. Productivity is impossible to maintain without focus. Your ability to focus depends on how well you take care of your brain. You need enough sleep, regular cardio exercise, brain-friendly nutrition, and downtime. You'll notice that all of these are the areas where you tend to cut as things get crazy at work.

To do your best work with the most ease, you need to better manage your mental energy, match your energy with the tasks you need to do, and manage the environment to protect your mental energy. That includes setting proper boundaries.

Creating a plan that works for you starts with a new way of thinking about time. You'll need a planning approach that works with your brain and conquers your time blindness. Neurotypical strategies for managing time won't cut it.

You need to adopt a layered approach to planning that will ensure not only work-life balance but a plan that ensures self-care never takes a back seat.

I'll be speaking at the International Conference on ADHD on Friday, November 6th. I'd love to see you at my session, "The Entrepreneur's Guide to Better Health and Well-Being." I'll be discussing today's topics in more detail, and we'll dive into the critical factors to managing your business or professional life so you can achieve better health and well-being, and still live a life you love!

Linda Roggli:

Okay. That's today's ADHD wisdom. Much more to come. And why not join us for the Virtual 2020 International ADHD Conference coming up in November? Details at ADD.org. And while you're at it, why not join ADDA? It's a great investment in your ADHD life.