

TADD Talks 2020 - ADHD: What Good Is It?

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.

Duane Gordon:

Welcome to today's TADD Talk "ADHD: What Good Is It?" My name is Duane Gordon. I'm President of the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, or ADDA. ADDA is a community of adults working hard to thrive with ADHD. We celebrate ADHD and offer services to support and empower our members to discover and reach their potential.

Duane Gordon:

Today, I'd like you to consider seeing your ADHD from a different angle. If we know anything about Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, it's that your ADHD is different than my ADHD. And the people we know with ADHD? Well, their ADHD is different than yours or mine.

Duane Gordon:

We all know about ADHD symptoms. We're hyperactive. We're impulsive. We can't focus. For most people, that's "the definition" of ADHD. Are there other symptoms? As an adult with ADHD myself, and someone who's been active in the ADHD community for more than 20 years, I can confirm there are dozens of other aspects of ADHD. And ADHD is not binary, like pregnancy. It's not on or off. ADHD exists on a continuum. We have different symptoms. We have different strengths. And they all affect us to varying degrees.

Duane Gordon:

But, since ADHD was first diagnosed—way back in 1902, before most of us were born—society has seen people with ADHD as "falling short," as "broken." Back in the early 1900s, British pediatrician Sir George Still described ADHD as "an abnormal defect of moral control in children." A "defect of moral control," that can't be good, right?

Duane Gordon:

ADHD has gone through many name changes since it was first recognized, but none of the names have indicated people saw it as anything but a problem. Even today, the Ds in ADHD stand for "deficit" and "disorder."

Duane Gordon:

Yes, ADHD creates many challenges. ADHD is often associated with struggles at school, in the workplace, and in relationships. Untreated ADHD can make you (and your family, friends, classmates, and co-workers) miserable. But when you get the right treatment, you connect to the right community, and you learn the right skills, you can overcome those challenges.

Duane Gordon:

And what if some of those ADHD "symptoms" weren't a problem at all? A friend of mine, Rick Green, of TotallyADD.com fame—a fellow Canadian—explained ADHD this way: He said imagine ADHD is like height. There are tall people. And there are short people. Most people fall somewhere in the middle and

only a few appear at the ends of the scale, a traditional “bell curve” shape. Relatively few people are tall enough to suffer medical issues, though more are tall enough to bump their heads more than average. Some people are short enough that they need a stool to reach the shelves in the kitchen, but relatively few are short enough to suffer medical issues because of their lack of growth.

Duane Gordon:

But what about the positive aspects of height, or lack of height? Tall people have a better chance of becoming professional basketball players. Short people have a better chance of becoming jockeys. So, if we think of ADHD like height, isn't it possible that some ADHD characteristics may be adaptive rather than impairing? Could it be that you, and I, have aspects of our ADHD that help rather than hinder?

Duane Gordon:

We've all heard a lot about “confirmation bias” lately. This is the tendency of all people to find what we're looking for. When we look for information, we search for, interpret, prefer, and remember information that confirms or supports the beliefs and values we already hold. What if, with ADHD, we look for problems so we find problems?

Duane Gordon:

Don't get me wrong. The problems associated with untreated ADHD are real, and they can be severe. I encourage every adult with ADHD to seek treatment. And to connect with other adults with ADHD. That's what ADDA's about. Together, we support each other as we strive to reach our full potential.

Duane Gordon:

But only looking at the negative side of ADHD doesn't do those of us with ADHD any favors. There are positive aspects to ADHD, as well as challenges. ADDA has always recognized ADHD makes us different, but ADHD does not mean we are broken.

Duane Gordon:

For many years, the science focused on why we don't fit in. ADHD was identified in boys because they were loud, couldn't sit still, and disrupted class. ADHD was ignored in girls because they didn't disrupt the class. And by the time they were young adults, children had been cowed into being quiet in class, whether they were learning or not. No wonder researchers thought ADHD “disappeared” in adulthood. We suffered in silence.

Duane Gordon:

ADHD includes many different symptoms. But most research is done on the symptoms that challenge us, like impulsivity or lack of focus. Not much research is done on the parts of the ADHD package that serve us well. And we all have attitudes, skills, and strategies we've adopted because we had to deal with our ADHD. I'm speaking broadly, of course. Not every person with ADHD will have all (or necessarily any) of the symptoms I've listed—but of the symptoms you have, some help and some hinder. But people with ADHD are known for high-energy and drive, hyper-focus, pattern-recognition, and divergent thinking. What's more, we can also benefit from the skills and strategies we've developed to overcome some of the less helpful symptoms. For example, many people with ADHD are known for their helpfulness, empathy, and persistence.

Duane Gordon:

Twenty years ago, positive psychology emerged as a branch of psychology that focused, not on the pathology of mental health, but the enabling, strength-based, positive aspects of human psychology.

Though slowly, they've begun to conduct research that is not focused on the deficits of ADHD but on the resources a person with ADHD might be able to draw on to succeed and thrive.

Duane Gordon:

Their efforts have not been in vain. Research has correlated ADHD's divergent thinking with high creativity. Research has also shown that hyper-focus, usually described as a deficit in task-switching, actually enables focused work that lets creative genius flourish. Studies revealed that ADHD is often associated with curiosity, courage, and self-acceptance. We are also associated with flexibility and adaptability that allows us to be very resilient. And of course, research shows our natural energy is associated with positive behaviors like zest and vigor and a sense of humor.

Duane Gordon:

We've all seen lists of "Famous People with ADHD". They're presented as proof that some people, with enough hard work, can succeed. Many people with ADHD are able to function, some of them very well. But what if some of those people succeeded, not in spite of their ADHD, but because of their ADHD?

Duane Gordon:

ADDA has always looked for the silver lining in ADHD. We don't deny there can be challenges, but when you're on the inside looking out, it doesn't really help to adopt the "doom and gloom" or pathological view of ADHD. As an adult with ADHD, it doesn't help me to see myself as broken.

Duane Gordon:

ADDA is a worldwide inclusive community of supportive ADHD adults. We are working to make it possible to thrive with ADHD in today's world. We celebrate ADHD and empower our members to discover and reach their potential. I invite you to "look on the bright side" of ADHD.

Duane Gordon:

Join ADDA. Come home.

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.