

TADD Talks

FOR ADHD AWARENESS MONTH

Catching Yourself In the Act: Push Aside Negative Talk and Celebrate the Wins!

Roberto Olivardia, PhD

TADD Talks 2026 Transcript

Hello, I'm Dr. Roberto Olivardia. I'm a clinical psychologist and lecturer in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts. I'm excited ADDA invited me to speak with you today on the topic, Catching Yourself in the Act: Push Aside Negative Talk and Celebrate the Wins with ADHD.

I am directionally dyslexic. My genes of navigation were clearly usurped by my older brother, who has the best sense of direction of anyone I know. Before GPS, I would take wrong turns, confuse lefts and rights, and get epically lost. Even now, with navigation and a map on my screen in my car, I still take a turn prematurely or miss the exit either due to attending to something in my head or providing backup vocals to a Beach Boys song, imagining myself as a member of the band. Although I can be frustrated, I stop short of the all-too-easy narratives of, I'm such an idiot. Oh my God, I'm so stupid. What the hell is wrong with me?

If you have ADHD, you may know that voice very well. Whether it is a similar situation or because you walked into a room and immediately forgotten why you were there, or perhaps you opened your phone to check one thing and 45 minutes later wondered how you ended up watching videos about how honeybees communicate with each other with a certain pattern of how they fly. It's quite interesting, but I digress.

Perhaps you berate yourself for being late, despite trying so hard not to be, forgotten something important, interrupted someone, procrastinated on something you genuinely wanted to do, and then immediately heard that little voice in your head saying, Why can't you just get it together? Everyone else seems to be able to do this. Why can't I? Well, for me and those of you who have ADHD, it's because we have ADHD. It's not an excuse, but it's a fundamental truth that warrants compassionate understanding.

And today, I want to talk about something I believe is probably more important as learning how to manage our calendars, our medication, our time, our distractions, and our to-do lists. I want to talk about how we talk to ourselves, and I'm including myself in this circle.

Because sometimes the biggest obstacle standing between a person with ADHD and the life they want isn't the ADHD itself. It's the story they've learned to tell themselves about having ADHD.

We know ADHD can create real challenges with various forms of executive functioning, and for many people, those challenges can accumulate over years. The thoughts, however, do more than accumulate. They metastasize. It starts with, Ugh, I forgot my keys. It has the potential to morph to, I'm so irresponsible, cancerously becoming, I'm a failure. What makes me think I could do anything right? And the rancid cherry on top thought, Who would ever love me? Am I even meant to be in this world?

There is a difference between having a challenge and turning that challenge into an identity of inferiority, and that difference matters. We need to catch ourselves in the act, not just catch yourself doing something wrong, catching yourself talking to yourself in a way that you would never talk to someone you love.

Think about that for a moment. Imagine your best friend or your child forgets an appointment. Would you look at them and say, You're a disaster. You never get anything right. Probably not. You'd probably say, Hey, you forgot. It happens. What can we do differently next time? But somehow, when it's us, compassion can disappear. We become the harshest coach, the worst critic, and sometimes the loudest bully in our own heads.

And for people with ADHD, that inner criticism can become especially powerful because many of us have spent years receiving messages about what we should be doing better, and then we start shoulding ourselves. And eventually, I should becomes I am. I am disorganized. I am unreliable. I am lazy. I am broken.

But here's the problem. Other than my heart not wanting people to talk to themselves that way, it also doesn't work. Shame is not a productivity system. Beating yourself up does not magically give you executive functioning. Calling yourself lazy doesn't make a difficult task easier to start, and replaying your mistakes for three hours doesn't undo them.

In fact, negative self-talk can create a downward spiral. When we're emotionally flooded, our ability to think clearly and regulate ourselves and access executive functioning can become even more difficult.

So what if we tried something different? What if instead of trying to eliminate every negative thought, we learned to catch it? Imagine you were driving a car. You hear, I'm such an idiot. Stop. Stop the car. The thought. Notice it. Okay, there's that voice again, almost like it's a cloud in the sky. You're not fearful of the thought. You don't automatically see it as fact. It's just a thought, like the thousands of other thoughts that present themselves in our twisted minds. I can have the thought that I am harmonizing with the late, great Brian Wilson, but that doesn't make the thought fact in any way. It's just a thought. It's not indicative of a true thing that's happening.

Ask yourself, is that thought helping me? If the answer is no, we don't have to argue with it. We don't have to replace it with some unrealistic affirmation like, I am perfect and I never make mistakes, which isn't true. We simply make the statement more accurate. Instead of, I'm so lazy, try, I'm having a hard time getting started. Instead of, I always screw things up, try, I made a mistake and I can figure out what happened. Instead of, Why can't I be normal? try, My brain works differently and I can learn strategies that work with it.

This is not making excuses. That is changing the conversation from judgment to problem solving, and that's a powerful shift. Because when we stop spending all of our energy proving that we're failures, we have more energy available to actually solve the problem.

But there's another side to this. It's not enough to stop beating ourselves up. We also have to learn how to notice our wins, and this can be surprisingly difficult for people with ADHD. Think about how easily your brain remembers the mistake. Those moments can replay in your mind like a highlight reel. They become the uncoordinated performer who gets the spotlight in a stage they share with a hundred in-sync performers.

But what about the things you did right? Did you answer the email? Did you make the appointment? Did you get out of bed when you didn't want to? We don't often count those. We move the goalposts. Yeah, but I only did one thing today. Yeah, but I should have done it yesterday. Yeah, but everyone else does that. That should be easy. Nope. Let's count it. Because progress doesn't become less real simply because it wasn't perfect.

One of the challenges with negativity is that we can become extremely good at noticing what's wrong while overlooking what's going right.

So here's my challenge. At the end of every day, ask yourself one question: What did I do today that deserves credit? Not what did I accomplish, not what did I finish, simply what deserves credit. Maybe you made dinner. Maybe you showed up. Maybe you got through a difficult conversation. Maybe you worked for 20 minutes instead of avoiding the project entirely. Maybe you took a break before you became overwhelmed. Maybe you tried again. Those count.

And I want to make one distinction very clear. Celebrating your wins doesn't mean pretending your struggles don't exist. It means refusing to let your struggles become the only evidence that you use to judge yourself.

I am reminded of one of my dear patients who recently celebrated a milestone year of sobriety from a severe drug addiction. In the past, he would find himself lamenting as to why it took multiple stints of rehab and years of struggle and pain before achieving sobriety. Why didn't the first time in rehab stick? And the thoughts would

spiral to, Why did I even become a drug addict? Meanwhile, he achieved an amazing feat and worked so hard. Yes, it was several rehab stints and support groups and various treatment providers, but he stuck with it. It was clear. Had he not, he would have lost his precious life to drugs.

Celebrate the wins, even if it took you longer than it might have taken others. Even more, celebrate when it's something others around you may never have a problem with in the first place. That shouldn't invalidate your struggle, and more importantly, does not invalidate your win.

You can say, I struggled today and I kept going. I forgot something and I handled the consequences. I procrastinated and eventually I started. The word and is incredibly powerful because ADHD does not have to be either I'm amazing or I'm a failure.

The truth is usually more complicated. You can be capable and struggling. You can be successful and overwhelmed. You can be intelligent and forgetful. You can be creative and disorganized. You can have ADHD and still be extraordinarily capable.

So the next time that negative voice shows up, I want you to catch yourself in the act. Pause, name it, challenge it, and then look for the win. Maybe your new internal conversation sounds like, I didn't get everything done today. That's true, but I did finish two important things, and that's true too. Tomorrow I'm going to make the first step smaller. That's not toxic positivity. That's self-awareness and self-compassion, and that's a skill. Because self-compassion isn't about letting yourself off the hook. It's about responding to mistakes with understanding rather than cruelty, which can help build resilience and healthier coping strategies.

And here's the part I want you to remember: your brain is already keeping score. Let's teach it to count the wins too. The next time you forget something, catch yourself. The next time you compare yourself to someone else, catch yourself and say, Wait, I see what I'm doing. I'm turning one difficult moment into a judgment about who I am.

Then change the sentence, not into a lie, into the truth. I had a hard moment. I made a mistake. I am learning. I did something well today. That's the win. Not perfection, progress. Not punishment, practice. Not asking, What's wrong with me? but asking, What do I need? What was I seeking?

So tonight, before you go to sleep, I want you to think of one win, just one. Doesn't have to be impressive. Maybe you made the phone call. Maybe you got through the day. The last one might be the biggest win of all. Maybe you just caught yourself being cruel to yourself and changed the sentence. Because every time you catch that negative voice, you create a little more space between the mistake and the meaning you attach to it.

And in that space, you get a choice: compassion over criticism. You can choose to keep score of everything that went wrong, or you can finally start keeping score of what went right. Catch yourself in the act. Catch the negative thought. Put aside the unnecessary judgment and celebrate the win.

Because maybe the goal isn't to become the person who never forgets and never procrastinates and never gets distracted. Maybe the goal is to become the person who doesn't abandon themselves when those things happen.

I'm glad you joined me today. I'm Dr. Roberto Olivardia. You can reach me at R Olivardia, O-L-I-V-A-R-D-I-A, at McLean, which is M as in Mary, C-L-E-A-N dot Harvard dot edu. Thanks for listening.