

## Controlled Chaos: Living With ADHD

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I remember reluctantly sitting in an odd-smelling therapist's office when I was 12. I was alone in the room, left to solve various psychological tests. "Press the spacebar when you see the letter X", the doctor instructed. "I'll be back to check on you soon". I sighed and glanced at the computer. This was so boring. The test started, and the spacebar kept clicking; On every other letter that wasn't X. I was not thrilled in the slightest, in fact I was furious with myself. Why couldn't I do this right?

When the test concluded, I cried. I knew I didn't do well, I didn't "pass". That was the first time I would undergo an evaluation for a mental health disorder, and the first time I felt like something was wrong with me. None of my other friends had to go press a space bar on the letter X; why did I?

The doctor called my Mom and me back with my results. The doctor concluded I had ADHD. I felt my stomach turn. I shrank into the seat, dreading that I was now considered "bad" or "damaged". On the car ride home, my Mother scoffed and shook her head.

"They say every kid has ADHD these days. Kids are going to be kids! It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you, honey."

That statement was uplifting at the time, but would eventually warp my perception of the diagnosis. I continued my middle school years writing stories during class, finding any excuse to walk to the bathroom, and being berated by my math teacher for doodling hearts on my tests. One day, he called me into his office to harshly reprimand me for making "careless mistakes" (A saying I would hear for the rest of my life). I felt stupid. I was trying, and I did care. I was just never good with numbers. I cried leaving his office that day, knowing that my best wasn't good enough for the general standard.

Over the years, multiple adults have echoed the same statement that my mother and math teacher did that day. "You don't pay attention", "You make careless mistakes", "They diagnose kids for being kids", and "It's not a real thing". I wasn't aware of it at the time, but this constant representation of ADHD diagnoses crept into my brain. I believed it was nonsense, and that "everyone had it". If everyone has it, doesn't that mean it's "normal"?

I fell into drinking and drug use in my high school years. The genetics from my birthparents was the bullet, and an opportunity in front of me pulled the trigger. The feelings of worthlessness and not fitting the general standard consumed me; I needed to escape. If I wasn't good enough to fit in, why bother trying?

I saw a psychiatrist briefly during this time, and she was convinced I was bipolar. I consistently lied to her about how much I drank and the drugs I used, which didn't help with getting an honest diagnosis. I was prescribed Lamotrigine, a mood stabilizer, and became numbed out. Lamotrigine combined with the drugs I was using could have never worked. I ditched the Lamotrigine, and decided buying substances from strangers was a better option.

These feelings behind my using all boiled down to "not being good enough". My family and friends who didn't drink like I did didn't have these emotional outbursts. They could hold

down jobs, get college degrees, and excel in their personal lives. I couldn't succeed in those areas. Panic, mental breakdowns, guilt and shame stopped me from moving forward in my life. The cycle perpetuated, and as I escaped more through substances, my guilt piled up.

In 2016 I found the courage to get sober. I attended an Intensive Outpatient Program and began seeing a new psychiatrist. She was warm and loving, and really took an interest in my recovery. My starting mental health diagnosis was depression, given to me while I was detoxing off alcohol and drugs.

My first prescription in sobriety was Lexapro; A selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor which allowed serotonin to stay in my system for longer. Serotonin is known to help with happiness, focus, sexual arousal, and sleep. The first night I took it, I felt amazing, like I was on top of the world. I would continue for years on Lexapro before I realized it made me exhausted. After waking up in the morning, I knew I had about three good hours of energy before my body forced me to lay down for a nap. I couldn't plan full-day adventures with friends. If I had to go to the store or run various errands, I made sure to crunch my time before my daily nap. Once that clock struck 2PM, I was passed out.

Down the road, Lexapro was not enough. My psychiatrist added Lamotrigine again, which had a very different effect than it did when I was partying with people I hated. It balanced me out and lowered my drastic mood swings. However, it was still not enough. Gabapentin was added to the mix to use off-label for my anxiety. I began taking 400mg 3 times a day: Slightly higher than the average dose.

Once cemented in my sobriety, I tried getting various jobs. Being a veterinary receptionist at a high-end clinic, I found myself in a very fast-paced, old-fashioned, and strict environment. Every morning, I parked my car and looked at the building that would trap me for the day. White walls and a beautiful sign acted as a prison, and I couldn't stand it.

Getting overwhelmed with constant phone calls, spreadsheets that never ended, and typing numbers on invoices marked my days. I would zone out on bland sequences of numbers and miss details. People entering the office would take my attention away from my phone calls, and I would forget to put appointments on the calendar. I would be putting a file away and get distracted by a co-worker asking me something, and the file would be misplaced. "Careless mistakes", I could never escape those words. I wasn't careless. I tried very hard to be a good employee. I put all the effort in that I could. I couldn't understand why I always fell short of others' expectations.

After a few tries at desk work, I realized it wasn't for me. I decided to become a dog walker. I was able to drive around, get physical exercise, go to multiple locations each day, and listen to my music. Not being confined to one space was amazing. My daily schedule was always new and exciting, my bosses weren't hanging over my shoulder, and I experienced a "care-taker" role, which boosted my self-esteem.

My dog-walking job improved my mental health and selecting my own schedule allowed me to have my daily Lexapro nap. Eventually, I was hired to do in-office work for the same company. That dreadful feeling of a building trapping me crept in again. Bosses were close by, criticism was lavished, and I was around other people constantly.

About three months after beginning the office work, I pulled my famous "Cut and run" move as I had with many jobs before. I became too overwhelmed, the emotional stress was too great, and I would freeze. I couldn't physically move from the spot I was in until I had decided

that I would quit the job; on the spot. I left many employers hanging and confused as to why I suddenly quit when I previously had great work performance. Afterwards, I was always overwhelmed with guilt and shame. My parents and friends couldn't understand why I had to leave. I couldn't explain that I felt forced by both my brain and body; That it felt like I was somehow in eminent danger. This highlighted one of my main issues with ADHD, impulsivity.

The dog-walking opportunity happened for a reason. I loved being with animals, driving around, and communicating with friendly clients. I missed those aspects of the job so much that I decided to start my own pet care business. I sat for days locked in on my computer building a website, making business cards, and brainstorming advertising ideas. My business reached a point where I had considered hiring employees to help with the heavy work load.

I realized when I put my mind to something, the results were incredible. I didn't know it at the time, but this was a part of my ADHD. When I was doing something I loved, I could buckle down and focus on it. Even though some considered my business to not be a "real" job due to lack of an LLC license and stable income, I persisted.

My impulsivity in the work environment slowed with having my own business, but it remained prevalent in my personal life. Relationships suffered the same burst of anxiety that my employers had experienced. During the course of my sobriety, I have been in a few relationships where my patterns repeated consistently. The most prominent behavioral sequence was blurting out anything that slightly bothered me. When something small came up (Partners leaving dishes in the sink, not responding to a text for a few hours, etc.) my anxiety would overtake me. My body felt like it was burning, and every nerve in my body tingled. It was the same feeling as the "Cut and run", but in this situation, I had to do something instead of avoid it. Sending furious messages, spam-calling partners, and starting fights seemingly out of nowhere plagued me. The mood swings were detrimental to my partners; Most days they wondered which Lillian they would experience.

Many of these tantrums became more severe as I continued to make my partner the center of my world. I would think about them non-stop, every day. They were all I would talk about with my friends. I often wondered where my life would go if they left me. This only perpetuated the cycle of anxiety and obsessive thinking. I thought I was desperate and clingy; The partners I was with never let me forget it. My "type" was a man who was older, had more experience, and could hold my hand to walk me through life. I had no confidence in my abilities or trust in myself. I couldn't hold down a "real" job, my emotions had control over my life, and my brain never stopped the obsessive dialogues. It was easier to latch to someone who seemed stable and ask them to take care of me than it was for me to take care of myself. I had never heard the term "Hyper-focusing" before, but once I did, this all made sense.

Hearing about these personal issues, my psychiatrist and I blew through more diagnoses as to what my condition could be. The ADHD diagnosis did come up, and I tried both Adderall and Vyvanse back to back; One of the worst medication experiences I would have. I became suicidal almost immediately on both amphetamines and began planning my suicide. Quickly, I was taken off the medications and began returning to "normal". Returning to the anxiety diagnosis, we decided to try a few new medications: Bupropion which numbed me out, Effexor which heightened my anxiety, and colonopin taken as needed, which I only took once under psychiatrist recommendation ("As needed" drugs are dangerous for addicts in recovery due to

our intense rationalization abilities, and I wasn't willing to risk my recovery for a quick anxiety fix).

The suicide plans took my mental health treatment to a new level. Sitting in my psychiatrist's office sobbing, I told her that I felt there was no hope for me. She recommended I take an at-home Genomind test. Genomind is a DNA test that determines which medications work best with your genetics. They scan for possible adverse effects, deficiencies in neurochemistry, drug metabolism and absorption abilities.

I ordered it reluctantly and waited impatiently for three days. Once it arrived, I stared at the box for an hour. I was halfway excited to see the results, and more terrified that there would be none; that my symptoms would just be my personality, not a medical issue. I sent off the test skeptically and anxiously awaited my results.

The findings were very informative. I saw that my brain had adverse reactions to both Adderall and Vyvanse, as well as an inability to process folate. Folate is a natural form of vitamin B responsible for energy levels, light-headedness, headaches, irritability, depression, and judgement; most of my prominent symptoms. I began taking L-Methylfolate, a chemical which helps the brain absorb and maintain the essential nutrient. To my surprise, my mood slightly increased. At the time I was elated, but I had no idea how far down the scale from happiness I still was. The test also laid out how my brain would react to any psychiatric drug in any class. Going forward, this information was very helpful in avoiding any more worst case scenarios.

I also underwent extensive blood tests. The most shocking findings were my allergies to various foods. Wheat, yeast, corn, soy, eggs, and peanuts send me over the edge. I can't digest them properly, and they send me into a tailspin. I lose energy, become incredibly angry, and lose a sense of myself. Ingestion of these foods can make these symptoms last anywhere from three hours to four days. The reactions heighten my ADHD symptoms of inability to focus, little to no emotional regulation, and rage fits. I changed my diet immediately once I learned of these intolerances. I began to feel much better, and save some money on large Domino's pizzas ordered every night.

My symptoms continued, and more diagnoses were made. My psychiatrist and I blazed through Borderline Personality, Generalized Anxiety, PTSD, and Bipolar. Many different pills charged through my system rapidly. At the time I listened to my psychiatrist closely and had faith in her. Anything she suggested as an option I tried; medications such as Prozac, Seroquel, Wellbutrin, Celexa, Abilify, Citalopram, Cymbalta, Zoloft, Sertraline, Zyprexa, and Latuda graced this list. At one point, I was on eight different medications at once, each prescribed to treat a side effect of a previous one. My friends recall me as a "zombie" or a "robot" during this time. I was so drugged up, I didn't even know that I didn't feel human anymore.

From June to August of 2021 I went through eight drastic medication changes. I was on a new class of prescriptions every week. Due to the rapidly changing chemicals in my brain, I was a mess. This "mess" presented symptoms of various psychiatric conditions, leading to the multiple diagnoses. I was even prescribed antipsychotics, even though I had never been diagnosed as Schizophrenic. Regardless of my aversion to certain SSRI's, I was asked to try them again. At the time I wasn't aware that I could have a say in my mental health treatment. I continued on the path I was being led through, and in October of 2021, I fell into a deeper depression than usual. This was where my Latuda (An Anti-psychotic) adventure began.

I was on top of the world. Invincible, no anxiety, confident, and stable. I had finally made it. This was the cure-all drug I had been looking for. I felt like I had just found buried treasure after searching for it for five years. I was determined to make the best of my fresh start. Little did I know, this feeling wouldn't last long. The end of November came, and paranoia struck. I remember panicking in my car while going to the store (A common, daily activity) while crying and smoking a cigarette. Suddenly I was convinced that the cigarettes had weed in them. I took every cigarette out of that pack and broke it open, scanning for any sight of marijuana. Tobacco scattered all over my car, eyes red from wiping tears, and heart palpitations tormenting my chest, I mentally crashed. The line between reality and my false narratives had blurred, and the overwhelming feelings I had dreaded for so long returned.

I admitted myself to the hospital for suicidal ideations only to find that I would be shipped off to a random mental health facility somewhere in the state. I immediately decided to come home. My psychiatrist declared that she couldn't treat me anymore if I didn't enter a facility. I wasn't ready to go, and I had responsibilities at home I needed to take care of. Leaving behind my sick cat, recovery community, pet care business, and family wasn't in the cards for me. My psychiatrist and I wound up parting ways, and I went without psychiatric care for five months. I had four medications I had been on consistently with me, and for my first two refills I went to urgent care, and then paid for a membership to a primary care doctor. They both gave me one refill each for 60 days of each medication; enough in total for four months. They wouldn't fill my prescriptions again without a psychiatrist's sign off. My skepticism of the psychiatry industry stone-walled me from finding new care.

During this time, I wasn't being told to try any new drugs. I worked intensively with my therapist on coping mechanisms. I realized I had been relying on a fantasy of a "Cure-All" pill for years. I learned techniques to soothe my panic. Deep breathing never worked for me, despite how commonly it is used. What did work, was to pretend like I was announcing the letter "R". Placing my tongue at the back of my throat, I could feel my body relaxing. Another was telling myself "I am safe" when I am in a comfortable environment, so that I would believe it when things were uncomfortable. Journaling and descriptive writing were amazing outlets as well. Once you dump your thoughts onto paper, you don't have to hold onto them anymore.

My favorite tactic is sitting in my car with my music. I have a playlist of songs with a certain bass level that calm me. Turn the music all the way up, let the bass vibrate through you, and the lyrics drown out your thoughts. Once that is done, I can organize my emotions into words and pour them out on paper. My coping mechanisms weren't just for calming down, they were for calming, organizing, and then externalizing my thoughts. Without externalization, my thoughts will spin forever.

Unfortunately, I wasn't only using healthy coping mechanisms. Drinking five cups of coffee, smoking six cigarettes a day, vaping consistently, and chasing after men that I knew were emotionally unavailable failed me. Searching for a distraction from myself became my primary goal.

Eventually, I found myself in constant panic attacks for a week. They never stopped. The paranoia had come back, and I felt everyone was out to get me. I had a phone conversation with a friend about our spiritual beliefs, and they began speaking of crows and numerology. Something about that conversation made me think of evil, and I convinced myself that the conversation would leak evil into my body. I hung up that phone call and sobbed for hours. I

was terrified that I was nearing a break from reality. I felt I had hit the ceiling of “normal life” and was about to transcend into a psychotic break.

Speaking with my therapist, I realized that I had tried coping mechanisms for six months. I learned so much and had come such a long way, but it wasn’t enough. I knew I needed more help if I was to continue participating in my daily life. I contacted a new psychiatrist, and he was amazing. He understood my past experiences, was constantly available to talk with in case I needed extra support, and gave me my final diagnosis: ADHD. He told me about the impulsivity, hyper-fixating, irritability, outbursts, and emotional regulation issues that come with ADHD. My perception shifted. I always thought ADHD wasn’t a “real diagnosis”, or that it was only an inability to focus; I had no idea how deep the condition went.

Along with my new psychiatrist, I also participated in a SPECT scan, which monitors blood flow to various areas of the brain. When the results came in, the doctor showed me images of a normal, resting brain. The low energy levels were colored blue, which took up most of the brain. A few parts glowed slightly red, showing light activity. Once we discussed what it all meant, he pulled up mine. My brain was lit up like a Christmas tree. Burning red shot across all areas of my brain. This was my brain in its resting state. My mind was constantly on fire, spinning as if a bear was charging right towards me. I was always prepared for danger, and assumed every corner of my life would kill me. I broke down. I began sobbing and repeating “It’s not my fault”. This was a neurological disorder. I had no control over it. I wasn’t a bad person, I wasn’t stupid or not trying, and it wasn’t my fault that I had these behavioral issues.

Throughout the Genomind test, SPECT scan, allergy testing, intensive therapy, and a new psychiatrist, I learned that my final diagnosis was ADHD and PTSD. We had finally figured it out. I began taking light doses of Strattera with close supervision from my psychiatrist. I learned to work with the medication, rather than expect it to be a “cure-all”. I cut out coffee and quit cigarettes. I learned to rely more on coping mechanisms and faith in myself than a pill. I didn’t give up on the Strattera during the adjustment period. When we upped my dosage, I was aware that it wasn’t working and notified my psychiatrist immediately. Now, I am on Lamotrigine, Gabapentin, L-Methylfolate, and Strattera. This combination of medications works to subdue my symptoms, but I still have to consciously try every day to keep them under wraps.

Today, I live with an amazing man who understands my diagnosis. He is patient and kind, and I have learned how to communicate effectively with him. I still have outbursts, but they are short lived and less severe. We talk about issues calmly, and don’t let emotional moments break us down. I have my own life as well, focusing on my recovery, work, and friends. It is still a struggle to not hyper-fixate on my relationship, but I have improved significantly.

I still own my pet-sitting business and am now a published author. I have learned that desk jobs and working under someone else is not for me. I don’t fit into that mold: and that’s okay. I am my own boss, do the things I love, and can focus on my work intensely. The combination of physical activity when walking dogs and mental stimulation from writing gives me a well-rounded work life.

Changing between these two jobs helps, as my brain is constantly changing as well. If I have a bad day, I can take a break and cry it out or take time to calm down. I have my music available, friends to call, and creature comforts to assist me. I also focus greatly on healthy eating. Due to my allergies, most of my food is home cooked. I stick to a diet of fish, meat,

fruits, and vegetables. I am cautious of what is in the seasonings I put into my food, and when I go to restaurants I always notify the waiter of my allergies. The Taco Bell and large pizzas I used to eat were not worth the emotional and physical drop I experienced. When I got sober, I weighed 220 lbs; now I am down to 140.

I also own two cats named Tubby and Bonkers. They help me constantly with stress management. I love taking breaks to play with them, get in some cuddles, and occasionally help them get down from the top of the fridge. They give me a sense of responsibility and aid in my daily routine. I used to live in chaos, so much that I got addicted to it. Waking up in the morning, making my tea, feeding the boys, and beginning my writing is something I now look forward to. Structure is important to aiding my ADHD, as it helps me predict what will happen tomorrow morning when I wake up. Having animals around is a great coping mechanism for me. They give unconditional love and are there for me on my worst days. Having something to care for, love, and appreciate keeps me centered and boosts my self-esteem. They drive me crazy some days, but they have absolutely improved my life.

I have control of my life now. I stopped trying to fit into the mold of my friends and family and decided to trudge my own path. I have stopped internalizing feelings of guilt due to my mental illness, and educate others on the many effects of ADHD. This is not a “fake illness”, it is something much more complex and difficult than others imagine.

The main issue with ADHD that I have experienced is that I don't get to choose what I focus on. I can get wrapped up on a dish left in the sink and take that into a full-blown fight with my significant other. I will zone out on boring spreadsheets and lose track of time. I get consumed in panic attacks, and hyper-fixate on the emotions I am experiencing. What helps the most is doing things that I love. When I focus on writing or promoting my business, I knock it out of the park. The benefit of living with this condition is that used in the right way, it can propel me forward; maybe even faster than others.

There is nothing wrong with me, I am not damaged, and I am not my diagnosis. My brain operates differently than others, and I have learned to work with it, rather than try to “fix” it. Use this diagnosis to your advantage. Find what you focus on easily and chase it. Learn what hyper-fixation feels like in your body. When you introduce yourself to others, don't promote your diagnosis more than your name. ADHD does not make us bad, careless, crazy, or not worthy. Look at it as a friend rather than a disease. It doesn't need to be eradicated; it can be used to help you if done the right way. I didn't know it when I was 12 sitting in that therapist's office, but one day that diagnosis would become my greatest strength.