

## Dan Hartman's experience with ADHD

I'm an ambitious, energetic, passionate 23-year-old male who's recently entered the professional world. I was diagnosed with ADD just before the second-last set of exams in my final year of high school.

My initial feeling was relief. Finally, my struggle to concentrate on my work would be over, thanks to the prescription I'd be written. I'd be able to reach the 'potential' people had for so long been saying I had. I'd be on track for an ATAR in the 90s, which would give me the choice to study almost anything I wanted at university.

Then I was confused. What does this tell me - and other people - about who I am? Does it mean there's something wrong with me? Then I was afraid. How will this affect my future? Will I ever be able to get a high-paying job?

And finally, anger. How can it be that nobody thought of getting me tested for attention deficit disorders? After all, 12 years of school reports saying I was 'bright but easily distracted', 'disorganised', and 'had trouble applying myself' should have rung alarm bells.

As this mix of emotions swirled around in my head, I began my first Ritalin prescription. The change was instant. Not only did I not 'lose my personality', as some people claim about those who use ADD medication, but I was also instantly more focused at school. When exam time came a few weeks later, I got the best marks of my school career. I was in the top 10% of my year at a selective school, whose median ATAR ended up being 94. I felt brilliant. I was finally achieving what people had been telling me I was capable of.

Then, come time for my final exams, I experienced something I never really had before: anxiety. I had trouble with one of my favourite things in the world - eating. I was on edge. Maybe my Ritalin dose was too high. But when I had to leave my second English exam due to nausea and gagging, I vowed to stop taking the pills forever.

My final results were telling. I had scored in the top band for the assignments I submitted before the exam period and in my English exams that I wrote on Ritalin. After I stopped taking it, my results were in the high 70s and low 80s. My final ATAR score was 77.95, which while it is a good average score, placed me in the bottom 3% of my academically selective school.

I felt like the poster boy for unrealised potential. Everyone was talking about their results. I felt it necessary to either point out that 'I don't think your score really matters anyway' or just flat-out avoided telling people.

I was, at times, a bit unhappy back then. Mostly because I was so uncertain about what to do next.

Fast forward six years, and I'm a sales professional working on the other side of the world, the happiest I've ever been, and with more opportunity in my career than I dreamt of when I finished school.

### **So what changed between then and now?**

First, **I stopped letting ADD define who I was.** Yes, it may express itself in personality quirks or in the way you learn, but it's not who you are. In fact, it rarely even occurs to me that I have ADD. I don't take any medication for it, because I don't want to feel that anything I've achieved is possible only because I have a license that lets me take amphetamines every morning. What if, ten years from now, I have to make a big presentation to a packed audience and I forget to take the pill I've been relying on for the past decade?

**I realised that I might have to find alternative methods of learning.** Since leaving school I have dropped out of university three times. I wish I'd never gone at all, because my heart was never truly sold on what I was learning there. I felt that I learned faster by *doing* the thing I was learning about. I learn by asking questions and finding relevant short articles when necessary.

I am not suggesting that everyone drop out of university, and if it *did* suit my learning style then I'd absolutely have tried to complete a degree. I'd hopefully be starting an MBA right now. But the reality is that this path did not suit me, and it's unfair to 'wish' I had done a degree so that I could enrol in an MBA program.

I suggest you think about what learning style suits you and try to use that in whatever you want to learn.

**I found a way of working that suits my style.** I am incredibly productive in 15 to 30 minute bursts, but need two to five minute breaks in between those bursts. So when I need to complete a task that will take longer than 30 minutes, I minimise distractions, put my head down for about 20 minutes, and then give myself a short break to check my text messages, chat to someone nearby, etc. I don't manage my time in any specific way, such as using a countdown timer, but I know that many people, both with and without ADD, have had some success with the [Pomodoro](#)

[Technique](#). If you feel that you work better in short bursts, then maybe it's worth giving this technique a try.

Minimise the distractions in your work area. Either sit away from people you like to chat to, or have a candid conversation where you explain your difficulties concentrating and ask them to keep chatter infrequent. Put your mobile phone on silent and turn it face-down on your desk so you can't see notifications popping up. Use instrumental music to block out background noise if necessary.

**I found a career path that aligns with my passions, my skills, and the realities of the world I live in.**

Notice that I said 'found', not 'chose'. I applied myself to doing *something* and let myself wander to where I am today, guided by the realities of my environment. Finding a dream career is a big challenge, of course, and entire books have been devoted to the subject. If you feel uncertain about your future, work out what values are important to you. Then find a product, company or industry you like and that expresses these values, and try to work in those companies or industries. Even if the first job do isn't one you'd want to do for the rest of your life, keep to your path. You'll learn a lot about yourself and discover what you're truly passionate about.

Don't let ADD limit your career choices. Sure, it may disadvantage you in some ways, but I'm absolutely certain ADD gives me advantages over some of my peers, too. [This is a great article on the unexpected advantages of a short attention span.](#)

The final piece in the puzzle was that I **started mindfulness meditation**. 17-year-old me would *never* have thought I'd do this. I even ignored a teacher's suggestions to try it. I could not reconcile myself with my mental image of a meditator: a weird, middle-aged person sitting cross-legged, wearing linen clothes, surrounded by nature and humming.

As it turns out, mindfulness meditation is actually just a form of brain training. It takes 15 minutes every morning before work, and involves me sitting on a chair wearing headphones doing basically nothing. Doesn't sound too bad, right?

I implore you to check out meditation site [Headspace](#) and try some of the free 10-minute guided meditation sessions there. These exercises will teach you to recognise when you're distracted, refocus, and get back to the task you want to be doing. I've felt a lot less stressed, happier, and my thoughts are a lot clearer since I started meditating. To me, this serves the same purpose as ADD medication, but without any of the downsides.

What I'm really trying to say is that everything is going to be okay. What works for me may not be what works for you, but hopefully sharing my story has helped someone, somewhere, feel a bit happier about who they are. The most important thing is that you don't let ADD define you. My attention span is so bad that I keep forgetting to have ADD!

*I'd love to chat further with anyone who's looking at finding ways to cope with ADD. Get in touch with me on Twitter (@HartmanOnline) and we can organise a way to chat.*