

Hairdresser Michael Johnson is affected by ADHD but has not let it stop him from running his own salon.

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So it goes like this. You're at work and you're not able to focus or concentrate, even though you have an in-demand job that stretches your talent. Somehow though you've been "managing" or maybe dealing with your inability to manage, all these years.

Until now. Now that you have all these balls in the air to juggle like family and career you feel you're not coping as well. You have poor sleep, are easily distracted, blurt things out, interrupt others and often miscommunicate. The fact that you're forgetting and misplacing objects such as your wallet and car keys is starting to take its toll. You feel irritable and distracted. You start to become quite despondent because even though you appear to be getting through by "winging it", much to the awe of others, your problems are getting in the way of the high level of functioning you wish to achieve.



Hairdresser Michael Johnson is affected by ADHD but has not let it stop him from running his own salon.

You then take your 12-year-old son to the doctor for behavioural problems, only to find out that he is diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Because he has similar symptoms to you, you trial his medication, and feel an improvement.

Although this last course of action is clearly risky and would not be recommended by doctors (an assessment is standard practice), it is exactly what happened to 40-year-old single mother of two, Susie*, who has two sons aged 9 and 12. With a full-time job in real estate, she is also developing an online clothing business while checking out dating apps "for a quick laugh", trying to get out there in the single world again.

"I was 35 years old when I was first diagnosed with ADHD and I wish it was much earlier. It's like I'm running on a motor that does not turn off. While I can juggle big projects and tasks, I miss the details in things. I can't read more than one page of a book without my train of thought drifting off. I interrupt people, which comes across as rude, but it is simply because I often can't hold onto a thought or idea long enough to remember it, so I have to blurt it out. I get bored easily and am very impatient. On the positive side I'm the life of the party!"



Mr Johnson is also studying towards a law degree.

Welcome to the world of adult attention deficit disorders, where drugs such as Ritalin, Concerta and Dexamphetamine can help cure your inattention, giving you "hyper focus with tunnel vision and getting 10 times the workload done", according to Susie. It's like "putting on a pair of glasses and being able to see again", she says, and feeling like your "life has just begun".

ADHD drugs are controlled drugs in the same category as cocaine, opium and morphine, to reduce misuse and dependence. This is one reason Susie does not wish to be identified. "Because I'm working in a conservative industry the stigma for mental illness is still there, and I also don't want anyone knowing I take Dexamphetamine." "Medication, however, has changed my life," she adds. "I thought my inability to focus was my own fault. Having ADHD made me think I was stupid, and medication made me realise I wasn't. Had I known this when I was at school I would have achieved more and had more confidence."



Ritalin, Concerta and Dexamphetamine are prescribed for ADHD. *Photo: Keith Beatty/Toronto Star*

Sydney-based consultant psychiatrist Dr Hugh Morgan says the most recent criteria for ADHD in adults is that they are predominantly the inattentive type, or the combined type of inattentive and hyperactive.

"This is usually expressed by not being able to sit still, fidgeting a lot, tapping the foot constantly. They can't watch a TV show without multi-tasking. Procrastination is a big issue. They're distracted: they may be in a conversation with a friend or at a lecture at university and drift off. They have difficulty with time management and are always running late. They might get a sense of 'why can their friends just get stuff done?' All of us have a level of this, but it depends on how mild, moderate or severe it is for one to need treatment and medication."

Dr Morgan explains that the impact can be quite severe, with people living very chaotic lives: having multiple jobs "because they get bored", even getting fired because they're not working "productively".

"A lot of adults feel a tremendous sense of regret and loss and ask 'why was this not picked up?' The response to treatment is quite remarkable."

While adult ADHD appears to be on the increase, research shows that it is becoming more recognised. Prior to 1990 the federal government did not allow adults to be treated for ADHD: they were treated as having anxiety disorders or personality disorders.

"ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition and something you're born with," explains Dr Morgan. "Quite a few people come to see me for anxiety and depression, to find out that they have ADHD as well."

Michael Johnson, a 30-year-old hairdresser from Sydney owns his own hair salon, runs an online hair and beauty store, has travelled the world working alongside leading fashion and lifestyle brands, and is a regular stylist at leading fashion shows. He is also studying for a law degree.

"I was first diagnosed with ADHD when I was in high school. I found that I lost focus and motivation for education once the workload started to increase and I needed more organisation. Thankfully, I found a career that allowed me to leave school and express my creativity in an environment that accepts all kinds of people. I also study law because I'm into expanding the mind."

Says Dr Morgan: "ADHD affects people across the spectrum, from those who have an intellectual disability to those who are geniuses. I see a lot of students studying law and medicine who have it. When that level of higher executive functioning is required, that's when they need to take medication so they can stay on task."

If untreated, Dr Morgan says such people are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

"One example is that people with ADHD are more likely to smoke. Part of it is that it is a stimulant, and part of it is the risk taking. People who are abusing drugs, or have drug and alcohol problems, probably do have an increased chance of having ADHD, and would therefore be good to have it screened for."

Recent government statistics show that the average number of Australians potentially diagnosable with ADHD is 5 per cent, which means that 1.2 million people could be affected, yet only a tiny percentage of this group have actually been diagnosed. NSW health stats show 6809 adults use psycho-stimulant medication for ADHD.

However between 2005 and 2012, there were no changes in the overall rate of treatment of adults with psycho-stimulant medication in NSW: the rate has been 0.1 per cent of the NSW adult population throughout that period. Joy Toll, founder of the ADHD CENTRE and ADDults with ADHD, is despondent at the lack of help for adults who are undiagnosed but whose personal lives, families and communities are affected.

"These current statistics show that adult ADHD is clearly misunderstood and underdiagnosed. Mental health conditions like anxiety – the most prevalent mental health condition in Australia – are better researched, but then, the majority of adults with ADHD also have anxiety and some depression, which usually settles with medication." The problem, she says, is that with adult ADHD only recently being understood as a "whole of life" neurobiological condition, many middle aged and older adults have been misdiagnosed.

To add to this, mental health clinics in public hospitals do not treat adult ADHD, leaving adults no alternative than to visit private psychiatrists for assessment and treatment.

"Yet not all psychiatrists treat adult ADHD, and those that do have long waiting lists and can be very expensive: \$400 to \$650 per visit, with a Medicare rebate of \$221.30 for the first visit. The pressure is also growing, as paediatricians who wish to move young adults on to adult psychiatrists from 16 years of age, is totally overloading the adult system. Hence our helpline regularly receives distressing calls from university students, the unemployed, the homeless, pensioners, and low-income families alike."

Sydney paediatrician Dr Patrick Concannon estimates around 25-30 per cent of the parents of children with ADHD that he sees also have the condition.

"Up until a few years ago the most common reason adults were getting diagnosed was subsequent to their child being diagnosed. If parents feel that they do have problems, that's when I suggest they have their assessment." "Something I do hear quite often, is that because they had such a terrible time growing up they don't want their child to go through the same thing. ADHD affects families, relationships, work, the incidence of divorce is higher, they have more troubles with vocation and jobs, and more difficulties with social interactions."

He also says it's hard to find adult psychiatrists who will treat adults because many don't have experience in ADHD or lack interest in treating it.

"It's a problem we have and the waiting lists for assessments and treatments are long."

While Michael admits he is still a "shocking organiser," he is relieved at understanding the symptoms of ADHD. "I won't let things go undone, like I would in the past. Naming the collection of personality traits and my coping mechanisms has helped me manage the symptoms of ADHD that affects my life and relationships."

Says Susie: "After being diagnosed everything made so much more sense understanding why I am the way I am. I am now more at peace."

** Not her real name.*

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/adult-adhd-head-20160412-go43bf#ixzz47a0foRH6>

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