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A Race Car Brain With Bicycle Brakes: One Vision of ADD With Edward Hallowell

Carol Smaldino | May 01, 2012 03:50 PM EDT

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Few who know about the worlds of ADD and ADHD would dispute the notion that the major leader in the field -- in terms of time and effort, teaching and achievement in general -- is Edward Hallowell, M.D., who now has clinics in the Boston area and in New York City. With John Ratey, M.D., he wrote the now-famous book *Driven to Distraction*, and he has stayed in the field of expanding awareness and treatment from coast to coast and beyond.

Thor Bergerson, M.D. is another psychiatrist (who also has his own center in Boston) who has ADD knowledge at his fingertips and oddly enough he, like the first two, also comes from the Boston area. Then there is Thom Hartman, whose book *The Edison Gene* created a respect for ADD wiring as perhaps actually necessary as a gene for the hunter-gatherer age and for other arenas of creativity. Hartman hails from Michigan, so the theory about Boston may have to end. Hartmann himself has become something of a progressive maverick in journalism and on the radio. But let's get back to Edward Hallowell (she says, showing some signs of her own ADD).

The Boston theory is actually no joke, or at least not entirely, since for years in my own clinical practice in the New York area, I found that comprehensive diagnostic awareness and coping skills -- not to mention empathy about ADD -- were just about lacking in the New York area. Now it has seemed to catch on but not enough in my view, and this is in part due to prejudice, to ignorance and also to the lack of adequate appreciation and respect for ADD wiring and those who have it.

Dr. Hallowell is quick to avoid any love affair with the diagnosis in terms of the initials ADD or ADHD (though he does like the example of "being like a race car with bicycle brakes"), saying he doesn't blame any child or adult for resentment about being pushed to buy into having a "deficit" when it's more like a difference, with good and bad sides to it. He is pragmatic and positive and direct about the dynamics -- as opposed to taking a politically correct stance, like many who substitute better-sounding names for real diseases. Truth be told, ADD is not a disease, though when it is ignored or treated as purposeful disrespect in its own right, it can prove hazardous to all

aspects of health. All the same, without ignoring the issues, he feels it is entirely possible to talk to a child, for instance, as a human being about his/her actual and personal experience and to get real about specifics without stuffing labels down any throat at all.

This is seriously refreshing, and is an addition to the growing knowledge, not quite spread far and wide enough, that some children are simply wired for -- if not oppositionalism -- then a fierce need for autonomy, freedom of will that indeed can border on or become defiance or even arrogance. These are the children who may need a bottom line but even more importantly need space, neutrality, negotiation and an absence of prissy rules and punishments. To go head to head with a child with ADD that has accompanying strength of will is disastrous. But here, for me, is one of the lessons we can all learn from ADD in general, which is that we need to cultivate respect for ourselves and for our children, rather than demand behavioral conformity without considering the lust for freedom that we sing about in theory.

So, New Yorkers, Dr. Hallowell and his multi-talented and diverse staff are now in New York (as well as in Boston), where they supply a "you name it" in terms of ADD evaluations. Not only that, my own experience of referring to them -- and in particular, I've worked mostly with Thor Bergerson -- shows that not everyone is diagnosed with the same thing(!), no small fact since some specialists see the world from one angle only.

This is a pretty upbeat place in Manhattan -- for Dr. Hallowell also, since he has ADD himself and feels blessed to have the assistance of Denise Boline, who not only has a huge reservoir of energy but consistent focusing abilities as well -- no small thing. There are plenty of teaching tools here that can help parents and educators understand how someone with ADD can be antsy or zone out in one set of activities and be hyper-focused in others. Hopefully, soon, gone will be the days of people saying, "She/he is just lazy, since he's good in math but just doesn't want to do spelling." And there will be ways to find the real story and work with our children, not against them.

For me one way of thinking about children with ADD (adults deserve their own piece and the center deals with them too) is that they are more fiercely democratic than other kids who will easily adhere to strict rules and regulations with a passive attitude. I suppose for me "fresh" kids have always been a bit more delicious, because they are spicy, and perhaps because deeper down I wanted to be as fresh and refreshing as they could be. (There is also the wonder of helping an overly quiet kid reach his/her spice potential)

My own wish: May the centers spread, and may the humanizing of a very important and human condition be made ever more understood without being demeaned. May we get to know ourselves and others for the myriad of parts we have -- for the rebel deep down or the oppositional part of us -- or the scared part that wishes we could be found and not stay lost.

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