

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

by Jillian LaVelle, CSMC, CHt

In examining Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), it is amazing to me to see the rising rates of diagnosis per year. Therapists are now actively involved in helping family members as well as their clientele. I did an unofficial survey on my neighborhood block and found that almost half of the children were diagnosed with ADD or ADHD. This was a very alarming discovery. Hopefully my block is atypical, but I fear not. Obviously ADD/ADHD is not going away; it is becoming more predominant in our society.

Since so much of life is lived through one's perceptions, I just want to share some positive traits that develop for individuals diagnosed with ADD. Perhaps this stems from my always looking for the "silver lining" in a cloud. Perhaps I have an overdeveloped Pollyanna conviction that inside every challenge, there is a solution. After reviewing a variety of reading material on the subject, I found two books that offer an "upside" to having ADD. These are *Living with ADD: A Workbook for Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder* by M. Susan Roberts and Gerard J. Jansen, and *Driven to Distraction* by Ed Hallowell and John Ratey.

Here is a list of the positive strengths. Perhaps you can add other qualities. The first trait is increased creativity. An individual with ADD is an extremely creative person. This is an individual who does not let "normal" mental boundaries stop him/her from putting concepts together in an innovative way. There is an aspect of looking at an object and limiting its capabilities to the labels of society on the object. I am referring to the concept of "functional fixedness." Many people define and limit an object to its known use by the manufacturer. However, an individual with ADD often sees in extremely creative dimensions. He/she can see a box as being used as a step, or as a weight, or as an umbrella, or in hundreds of other ways. Because he is less confined to boundaries, the ADDer is excellent at creative brainstorming sessions. He has a natural ability to break the traditional concepts and put new reconstructions together.

Another positive aspect is the renowned sense of humor exhibited by many well-known comedians. If a Robin Williams (or other high energy performers) were in school today, we would be giving him medication and trying to confine him. True, oftentimes the comedy is the style of physical slapstick. ADDers also exhibit a delightful twist on language, concepts, or social exchanges that create the surprise necessary for good comedy. The class clown serves the function of playing the "Divine Fool" from the Jungian archetypal perspective.

Spontaneity is another positive aspect. True, ADDers' lack of inhibition can also lead to trouble, but it may lead to a vibrancy of living. Living a spontaneous life will bring in interesting situations and learning experiences. The possibilities abound of trying out new restaurants, activities, forming new friendships, problem solving, or perhaps creative cooking. Following one's impulses can be a freeing experience. One thing is for

certain: Life will never be dull.

Hyperactivity is high-level energy. One of the defining characteristics of the ADD individual is an abundance of energy. If channeled in a constructive manner, the ADDer can truly capitalize on this trait. Since they have a lot of energy to burn, many become super achievers. I know of an ADD adult who has a regular job at the local Post Office. After he finishes his route, he has his own landscaping business. He is a prized employee at the Post Office because he gets through with his route very quickly. Then he channels his excess energy into a very profitable enterprise. Many ADDers make good entrepreneurs. Society rewards this behavior. Don't encourage an ADDer into an occupation where he has to sit around a lot. ADD/ADHD people like to move around, and many are excellent at "hands-on" technical skills.

Another positive trait is the ability to hyper-focus. This is when an individual is so intensely interested in a subject that all else disappears. The ability to concentrate can be an extraordinary asset. For some careers, hyper-focusing is an essential element of the job. The key here is to find the area of intense interest for the individual. This means that ADD individuals have the ability to work well under crisis. Remember that a person with ADD is not being stimulated enough. That is why he fidgets; he is looking for stimulation. The majority of medications that are prescribed are stimulants. If he works in a position with a high intensity to it in activity or stress levels, this is excellent for ADDers. Another adult with ADD that I know is extremely successful as a physical therapist. He has an excellent recovery rate with his clientele. Part of his success is his ability to hyper focus while giving the treatment. He literally gives them his undivided attention. The client has a very positive response to that style.

Psychology researchers are still developing an understanding of individuals with ADD. Many of the positive aspects of the disorder are yet to be discovered. Research studies don't usually look for the aspects that are beneficial; they are too often designed to identify the dysfunctional qualities. I encourage you to look for the positive qualities and focus on reinforcing those aspects in your clients' life.

I also want to state a strong concern for people who are being diagnosed with ADD or ADHA and being labeled as extremely dysfunctional. We have always had these people in our society. They may function differently, but they are often high achievers. It is a disservice to take the diagnosis and use it as a scapegoat to not succeed in life or non-adherence to society's rules. When parents use the ADD/ADHD behavior to be an excuse for not training their child in socially acceptable behaviors, they are the ones handicapping the child.

Secondary gain by adults is also surprising. I met a man at a social gathering who had been given a book about ADD and had taken the book's test. He had self-diagnosed from that information. (This I find incredible, but people do this.) He explained that because he had ADD, he had not read the book, had no intention of doing anything about it, and I would have to give his behavior a wide level of acceptance. He may be sidetracked and be extremely late, he may forget to call, etc. In other words, he had

found a way of becoming totally irresponsible for his actions and blaming it on ADD.

Absurd. I set up several healthy boundaries and never experienced problem behavior with him. I must admit that it was a good try on his part.

Much of our life experience is acted out by our own perceptions of our self-image. If you are working with a person with ADD or ADHD, then I would encourage you to accentuate the positive aspects. Develop the beneficial traits and talents in that individual. You can help instill a good self-image and assist the person to achieve their potential.

Biography of Jillian LaVelle

Jillian R. LaVelle is the CEO of the International Association of Counselors and Therapists in Bonita Springs, FL. The Citizen's Ambassador Committee in the field of hypnotherapy appointed her special Ambassador to China.

She represented the United States along with a twenty-seven-member delegation during May of 1994. She has accepted the honor of being a delegation leader in July 2001. In 1999 she was the recipient of the Outstanding Clinical Contribution award by the National Association of Transpersonal Hypnotherapists. Jillian is the publisher of the "Unlimited Human!" magazine.