

"Instead of trying to fix what isn't broken, I just sit back and enjoy my son for all his super energy and brilliant imagination."

Before I Knew Better

ADHD AND REGRET



compiled by Marie Paxson

AS FRANK SINATRA'S SONG *My Way* reminds us, we won't go through life without experiencing regret. Certainly that's true for those of us who've had to deal with ADHD in ourselves or a loved one. So I asked members of the ADHD community about their regrets—and more importantly, how they manage their regrets. A mere list of regrettable actions and decisions, after all, would not be helpful to others. The main benefit of being part of a community is to learn from each other.

It has been said that we would not judge others as harshly as we judge ourselves. When a friend or loved one has a poor outcome, we would not think of piling on the blame and shame. But when it comes to ourselves, we heap on the self-criticism with a shovel. This can be a hard pattern to break.

Not all perspectives are represented here. Most responses came from people over age forty. Could this mean that middle-aged folks are more introspective? Or that those coping with young children, beginning careers, or trying to manage an ADHD whirlwind are too busy to reflect? And, of course, some time needs to elapse between taking an action and realizing it was regrettable. Whatever the reason, it would be interesting to hear some younger voices.

You may notice that the strategies for managing regret fall into categories. Some made changes when they noticed negative results. Others worked very hard to learn lessons and move on. Most accept that this is a process that takes time to work through. Others still struggle to accept that their good intentions or insufficient information had unintended consequences.

Let's hear from our regret "experts."

Julie, parent of a nine-year-old boy with ADHD, ODD, dysgraphia, and sensory issues

● **Regret:** I wish we had started treating my son's ADHD with medication sooner. It has made such a difference for him academically.

● **Management strategy:** Live and learn. I volunteer for CHADD because I believe it is important to share experiences so others feel comfortable discussing similar issues. It reduces the stigma surrounding brain-based differences.

Felicia, parent of young adult with ADHD, Asperger's syndrome, and other issues

● **Regret:** My husband and I lost our social life. We couldn't take our son many places due to his behaviors. We were almost friendless, and the isolation did not help our son at all. For a while, all of our activities were disability-related.

● **Management strategy:** We took action to make a change. My spouse and I pursue a purely social activity. We are not on any organizational committees for this pastime. We don't discuss our family issues at all. The other participants know we are parents, but we don't share any other information with them. This is our time to take a break from the stress of being a special-needs family.

Morgan, parent of several young adult children with ADHD and other issues

● **Regret:** I have some guilt that it took so long to recognize our children's learning differences. Once their ADHD was discovered, help arrived.

● **Management strategy:** I became a CHADD chapter coordinator so that others don't have to go through this! Or at least they won't do this alone.

Nancy, parent of twenty-four-year-old son with ADHD

● **Regret:** Nancy had difficulty identifying a specific regret, but had definitely experienced several.

● **Management strategy:** I once learned that staying in regret is actually a self-indulgent thing to do. We all make the best decisions we can with the facts that we have. If it doesn't

"Recognize that worries and fears are not the same things as facts. I try to be less apprehensive when presented with new ways of accomplishing things."

turn out well, determine what went wrong, attempt to fix it, and learn the lesson. Then move on. Any time spent dwelling on it is just self-indulgence. And you have better things to do.

Margaret, forty-four-year-old woman with adult ADHD

● **Regret:** I regret not listening to my intuition. I had undiagnosed ADHD as a child, even going to seven different elementary schools because my learning style was so different. After my diagnosis as ADHD and gifted, my life improved for the better. I was given a challenging curriculum and lots of structure, as well as accountability. I fared very well, had a high GPA, and was awarded a scholarship to a prestigious university.

There was just one problem. I had put so much time and mental energy into getting into college that I felt too depleted to actually participate in my education. I had wanted to take a year off (gap years were unheard of at that time) and recharge my batteries. Instead I complied with the wishes and worries of others and went to college right after high school. I experienced academic failure and lost my scholarship.

● **Management strategy:** I learned to take my intuition very seriously and to factor my gut feelings into my major decisions. I don't ever want to go through this again. The silver lining is that I learned this at a young age and it has served me well.

Martin, father of a young boy with "ADHD Plus"

● **Regret:** My regret is that I constantly felt there was something new or something else I should do or had to do or try to make my son "better." There were the books, the diets, the magazines, the CHADD membership, the websites, etc., that I just had to try one after another. But just when I thought I had done it all, after enrolling him in karate, or camp, or got him a 504 plan, I would overhear another parent talking about fencing, a new diet, or fish oil and then krill oil. I would think, "Oh my gosh, I really should look into that too."

● **Management Strategy:** Instead of feeling dread, I stop and take inventory and realize that I am trying pretty darn hard and doing pretty darn well. And, instead of trying to fix what isn't broken, I just sit back and enjoy my son for all his super energy and brilliant imagination.

Renee, mother of thirty-year-old son with ADHD

● **Regret:** I have many regrets now as an older and wiser parent of a young man with ADHD. I wish I had spent more time when he was a teenager educating him about his ADHD-related academic complications. He knew he had difficulties doing school work, but I am not sure he understood why. I think he still doesn't know. I spent time learning these issues, but I did not communicate what I learned directly with him. I depended on the school to do this, and I am not sure how much communicating they did.

I was always afraid to let him take online courses in high school. As a non-self-starter, my fear was that he would not do the work or take the personal initiative and responsibility for staying attentive. He proudly proved me wrong, when he received his college degree after taking his last two years totally online. He loved the freedom of doing the work online and not having to attend a class with a lot of people. He could do his work late at night and pick it up whenever he was ready to do so. Online teaching held his attention better than classroom work.

● **Management strategy:** Recognize that worries and fears are not the



same things as facts. I try to be less apprehensive when presented with new ways of accomplishing things.

Melanie, parent of a young adult

● **Regret:** Finding out my nineteen-year-old son had ADHD and thinking that this meant that I had to micromanage his life *even more* than I had been trying (unsuccessfully) to do in the past.

My son had to drop out of college after getting very close to flunking out. None of us knew why he couldn't handle his life or his workload. A friend who is a psychologist suggested we do an evaluation to see if he had ADHD—and, of course, he did.

After his diagnosis, my son very courageously went back to school. I was so scared of another crash and burn, however, that I began to interrogate him about every class, give him a list of things he must do, and generally hover so close that my good-natured and even-tempered son had to tell me to back off. I realized that I didn't get the concept of coaching and that although he needed help, a good coach remains in the passenger seat. He was the one who needed to make the decisions, and my role at that point was to ask the kind of questions that helped him discover his own strengths and weaknesses.

● **Management Strategy:** He is getting better every day at managing his own ADHD and I am getting better at recognizing the difference between my fears (and guilt) and his abilities. I've educated myself about ADHD coaching and I work to better understand my reactions and to define my role as the parent of a young adult.

Sophia, mother of a twenty-eight-year-old daughter with ADHD

● **Regret:** When my daughter was sixteen, I found marijuana in her room, but I didn't take her for a drug and alcohol evaluation. Instead, I discussed the dangers of drug use and took away some of her privileges. My denial caused me to completely ignore the statistics that she was at a higher risk for substance abuse and addiction because she has ADHD. She eventually went into full-blown addiction to several drugs. My family paid a terrible price because I really thought this couldn't happen to us.

● **Management Strategy:** I recognize that I can only take responsibility for my part of a problem, not the entire thing. Living with guilt, regret, resentment, and confusion was going to put me in an early grave.

I can't change the past. While I own up to the fact that my actions or inactions contributed to this situation, addiction is a very tough illness with many facets. I cannot control anyone else's behaviors and reactions, just my own. I am not solely responsible for a disease that has been plaguing mankind for centuries. But I no longer ignore statistics and scientific data.

Lorenzo, grandparent of an adolescent with ADHD

- **Regret:** I regret not understanding that my granddaughter's disrespect, hurtful remarks, and lack of communication were not about me, but due to her ADHD and ODD.
- **Management strategy:** I managed by regret by first suspending all judgments about her actions and accepting that they were not intentionally directed at or even about me. I learned to understand where she was emotionally when we were together, to demonstrate genuine interest in her activities and opinions, and how to respond to her appropriately for the situation we were in at the moment. We are now able to spend more quality time together.

Christine, CHADD chapter leader who has siblings and in-laws with ADHD

- **Regret:** I knew ADHD was largely inherited and it obviously affected my family. Clearly Mom had it. Dad had issues; he could never keep a job or manage money. My siblings, while all coping and successful, had ADHD challenges that they had figured out ways to deal with. Or had they?
- Last fall I got an email from my sister-in-law. She was writing to apologize for speaking without thinking, for missing social cues, for over-talking. Although their daughter had been diagnosed, my sister-in-law and brother were only then having a light-bulb moment.
- My regret is that I had not done more to pass on my knowledge. They had lived for many years without addressing ADHD because "it always seemed to translate as weakness or whining or an excuse." Maybe if we lived closer and saw each other more frequently it would have been easier.
- **Management Strategy:** Now we are asking for and offering support—and not pretending that the issue is not there.

So there you have it. Regret is undoubtedly going to be a part of your life. What are your strategies to manage it when it appears in your life? 🗣️

Marie S. Paxson, chair of the editorial advisory board of Attention magazine, is the former president of CHADD.

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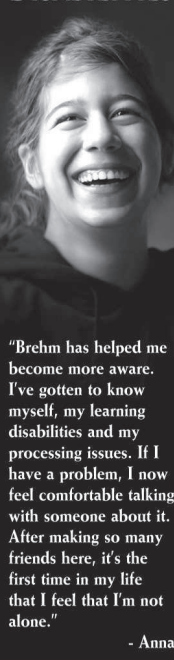
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