



# Voices of ADHD Diagnosis in Midlife and Beyond

**ACROSS THE COUNTRY, CHADD DISCUSSION GROUPS FOR ADULTS ARE GROWING** and providing an invaluable source of support, resource-sharing, and friendship. Attendees also see that adults with ADHD are individuals, with very different stories and different manifestations of ADHD.

For a decade, Silicon Valley CHADD coordinator Gina Pera has focused on providing support and education to people affected by adult ADHD. To share with *Attention* readers the various paths adults with ADHD take to diagnosis later in life—as well as the range of lifelong challenges and perceived benefits from diagnosis—she interviewed three members of the Silicon Valley CHADD adult group she leads and one member of the online group ADHD Partner, which she founded for the partners of adults with ADHD (she also founded a local face-to-face group for the partners of adults with ADHD). While the identities are concealed and the images are representative rather than actual photos of the people, the voices are authentic.



**From the minor to major, I talk a mile a minute and always have.**

**Name:** Kate

**Age:** 53

**Age at diagnosis:** 51

**Occupation:** college teacher

**Marital status:** married 30 years

**Children:** two daughters, 17 and 20

## **What would you see as lifelong challenges around ADHD, from childhood on?**

From the minor to major, I talk a mile a minute and always have. I have always bitten my fingernails to the quick. Still do. I've been obese since I was a baby. I've always been fidgety.

I was the dreamy kind of kid in school. I loved to read books, off in my own world. I always had trouble finishing projects, starting big things and not finishing, yet sometimes not even knowing how to get started.

As I got further along in high school, I had a hard time narrowing my focus. There were always too many directions to go in, too many ways to scatter my attention. My sense of time was not nearly as bad as my husband's, but still it was there.

On the other hand, I never had extreme problems with initiation or organization. I've always been able to break tasks into manageable chunks, once it was explained to me how to do it. My grades were okay, but I would always wait until the last minute to start projects. I laugh as a teacher now when I tell my students, "You should never do what I did!"



### **How did you and others explain these challenges before you were diagnosed?**

I just thought it was my nature. My mom had also been heavy as a kid, though as an adult she had a healthy diet. She did smoke cigarettes and was a very messy housekeeper, but she also had challenges with five children, several of whom I now see had ADHD. Today, three of my four siblings have drug and alcohol problems. Compared to my brothers, my sister and I were always the most high-functioning, so who would have thought I had a disorder?

My dad was a chronic gambler, which I didn't find out until shortly before he died, at sixty. He'd been in the military and then the police department. He had a history of working in high-risk jobs. When he had to leave that for medical reasons, his gambling got out of control. It seems the "stimulation seeking" goes back at least a few generations. My grandfather was a motorcycle cop in Detroit during Prohibition. My great-grandfather left his family and his farm to go prospecting in Canada.

### **How did you try to compensate? Did it work?**

Here's the single most important thing I did to get through college: I bought the smallest, lightest portable typewriter I could find. That was my key to meeting term-paper deadlines. You see, I read all the books well ahead of time, but I would always wait until the night before to write the paper. I'd sit down at the school library with this enormous stacks of books littered with bookmarks, and I would start typing the paper. At lunch breaks, I'd be in the cafeteria, still typing. On the bus to class, typing. By class time, I was at the desk—but still typing. And I'd get an A-plus on the paper. But I couldn't have done it without that little portable typewriter.

As I look back, I see that was my earliest warning sign of severe problems, because you can't function like that in the working world. Bosses are not going to accept that. And besides, it's simply much harder to function like that as you get older, too. Your body can't stand it. Plus, the older you get, the more competition you have for your attention—children, spouse, and domestic responsibilities. Procrastinating comes at a bigger price, because you're putting important things on the back burner and it quickly takes a toll.

For a while after college, I had multiple part-time jobs. I was basically tap dancing all the time—at a service counter helping a student coming in, and then fielding phone calls, and so on. Mostly, I was in clerical jobs, where there was lots of action and variety.

I eventually went back to school, received a master's degree, and started working at a college. Some of the work went well for me, and other parts of it meant I almost didn't make it through the tenure process.

One boss thought I had poor follow-through and organizational skills and therefore was incapable of advanced work. I disagreed with her opinion but understood why she felt that way. She was so very different in the way she did things. Her office was pristine. And I joke that I am "floorinized"—I sort things out on the floor to get organized. But I did get tenure, and I became recognized as a faculty leader.

So, in the workplace, ADHD wasn't really a problem. In fact, in most ways it played to my strengths.

My home life was the problem, specifically, my marriage. With both of us having ADHD, it is sometimes hard to know which way is up!

One of the things that drives us both nuts is talking to each other. For example, my husband will say Point A. I will respond to Point A by going off on a tangent, because basically I cannot even think about an issue until I've talked out loud my feelings and find out what I mean; I have to talk it out before I can provide an answer. Meanwhile, he's still waiting for an answer to Point A and trying to keep up with each digression of mine as if it's a direct answer to Point A, when really it's all background for me. He drills down further into Point A and I can't keep up with him.

Another challenge: I frequently will tell him things explicitly and directly and later he'll be totally ignorant of what was said. Either his attention wandered and the conversation never "sank in," or he's completely forgotten we ever talked about it.

I've learned to deal with his forgetfulness somewhat by making sure he's fully engaged; if I don't have eye contact and receive a logical verbal response from him (not just "un-hunh"), then I make sure to get his attention. I also try to not talk to him from another room; it makes it hard to know if he heard me or not.

On the other side of things, he often says he's told me something, or says that I've said something to him, that I'm completely unable to remember. This is a problem for me particularly in emotional conversations about difficult issues, because I react more to the emotions being expressed and I lose focus on the actual words being used. It makes it hard to remember exactly what he said to me during a discussion. Is he correct that he actually said the thing or does his own ADHD make him just think he said it? It's so confusing!

### **What led you to pursue an evaluation?**

My daughter was diagnosed first, on her way to getting her diagnosis of Asperger's. And then my husband said, "I'm an awful lot like she is," so he went in for an evaluation and was diagnosed. And that's when I thought, "Hmmm, I don't have the same type they have... if I have ADHD, it's definitely the hyperactive type." I have the fidgetiness, where they have more internal restlessness. So, finally, I was diagnosed, too.

What led me to follow up on the evaluation was the communication and other problems I've experienced for the entire thirty years of our marriage. So I really wanted to get that resolved. Personally, I resolved to find better answers, because I'm in my fifties and still biting my nails and have gained weight despite a gastric bypass.

### **Have awareness and treatment made a difference in your life?**

In my career, awareness has helped a great deal. Now I am better able to articulate to my colleagues: "This is what I need to do the job well." I can be a lot more explicit about what I need, which means I'm more capable of giving them what they want, because I can do really excellent work. I can say, "I can do this, if I can get this." It helped me be a



**Gina Pera** is the coordinator of Silicon Valley CHADD, where she leads groups for both adults with ADHD and their partners. Pera is the award-winning author of *Is It You, Me, or Adult ADD? Stopping the Roller Coaster When Someone You Love Has Attention Deficit Disorder*. She writes a blog for CHADD: [YouMeADD.org](http://YouMeADD.org).



little bit easier on myself with my weight and nail-biting—all these habits I've always wanted to change but can't.

Awareness of my ADHD hasn't helped in my marriage, though, and between the two of us, it's hard to tell where the bigger problems lie. My kids say my husband is using ADHD as an excuse ("I can't do this or that because of ADHD"). That doesn't fly with them, and frankly, it doesn't fly with me. He's been unemployed for a very long time and seems to have given up trying. Sometimes I think he doesn't grasp the full impact of our financial situation. It's just words that go in one ear and out the other.

I must say that awareness has clarified some relationship issues. I spent most of my marriage asking myself, "What am I doing wrong?" And now I'm thinking, I'm doing nothing "wrong," but we have incompatible forms of this condition—things that I need to function well are things that run counter to what he says he needs to function well.

Here's an example: I will never need a pristine environment, but I find it so much easier to think clearly when the sofas, tables, and floor aren't covered with stuff. Our four-member family lives in a 1,200-square-foot house, and his stuff is scattered everywhere. Yet, if I move something—even just from one end of the coffee table to the other—he won't find it! If you move it just a few feet, he won't see it! That's how he "organizes" himself—by having everything out in the open.

I can accept some of that, but it doesn't provide a good environment for me, because I'm constantly visually distracted. I'm a very visual person. A few years ago, I learned this is related to my challenges with food. If I see food, I eat it! I have to keep food out of sight, because there's no pause between stimulus and action.

Gastric-bypass physicians did put me through a mental-health screening, because they wanted to screen out bulimics and people who eat because they're upset, anxious or depressed. I could honestly tell them, "I don't eat more when I'm upset. I don't get depressed and go out and buy six bags of cookies and eat them." But they never asked, "Do you find yourself constantly eating when you're bored?" They never did a screening for ADHD. So, in 2007 I had the gastric-bypass surgery. At my heaviest, I was three hundred and fifty pounds. At my lowest after the surgery, I was two hundred pounds, but I've gained about thirty-five pounds.

**After the diagnosis, I thought back to my life and saw clearly that ADHD challenges extended as far back as I can remember.**

As for medication, my husband is taking something, though it's doubtful how well it's working. I recently started taking stimulant medication because I really want to see if this will help with some of these longstanding problems. It's too early to draw any definitive conclusions, but I am definitely having many "ah-ha" moments and am able to step back a bit more and view situations more objectively, less emotionally. Meanwhile, I'm trying to walk that tightrope between understanding the problem and still pushing effectively for change.

### **Has your family been supportive?**

Everyone in my family agrees that ADHD is real, which is good since we all have been diagnosed with it!

It's a bit of an issue for my husband's mother, who is in her seventies and shows very heavy signs of ADHD. But she doesn't see it for what it is. She thinks it's for fidgety little boys, and that's it. I don't try to change her.

### **What would you like to tell others who are thinking, "Maybe I have ADHD, too," but just haven't taken that next step?**

I absolutely think that finding out if you actually have ADHD is worthwhile. Especially reading as much as possible, because there is so much out there now.

In our case, the odyssey started with my daughter being told she had sensory processing disorder. Finally ten years later, we thought she'd had enough occupational therapy to get past that, but she was still having problems in school. The counselor said, "Maybe see if SPD is still a problem and also see if auditory processing disorder is a problem." A few years after that, she was diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger's syndrome.

Personally, I have actually found more of myself in the online partners group than in most of the books I've read. Until I joined the group, I tended to minimize my own challenges because I was the more functional one in our relationship. Compared to some of my husband's behaviors, my nail biting and nibbling didn't seem like major things. I didn't even have an idea these could be related to ADHD until the topics came up in the group. I started taking a little information here and a little there, and finally I had built a mosaic of an accurate picture of how ADHD might be creating specific challenges for my husband and me.

#### **Name: Kumar**

*Age: 38*

*Age at diagnosis: 35*

*Occupation: software engineer*

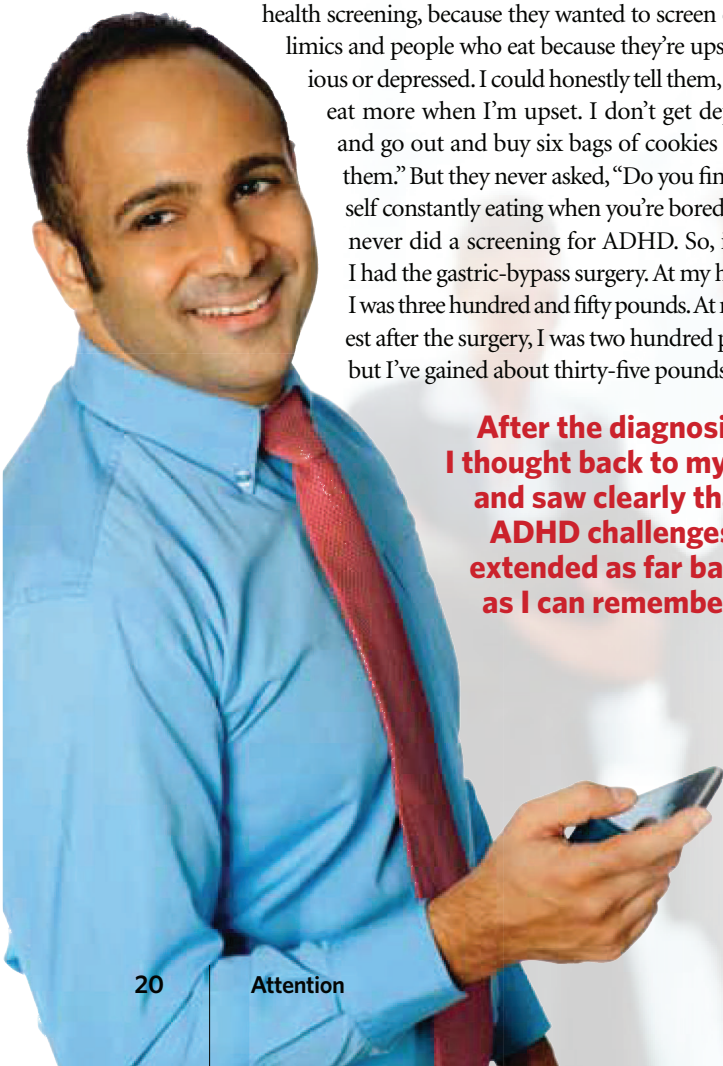
*Marital status: married 12 years*

*Children: son, 7, and daughter, 4*

### **What would you see as lifelong challenges around ADHD, from childhood on?**

After the diagnosis, I thought back to my life and saw clearly that ADHD challenges extended as far back as I can remember. It's funny, though, that three years later, I have a hard time remembering this.

As a child, I used to daydream quite a lot, just standing in one place for forty-five minutes and staring out the window. Maybe I would take a previous incident and replay it, trying to figure out whether, if certain things had happened differently, the result might have been different. I would always daydream about interesting things. My intense interest in geography, for example, led to an interest in history. I would ponder how those boundaries on the maps came to be, imagining that if I'd com-



manded one of the deciding battles, what my strategy would have been

I never daydreamed at school, however. We would never have that kind of unmonitored time, not even five minutes. I would daydream when I came home from school and had nothing else to do. This daydreaming was not particularly challenging when I was young, but it's something that I remember as being possibly related to ADHD, in particular my diagnosis of the inattentive subtype.

My biggest challenge in school was that I never did my homework or I did it at the last minute. Always. Yes, I probably was reprimanded but not so much because I was pretty clever. For example, when I was about age ten, the teacher gave us fifty words we were to incorporate in sentences. As usual, I had not done my homework, but when it was my turn, I stood up and "read" my sentences from my paper. But I hadn't. I was just making it up as I went.

I was smart enough to make it up on the spot. Because I was intelligent, I could do very well without studying too hard. But when it came to routine things like doing the homework, that hardly happened. Even later, in college and then earning my master's degree in computer science, I did the absolute minimum and always at the last minute. When it came to exams, I could never finish them in time. At the end of the allotted three hours, I'd be only eighty percent finished. Yet, because I was so perfectionistic all of my answers were correct and my overall grade wasn't negatively affected.

Finally, though, these habits caught up with me when I started work. I was always late in my work assignments.

### **How did you and others explain these challenges before you were diagnosed?**

I never had to explain my challenges. When I was young and in school, my mom said she'd done the same thing in school, so we didn't think too much of it. Only my boss and colleagues were aware of the inordinate time it took me to complete assignments, but they concluded, "Whatever he does, he does extremely well. But he does it very slowly." So, I became known for high quality work but doing it more slowly than others.

### **What led you to pursue an evaluation?**

Just before our second child was born, I was walking through a grocery store and heard a radio advertisement about a medication for ADHD: "Do you procrastinate a lot? Do you do this? Do you do that? If so, you might have ADHD." I heard those symptoms and they struck me quite profoundly. Oh yes, I thought, all those apply to me! Then I quickly dismissed it: "Oh, that's not me; I didn't want to be diagnosed with something."

After my daughter was born, though, things got pretty rough. In addition to work and an older child, we had a new baby and I had a business on the side. Prior to this, I'd kept things relatively together but then things really started falling apart. I remembered the radio ad.

I asked my regular physician about what I thought were my ADHD symptoms and he said yes, it matches. He prescribed some medication, but I didn't want to take that. I wanted to consult a more experienced expert first. That's when I came to the CHADD group looking for more information, to see if this was really a match—my condition and ADHD—and to see if I could get a recommendation for a good doctor.

Once the diagnosis was confirmed, I actually felt pretty happy. Because finally there was an explanation for everything. It came as a relief that certain behaviors weren't character flaws.

### **Have awareness and treatment made a difference in your life?**

Awareness has been priceless. It took away a lot of the guilt and the feelings of low self-esteem—not completely taken away but

reduced to a large extent. Awareness is half of the treatment.

I did take medication for about two years but stopped a year ago. I had tried a few different stimulants and settled on one that seemed to help the most. It used to make me tired because I would go on overdrive. I decided I needed to exercise more and build up my stamina in order to get full benefit from the medication. That's been my goal, to get more exercise, but I haven't really done it.

At the same time, I had no problems in my personal and family life. The business I had started on the side was distracting me, however, leading me to not give primary importance to my full-time job. Something had to give.

Ten years before, I had gotten involved in a multilevel marketing business and, over time, it did change my thinking. The promoters hold out these huge rewards. They say that to grow the business you must do things whether you enjoy it or not. The reward is huge but so far in the distance, and meanwhile most of the work is grunt work, which I did not enjoy. Getting out of the business was extremely difficult for me. I had to deal with all the brainwashing, the depression, the feelings of being a failure. I had hoped for a long time that I would make it. That's how they condition you, to think positive to an extreme, holding out that huge reward.

So I made a major change. I left the side business and I am refocusing on my career, with the mindset that I am going to enjoy what I do on a daily basis. I will let the rewards come from that instead of what I'd been attempting with the business: doing something I don't enjoy for a long time so as to get a reward far off in the future. This change is really more in keeping with how I like to do things, being completely immersed in my work and doing it extremely well, gaining reward from being appreciated and promoted.

I'm in the same job I've had for ten years, but am in the process of looking for a different job. It's difficult reorienting myself, though, because of the mindset introduced by this multilevel marketing.

### **Has your family been supportive?**

My wife has been very understanding, during the treatment and after it. After the diagnosis, it seemed like we had found the answer. But my wife was the one who was watchful enough to notice that, even after treatment and diagnosis, things were not better. The challenges I had with work were still there; the side business was a challenge. But I couldn't see that on my own.

If I had had better stamina and didn't get tired, I might have become more of a workaholic, as some people do with the medication. With the business and the job, there was a lot on the plate all the time. There was no time or energy to exercise. And so the Catch-22 situation.

### **What would you like to tell others who are thinking, "Maybe I have ADHD, too," but just haven't taken that next step?**

Honestly, I cannot relate to them. They remind me of my brother. I told him about ADHD because his symptoms are even more severe than mine. But he's not willing to do anything about it. He's in denial. Maybe when things get bad enough, he will. Just as I did.

To these people I would say: Take action while you can, get it checked out, look for a good doctor. A good medical professional who can give you an honest evaluation. There might be doctors out there who will jump on the diagnosis because they are happy for your business. But I want people to know there are good doctors, there are honest doctors. It was my psychiatrist who encouraged me to examine how I viewed my work and my goals with the business. He said medication wouldn't



change this situation, that I also had to make other changes. And he said this even though it meant losing me as a patient.

I've learned that the challenges faced by someone who is primarily hyperactive are very different from those who are primarily inattentive. It's a completely different set of challenges. So I think it's important to know that there are different types and different strengths within.

The best thing that I got from the CHADD meetings was from Blake Taylor. When he came to talk to the group, he said that once you conquer the bad part of ADHD, then you can harness the good side of ADHD. He gave examples of how he overcame some of his challenges and he gave examples of how he used some of his strengths for doing something completely well.

Get yourself evaluated while there is still time and you can take corrective action. On the flip side, don't use the diagnosis as a crutch, to explain away all your failure and be comfortable failing. It's still your responsibility to do well for yourself and for your family. It's important to take what you learn from the meetings, from reading, from the medication, to do well. That is the ultimate goal: To be the best that you can be.

**Name:** Jack

**Age:** 55

**Age at diagnosis:** 50

**Occupation:** Maintenance worker for the city

**Marital status:** married 33 years

**Children:** son, 23

### **What would you see as lifelong challenges around ADHD, from childhood on?**

All through my life, I've been hyper—bouncing off the walls since I was a young kid. When I was a baby, I would crawl out of the crib. My dad, an engineer, built it higher, but I crawled out five minutes later. When I was five, I put my fist through a glass door. Just impulsively. Same with the time when I was about four, jumping into the bathtub right after I'd been dressed up in my little suit for some event. I remember my very early years—kindergarten through fifth grade—always getting the minus mark in conduct because I couldn't sit still.

In my teens and twenties, my hyperactivity closed a lot of doors. It meant I always had fear of trying new things, such as learning new tasks or doing things that were out of the routine. I always had fear inside me that "I can't do this." Despite all that you hear about people with ADHD loving the new and novel, I was scared about learning new things because I didn't have the patience. I would get very frustrated because I couldn't sit long enough to think things through.

It seems that my ADHD also meant I lost opportunities even in the areas where I excelled. For example, I was a pretty decent high-school wrestler—was even the conference champion—but in sophomore year I up and quit. Partly it had to do with my father dying. But I also just didn't have the patience or stamina to stick with it. When I look back, I'm regretful because it might have meant I could have gotten a scholarship and attended college. In my late teens, I wanted to study electronics. I lasted only two months, even though I made the highest marks in the class.

There were just so many things I was good at but for one reason or another I didn't stick with them. Either I couldn't sit and think or I just got bored. Then there was alcohol. That affected my life immensely.

There were problems with my hot temper. I would say things that I shouldn't say, and I'd never feel remorseful because I was so defensive. As I saw it, everything and everybody was against me. If unpleasant things were happening, it was because people wanted to mess with me.

I had some oppositional defiance, too—"you can't tell me what to do!" It wasn't just at home. It was sometimes at work, too. I've been in the bosses' office more than once for a private meeting. But I guess I was good enough in my job that they put up with it.

### **How did you try to compensate? Did it work?**

As a teen, I think the drinking was a compensation that developed into a decades-long bad habit. Maybe I was suppressing feelings about my failings, and there was lots of stress, anger, and denial. My father died when I was fourteen. Plus, when I was drinking, I wasn't the "Angry Guy" but the "Fun Guy." When I got home, however, my mouth got me in trouble.

I hear other adults with ADHD talk about how they're so disorganized, and I wasn't like that at all. I was too organized, too aware of time. I think I just took things to the other extreme. When I said I was going to pick you up at a certain time, I would be there on time no matter what. I was obsessive about everything. Absolutely anal and always worried. I'd tell myself, "I must cut the grass on Thursday because if I don't, it will ruin my entire weekend." Or I'd have to do the laundry exactly when the basket became full; I could never wait a day.

I was very authoritarian, very strict with my son, probably due to my own low self-confidence. I took it out on him. It damaged our relationship for many years.

This kind of rigidity applied to almost everything I did, and I think it was my way of compensating.

Things were okay at work, as far as socially. In fact, I'm known as the life of the party, the ringleader. If somebody is turning fifty years old, I'm the one taking up the collection and leading *Happy Birthday* with my harmonica.

**In my teens and twenties, my hyperactivity closed a lot of doors. It meant I always had fear of trying new things, such as learning new tasks or doing things that were out of the routine.**



### What led you to pursue an evaluation?

After another big family argument, I found my teenage son sitting on the back porch, crying. I love my son so that hurt me bad. He's like me in some ways, not one to show a lot of emotions, but he doesn't have ADHD. It just hit me: I couldn't do that to him. That's what motivated me to seek help from a family therapist. Fortunately, she had ADHD herself and recognized ADHD in me.

I had first heard the term ADHD probably about 1987. This one guy at work had a kid with ADHD and had to put him on medication. I didn't think anything of it. I certainly didn't connect it to me. But knowing that my life was pretty much on the edge of collapse, I followed through on my therapist's suggestion and saw a psychiatrist.

This first psychiatrist talked to me for five minutes and prescribed dextroamphetamine, which just made me feel terrible. Depressing. Chemically depressing, not just the kind of depression that comes when some people with ADHD see their life clearly for the first time. Next, I went to a local university clinic where they put me through six to eight hours of neuropsychological testing but then couldn't treat whatever it was I had. That was a waste of time.

After learning a lot from others in the local CHADD adult ADHD group and trying another doctor, I'm on medication that's working very well for me.

### Have awareness and treatment made a difference in your life?

I think the diagnosis helped me be more optimistic about the future. I learned why I was the way I was. It took away that added layer of anxiety. For example, now I understand that I don't have to do all the chores in one day, all at once. Now, I take it a little easier. I do a bit at a time. And it all works out.

My relationships with my wife and son have improved enormously. My wife and I recently completed a big task we would have never taken on in the past—hanging several interior doors in the house—and we didn't fight one time. That was a big change!

I've also become self-confident in other ways. My stepfather died about two years ago. My wife offered to speak for the family at the funeral. But I said, "Hey, I can do this." And I did, even ad libbing a bit, which I would never done in the past. I would have had a paralyzing fear of failure, of stuttering, of the wrong words coming out or just not making sense. But I did fine. In fact, the eulogy was very well received, especially by my mother. She's never really said she loves us, you know. She's not a very emotional person, and she grew up in a very big family with some troubles. But she wrote a really nice thank-you note and said that she really does love me. That felt great.

I think the medication accounts for at least sixty percent of these positive improvements, because if I forget to take it, my wife can tell. But I have learned and picked up new insights and ways of viewing the world, from years of going to the psychiatrist and the CHADD meetings, I think that is at least forty percent of the positive changes I've made in the way I think about things.

### Has your family been supportive?

My family has been completely on board with the ADHD diagnosis and treatment. They said I am ninety-nine percent calmer; my outlook on life is better. It's very clear to me, too, that I'm more optimistic instead of seeking the negative all the time. I just enjoy myself and I feel better inside myself.

My son sometimes reminds me of how bad things used to be. I'll say, "Yeah, I know. I know I used to come home yelling and screaming." But he also says, "You're a lot better now, Dad." These days, we do things

together all the time and really enjoy each other. We go to football games. We go out to lunch every Saturday.

To this day, my mother doesn't know I have ADHD. I didn't tell her because it doesn't really matter. She's in her late seventies and wouldn't understand it, anyway. My siblings, though, have accepted it and say they've seen a big difference in me. They said, "Wow, you're so like calm now. You don't get all bent out of shape about stuff." In the past, I'd usually end up arguing with my mother. The last two times I was there, we didn't argue a bit. We actually enjoyed each other.

Nobody at work knows about the ADHD or that I take medication for it except for my partner. I can't tell the rest of these guys. They'd just make a lot of jokes, like "ADHD is phony," and so on.

### What would you like to tell others who are thinking, "Maybe I have ADHD, too," but just haven't taken that next step?

I would suggest that this person come to a CHADD meeting. Just see if any of the discussion rings a bell, and then get it checked out. I have a friend who does so many things that seem directly ADHD-related, and he just drives himself crazy.

I'm glad I took the next step, because it changed my life. I've stopped being a person I didn't like to a person I'm pretty proud to be. I no longer look in the mirror and ask, "Why did you do that?" I haven't had a drink in ten years, I don't smoke anymore, and my attitude is so much better. I've built a better relationship with my family.

There are so many different symptoms to ADHD. You can't just judge one person with ADHD and expect everyone else to be the same way. I've seen this in the local group. Some people struggle with issues that are foreign to me; for example, I'm highly organized and arrive on time. Yet we share many other challenges.

#### **Name:** Barbara

*Age:* 75

*Age at diagnosis:* 61

*Occupation:* programmer/analyst for business (retired)

*Marital status:* Widowed; now in a ten-year relationship

*Children:* son, 50

### What would you see as lifelong challenges around ADHD, from childhood on?

First, there's clutter: extreme at the very most extreme, not just a pile-up of paper. I love the hoarder shows. But where the shows might feature people hoarding Burger King collectible cups, I actually have some nice things—for example, eleven thousand books and five thousand square feet of paintings and art.

Second, I have always difficulty with time. But it wasn't until 1973, when I went to Europe with a friend, that it hit me exactly how poor my sense of time is. We had split up for the day and agreed to meet at a certain time in late afternoon, but my watch stopped and I wasn't paying attention so I was hours late. My friend said, "How could you not know where the sun is?" I never noticed! That made me realize that I just didn't understand time like other people seemed to. I'd always have to check my watch obsessively.

Even though I'm a horrible judge of time, over the years I've become very conscious about it. I always make an effort to leave way earlier than I need to leave. Everyone thinks I'm a very on-time person but they have no idea how super-careful I must be.

Another serious challenge involved school: I always had to work harder



than other people, but I didn't realize this until eleventh grade, when I attended summer school. He said, "Oh, you're the best English student I've ever had. How much time do you spend doing your homework?" I told him I spent all evening, and that I had to read everything three times. He said, "That's unusual." And that was the first time I ever realized that not everyone had to read everything three times to understand any of it. But this temporary teacher came from a school that was much less academically focused than our school, so I didn't give his comment that much weight.

Another teacher later said, "You have the second-highest IQ in our school." And I thought, yeah, well, these kids here aren't the brightest. But on the other hand, it was the first time anyone told me I did well on anything. Because my handwriting was so horrible and I did so poorly at sports, whatever I did well seemed to pale in comparison to the things I did badly.

Even though I made better grades than most of my classmates, I still thought they were brighter than I was. Having to work so hard to keep up, I had no social life. I spent every weekend night and day studying. It was a school where achievement was emphasized by most of the families. So, I just felt it was the thing to do.

A classmate named Howard said, "You're not really as smart as we are." To which I replied, "I never claimed to be." He said, "You may be third in the class, but you're not very bright!" This Howard grew up to be a very high-powered psychiatrist. Several years later, when we were attending the same university, he apologized to me for that comment. But it shows that even back in high school, he knew I wasn't like the others with high grades, and it was probably the ADHD that made him think that.

In college, I had a very tough time taking notes. My challenges around auditory processing were really key: When I write, my ears shut off. Even if I managed to take notes, I couldn't read my writing! I managed by asking classmates, "I lost my notes, can I borrow yours?" For many classes the lectures hadn't changed in twenty years, so lecture notes were being sold commercially. That made it so much easier for me.

I graduated with a BS degree in psychology, with an interest in psychological testing. I thought I would be a teacher. But I married and fourteen months later I gave birth to my son, missing only a week of school. After two years teaching and three years in real estate, I started taking classes in computer programming. This was 1966.

### **How did you and others explain these challenges before you were diagnosed?**

My husband, who came from a very scholarly background, thought of me as an idiot savant. Our IQ scores were almost identical to the number. Yet he once commented that my working vocabulary was only about five hundred words. He even speculated that was why I had so many foreign friends—because they had an easy time understanding my "simple" vocabulary.

When he was dying, I stayed with him in the hospital twenty-four hours a day. After thirty years of thinking of me as an idiot savant, he was surprised that I knew so many technical things about medicine. The reason is, I had volunteered years

before to support people with AIDS, so I could go to the doctor with them and be their advocate. I'd had cancer myself and knew that this kind of support was important. So, I'd learned a lot about medical issues through that. Still, my husband was just constantly in awe. "How do you know that?" he would ask.

My ADHD didn't really affect me on the job. In fact, I was very good at my work, especially in resolving problems for the software users. When I first started receiving positive evaluations at work, it was such a morale boost! Early in my career, I had overhead someone say, the day before evaluations, "Well, someone has to give her the word," and I thought surely it was going to be me. During the evaluation, when my supervisor said I was doing an outstanding job, I thought my hearing was playing tricks on me, because sometimes I do hear things incorrectly. Even when I was sure he had said outstanding, I thought "Well, that's okay for now, but when are they going to tell me I'm fired?"

### **What led you to pursue an evaluation?**

When my husband died in 1997, I had Butterfield & Butterfield to the house to make the appraisals for estate purposes. I had immense trouble making trails for them to get in to do their work. Suddenly, having these people in the house—and there were several appraisers, with specialties in different categories—drew my attention to this extreme situation. I thought, what is wrong with me? Is there something wrong with me psychologically?

Mind you, I'm not completely disorganized in my thoughts. For example, I was a good computer programmer and a great systems analyst. I have no problem organizing you, but I cannot organize me. In a work situation, there are a very limited number of things you're dealing with. At

home or in my personal life, there are so many possibilities. I'm a good idea person, but too many ideas means it's hard for me to decide.

After my husband's death, the clutter situation got worse because that meant more space for me. Then I remembered the lady who had taught a class on organization that I'd attended years ago. When I talked with her, she asked, "Have you ever considered you might have ADHD?"

This surprised me. I knew about ADHD. My son did have problems in school and was diagnosed forty years ago with ADHD. But he was extremely hyperactive, and I'm just the opposite! I never identified with his challenges because we were so different in every way. Still, I decided to be evaluated and was diagnosed with ADHD, the inattentive subtype.

### **Have awareness and treatment made a difference in your life?**

When I finally found out that I had ADHD, I was so excited to finally have an explanation. Right away, I attended a local support group and then a seminar with Dr. Daniel Amen. He ran over the time by about twenty minutes, and I was anxious to leave because a spider bite on my arm was growing worse and I wanted to call my doctor before he left for the day. But as I quietly tried to leave, half

**I'm not completely disorganized in my thoughts. For example, I was a good computer programmer and a great systems analyst. I have no problem organizing you, but I cannot organize me.**



the people in my row yelled out, “You can’t leave now! You can’t leave before the seminar is over!” And I thought what the heck? Here I thought I’d found my “tribe,” and these were nutcases yelling at me. Part of the difference is that I have the inattentive subtype, and these folks were extremely hyperactive. But it also turned out some had been sent to the workshop for their anger-management issues! I didn’t have a problem with anger; I just had trouble with time and clutter! This was my first clue how differently ADHD can manifest itself.

Later I tried attending a women’s group in San Francisco. The “hyperactives” and the “inattentives” sat across from each other at this oval table. The moderator was a very timid person with inattentive ADHD, so the hyperactives would just walk over everyone and not let the inattentives get a word in edgewise. Some of these people were nurses and other professionals, and they would be talking about mistakes they’d be making on the job and it was frightening! I never made such mistakes on the job. I felt I didn’t belong, so I quit going to that, too.

The current group I sometimes attend is great. We have a great blend now. But I still think lumping the hyperactives and inattentives is a mistake. I’m the last thing from impulsive or hyperactive. I’ve waited forty years to remodel my kitchen because I over-think and over-research everything. It’s almost like we have completely different conditions.

I can’t say treatment made much of a difference. I did take a stimulant and then a nonstimulant. Neither really had an effect. And I couldn’t tolerate much in the way of caffeine, etc. But, at this stage in my life, I’m not dealing with all the demands that challenged me when I was younger—raising a child, juggling home and work duties.

If you have ADHD and can find a supportive non-ADHD partner, you can have a better chance of things being more reasonable, less hectic. It makes such a difference. My significant other for the last ten years, James, is so marvelous. He does not have ADHD and he always remembers everything. I don’t have to remind him of the garbage, the way I did with my husband. He’s so tactful when I forget things. My husband wasn’t always so kind when I forgot things. And, for my part, I’ve helped James improve his timeliness. Yes, I know. The irony!

The biggest issue now remains the clutter. I would love to have a room cleared, so the logical answer is to enlist the services of a professional organizer. But I’m not willing to accept anyone else’s opinion. So there you go!

**What would you like to tell others who are thinking, “Maybe I have ADHD, too,” but just haven’t taken that next step?**

I think it’s very good to get an evaluation, for adults and children. Before we knew my son had ADHD, he was placed in special education. In those days, you had to say the child had brain damage in

order to get in the class. But my son was not brain-damaged. He was just very hyperactive and very verbal. Moreover, he was bigger, stronger, smarter, and more verbal than the other children in that class, so the teachers thought he just wasn’t trying, that he was a faker. The special ed teachers seemed to favor the little, weak children. So he simply didn’t belong anywhere.

I think medical treatment would have made my own education so much easier for me, what with the notetaking and spending inordinate hours of study. It was just so hard. Then, later, after I was married, being in school and taking care of a baby, it was so very challenging to remember everything I needed to do and the time organization around it. I just went from disaster to disaster. **A**