

Media Advocacy in the Information Age



The information age presents many challenges to those who wish to share the facts about a given issue to a media market that now places a premium on immediacy, chooses stories with an eye to beating the competition and is so commercially driven.

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WITH SO MANY NEWS OUTLETS vying for the attention of the public, media outlets want—now more than ever—to sell the news, and nothing is more marketable than controversy and celebrity. No topic has been more affected by this than mental health illnesses, disorders and problems. Despite the vast amount of scientific findings showing the reality and impact of mental illness, journalists continue to welcome debate over its existence and treatment. This debate at times relies on the opinions of talk show hosts, actors and other prominent individuals.



Entertainers and political commentators have no need for balance; instead, they tend to say whatever they think, regardless of whether it is based on science or not.

While many Americans turn to CHADD for information—our organization receives on average 12,000 telephone calls and 160,000 unique visitors to our Web site each month—most Americans learn about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) from other sources. The news media is one important source of information and—perhaps unique to American culture—entertainers working in the television and movie industry are another source of information. Political commentary shows, such as Rush Limbaugh and Armstrong Williams, are yet another avenue for information.

The news media typically strive to present a balanced portrayal of an issue. But many journalists view balance as equal time and space for two sides regardless of the scientific validity of the arguments. Thus, we are provided with two views: that of the mainstream published science and that of the fringe element that lends itself to a particular person's or group's beliefs. Entertainers and political commentators have no need for balance; instead, they tend to say whatever they think, regardless of whether it is based on science or not.

Given this dynamic, CHADD faces many obstacles in conveying science-based information to the American people. Therefore, CHADD is proactive in its advocacy with the media. To understand what this advocacy entails, it is important to first understand how people receive information.

The Rise of the Information Age

This past summer, after ABC News anchor Peter Jennings' untimely and unfortunate death, many newspapers noted the diminished importance of the network news anchor. Article after article asserted that the nation's viewers no longer turn to just one source for information. Indeed, network news has become a footnote in the modern information market, dwarfed by the explosion of various sources of information, such as the numerous specialty networks that cater to niche audiences, CNN, the Internet and a variety of other outlets.

One of the most interesting developments in recent years is just how specialized the media have become. This change is nowhere more noticeable than on television, where viewers can find a network that caters to their specific interest or hobby, political affiliation and even demographic. Indeed, there are now networks that target specific age groups, ethnicities, political affiliations and gender. Many of these networks have some sort of news program or talk show



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How to Become a More Shrewd News Consumer by Bryan Goodman

MANY OF US TAKE FOR GRANTED just how much information we receive from the news media. Whether it is through television, the local newspaper, radio or the Internet, we are likely to hear, watch or read about everything from novel research studies to local crimes. We are inundated with information that is not always accurate. That is why it is important for us to be discerning in how we evaluate information.

■ **Not all news is created equal.** Some media entities are plentiful in resources and employ well-trained reporters who maintain strict standards in reporting the news. Others, despite good intentions, lack the necessary requirements to properly and accurately disseminate information. Some journalists will deliberately focus on more sensational topics to attract viewers. When digesting news, consider the size of the media outlet, the types of stories reported and the sources it uses. Stories that use reputable sources and scientific studies to support their information are better than ones that use a few limited cases to make sweeping generalizations.

■ **Consider the source.** It is essential to question the credentials of the people who offer their expertise on a subject. When someone speaks about mental health care issues, look carefully at his or her credentials and affiliation. Is he or she a psychologist (Ph.D.) or a psychiatrist (M.D.)? Does he or she represent a reputable institution, such as a medical school or a government agency, such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)? If not, evaluate his or her comments carefully, and be sure to seek out other information.

■ **Remember: variety counts.** Be sure to turn to a variety of sources when obtaining information. Read the local newspaper and a national newspaper, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The Wall Street Journal*. These publications are available on the Internet and at your local library. Choose television news programs that focus less on individual situations (like car crashes and homicides) and more on big-picture issues. Radio DJs can be fun to listen to on the way to work, but for more substantive news, tune to a radio station that strives to objectively report the news, such as National Public Radio (NPR).

■ **Be wary of dramatic headlines.** Gatekeepers in the news business often run stories that will attract more readers, listeners or viewers. At times, stories can be blown out of proportion in an attempt to attract an audience. Before reacting to a story, see how it develops over time and turn to the experts for further context.

■ **Go to the experts.** If you read or hear an alarming story about mental health care, learn all you can about it by consulting credible Web sites or your health care provider. Helpful Web sites include CHADD (www.chadd.org and www.help4adhd.org), NIMH (www.nimh.nih.gov), CDC (www.cdc.gov), the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (www.nami.org) and the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) (www.nmha.org). Another important way to verify the credibility of news reports is to consult your physician and other health care professionals. ■

or in some way offer information to their viewers on a variety of topics. Of course, television is not alone in providing individualized information. The Internet is another way people can find information specific to their lives.

Fifteen years ago no one could have fathomed the vast universe that would become the World Wide Web. But the Internet has revolutionized everything from commerce to how news is disseminated. With just one click, information can land on the screens of millions of people around the world and potentially destabilize economic markets, sink political careers and ignite global conflict. The uniqueness and power of this relatively new medium is in just how democratic it is. Economic obstacles notwithstanding, anyone can log on and post comments or read information through daily postings called web logs or “blogs.”

In the shadow of the Internet is the daily newspaper that struggles to make itself relevant. Many major newspapers have tried to compete with the Internet by developing a Web presence or by striving to make stories more interesting to readers. Breaking stories on the Internet have influenced newspaper coverage, at times causing publishers much embarrassment because of the inaccuracies that can arise from the immediacy of the reporting.

Radio continues to inform people through political talk shows and news programs. From morning music disk jockeys offering snippets of novel news items to partisans espousing their world view to very measured broadcast journalists who truly look at every relevant angle, radio continues to shape the debate over current events.

This information age promises many rewards for

What You Can Do by Bryan Goodman

YOUR HELP IS CRUCIALLY NEEDED to get accurate information out to the public. While CHADD tracks the headlines about AD/HD in the major media, you personally know the devastating effects of the disorder. You have the power to impact the portrayals of the disorder that appear in your local media and can influence the perceptions of your friends, neighbors and community. What follows are some tips on ways to make your voice heard.

■ **Know your facts.** Know what the science says about AD/HD, its diagnosis and treatment. You can learn about the disorder by both consulting with your local CHADD chapter (locate your chapter under “Supports” at www.chadd.org) or by visiting key Web sites of leading mental health care agencies and organizations (for a list of these, please see the sidebar “How to Become a More Shrewd News Consumer” on page 21).

■ **Be informed.** Read your local and community newspapers and stay tuned to your local television and radio newscasts for stories or interviews about AD/HD. Find out what the media are reporting. Is it the real science or junk science?

■ **Respond with letters to the editor.** Writing a letter to express your appreciation for a well-covered story about AD/HD is just as effective as writing one when you object to a particular article. But in either case, it is important to be succinct and back your statements up with facts.

■ **Write an article.** Community newspapers, newsletters and magazines are always interested in personal stories. Has your child had success with certain treatments? Has his or her school performance improved? Contact your local newspaper editor and tell him or her that you wish to submit an article. Be sure to ask for the newspaper’s guidelines for writers.

■ **Share your story.** Your willingness to discuss how AD/HD has affected you, your child and your family plays a vital role in reducing the stigma about the disorder. Both print and electronic journalists want to put a human face on their stories. If you see a story about AD/HD by a particular reporter, contact him or her and offer yourself or your family as a source for future articles.

■ **Join forces.** If you are not already a member, join CHADD and get involved with your local chapter. You can join by visiting the organization’s Web site at www.chadd.org/join. You might also consider signing up with StigmaBusters, a proactive campaign operated by NAMI to help combat negative depictions of mental health. To learn more about StigmaBusters, visit www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Fight_Stigma.

Your help in media advocacy is much needed and appreciated. Together, we can make a difference for people living with AD/HD and their families. ■

communications professionals. But it also presents many challenges to those who wish to share the facts about a given issue to a media market that now places a premium on immediacy, chooses stories with an eye to beating the competition and is so commercially driven. One of the biggest victims of this new age is the dividing line between Hollywood entertainment and news. Increasingly, the media, including many television talk shows, have relied on celebrities to comment on current events. In doing so, they substitute unqualified celebrities for well-trained authorities or experts. Tom Cruise lecturing Matt Lauer on the *Today* show is but one example.

A good controversy consists of two sides with equally valid views. Absent that, in many cases the mental health debate has become nothing more than a manufactured event with an over-reliance on celebrity. The nation’s leading mental health care researchers and experts are pitted against prominent people who possess neither the academic credentials nor the training to comment authoritatively on these issues. At other times, the news media have picked up sensational story lines about mental health care from popular television shows, such as *Desperate Housewives*, turning fiction into reality and a storyline into a headline.

In the midst of this sensationalistic coverage, AD/HD has at times been misrepresented as either a disorder that does not exist or as something that is widely overdiagnosed. Such an atmosphere demands an organized response that succinctly and compellingly communicates the science around a disorder that, if left untreated, can have devastating consequences. Such a campaign would have to meet the demands of the information age.

CHADD Rises to the Challenge

Realizing the need for a comprehensive strategy to combat misinformation and negative stereotypes, CHADD launched the National AD/HD Education Initiative in 2003, as “Just A.S.K.—AD/HD. Science. Knowledge.” The Initiative, now in its third year, has allowed CHADD to reach out to policy makers [through four briefings for the U.S. Congress], the media and the public with science-based information about the neurobiological disorder, available resources and treatment options.

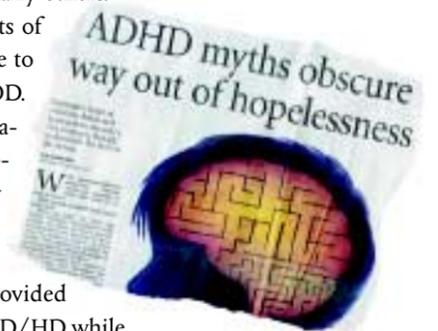
The Initiative has reached millions with a proactive media campaign and other public communications efforts. CHADD has established a dialogue with members of the national media to provide scientific information and support for AD/HD. The Initiative



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has also worked to increase accuracy in press stories about the disorder through proactive consumer media outreach. The Initiative has, at times, tailored its message for specific audiences, including African Americans, Hispanic/Latino individuals and many others.

One of the most notable achievements of the Education Initiative came in response to a national media mailing sent by CHADD. The *Orlando Sentinel* invited the organization to submit an opinion/editorial. Appearing on the front page of the Sunday editorial section in September of 2003, the article—entitled “ADHD myths obscure way out of hopelessness”—provided readers with detailed information about AD/HD while simultaneously discrediting the myths about the disorder. Sidebar articles that touched on the prevalence of AD/HD educated readers about science-based treatment options and explained how best to seek care.



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In the past year, some celebrities have taken their anti-psychiatry and anti-medication messages to the airwaves. CHADD, through the Education Initiative, has been quick to respond with accurate, science-based information each time. Two of the more memorable examples are an episode on AD/HD of the *Dr. Phil Show*—a popular talk show hosted by Dr. Phil McGraw—and the anti-psychiatry remarks by Tom Cruise during an interview on the *Today* show.

In October 2004, Dr. McGraw devoted an hour episode of his show to the topic of AD/HD. The show promoted questionable tools for diagnosing AD/HD and scientifically unfounded advice on how to treat the disorder, while perpetuating many of the myths that exist, including that parenting styles are to blame for the problem. CHADD became concerned and very quickly sent a letter to Dr. McGraw. Wanting to educate and not alienate, CHADD also acknowledged the parts of the show that were accurate and helpful to viewers, and then alerted its membership about the show by forwarding the letter through its

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electronic *News from CHADD* newsletter. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (FFCMH) responded in a similar fashion.

While promoting his new movie this past summer, actor Tom Cruise spent a considerable amount of time denouncing psychiatry and medication. His remarks began gaining attention after an appearance on the *Today* show. Understanding the influence Cruise has, particularly with young viewers, CHADD immediately released a statement supporting the stand of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), NAMI and the National Mental Health Association (NMHA), denouncing Cruise's remarks and highlighting the importance of effective, science-based treatment, including medication. A *News from CHADD* was sent to members alerting them to the response. [To read CHADD's response to actor Tom Cruise's remarks, please visit www.chadd.org/cruise]. CHADD also encouraged members to become active through such vehicles as NAMI's StigmaBusters.

Each day presents new challenges in the information age. Fortunately, the Education Initiative has been highly effective in promoting the real science while combating the misinformation. While "Just A.S.K." has been successful in reaching policy makers, media, health care professionals, educators and the general public with factual information about AD/HD, there is still much work to be done. Myths and misinformation about AD/HD abound in the media as well as in the U. S. Congress.

The National AD/HD Education Initiative will continue to adapt to the demands of the information age to ensure that the public and policymakers receive accurate, science-based information about a disorder that, if left untreated, can have negative outcomes for individuals, their families and society. ■

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