

# Adults with AD/HD

## Focusing on Strengths

by **Petrina Chong Hollingsworth**

**S**UCCESS IN adult life with AD/HD comes from managing symptoms and harnessing assets and strengths. Current models look at what is wrong rather than what is right. We need to focus on assets instead,” said Sam Goldstein, Ph.D., during the 2005 CHADD Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas.

Dr. Goldstein has been working to understand what factors help some adults with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) cope with the disorder and allow them to function in daily life while others do not.

According to Dr. Goldstein, positive psychology focuses on strengths rather than liabilities. “The strength-based approach helps individuals with AD/HD by identifying the qualities early on that ultimately will carry them through life and teaching them how to use those qualities effectively,” he said.

John Watson, Jr., has been able to function and succeed while living with AD/HD. He is the operations manager for his family’s furniture store, and has found a way to capitalize on his strengths. Watson said, “I tend to go from project to project and make a real impact. I keep the network going, manage the warehouse, delivery and the office end of things. It allows me to put people in charge of the day-to-day things that I know I won’t do and take on the big projects that I know I can do well. I enjoy the accomplishment and have gained respect for my abilities.”

Watson continued, “I have a pretty good sense of what things I will get done and those I will not, and I plan around that. I guess it comes down to playing to your strengths and accepting your weaknesses. Accept who you are and roll with it.”

Watson uses technology to help him manage day-to-day activities. “Online bill payments have probably saved me financially. I have set up automatic payments

on almost everything. When I don’t know what the monthly amount will be, I [put in] a little more and accumulate a balance. A few years ago I was spending a couple of hundred a month on late fees and bounced checks just because of not getting bills paid in time. It is now rare that a bill doesn’t get paid, and in many cases they owe me money due to my overestimations.”

The alarm function on his cell phone also helps, “I have to do payroll on the 1st and 16th of every month. I have these scheduled into my phone with an alarm so I don’t forget. It also saves me by reminding me of anniversaries and the like. I love alarms.”

“Email is also a major tool for me. Put it in print, and the likelihood of my getting to it in a reasonable amount of time goes way up. It isn’t perfect, but it helps a lot,” said Watson.

James Patrick Mahoney has been a successful psychotherapist for 30 years; is in senior management at Aetna Behavioral Health in Salt Lake City, Utah; teaches infant, child and adolescent development at the College of Social Work, University of Utah; and has a small private practice at the Neurology, Learning and Behavior Center. He is an avid surfer, skier and skateboarder and started snowboarding this year. He also has AD/HD.

Mahoney says, “I have certain attributes that have helped me in my development/life experience including my intelligence, empathic ability, highly developed speech and language skills, keen observation skills, highly developed memory, my kinesthetic organization/motor skills and my social skills.”

Robert Brooks, Ph.D., has long been an advocate of such strength-based approaches. Both he and Dr. Goldstein have focused on the importance of helping individuals find what they are good at or their “islands of competency.”

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In his online column, Dr. Brooks has written, “When we reflect upon the guideposts that direct our treatment, we will learn that “fixing” deficits plays an important, daily role but that the most impressive, long-lasting changes will be rooted in using each child’s islands of competence to nurture a resilient mindset. This is the true gift we give to our children.”



**John Watson, Jr.**

Drs. Goldstein and Brooks have found that many individuals who function well with AD/HD as adults share some specific traits. One of these traits is having an individual or individuals who support and nurture them, helping them find their strengths. As children, both Mahoney and Watson had supportive adults who helped them discover their assets and who looked beyond their AD/HD.

“I have to give unbridled credit to my parents. They survived the ride with me and helped me find my way,” said John Watson. “They saw I was a good person with a problem and went to extremes to help solve and understand it.”

Mahoney said, “My elementary school teachers were uniformly supportive, especially the Maryknoll sisters at the Mission San Juan Capistrano. The nuns and the Catholic priest at the Marine base I grew up on encouraged me to be an altar boy and develop my intellectual talents, inside and outside of school.” His mother was also highly supportive.

As adults, both men are fortunate to have found supportive partners. Watson credits his wife, “She is literally my other half. Without her I would be lost. She understands me better than anyone (often including myself), and helps me get past many of my issues. The phone call that says, ‘Did you get it dropped off?’ or whatever the thing I was highly likely to not accomplish gets me on track. The nudge in the morning

reminding me of the meeting I have. The question about what we are going to do for my brother’s birthday. Without her, most—if not all—of these things would not happen.”

“My wife has been my mainstay, friend, soul mate and all-around angel, who coincidentally [also] has AD/HD,” said Mahoney. “My psychiatrist, Fred Reimherr, M.D., has been as patient as my

wife, and knows the value of stimulants for adult with AD/HD. Medication has really been helpful for me.”

Along with treating symptoms with medication and behavioral therapy, clinicians are finding success with positive psychology and strength-based approaches in helping adults with AD/HD.

“Fortunately, the last decade has seen an emerging awareness and appreciation of the importance of human strengths as the foundation of our lives,” according to Dr. Brooks. “Positive emotions such as joy, contentment, love and happiness; behaviors such as forgiveness, compassion, caring and humor; and outlooks permeated by optimism and hope are increasingly accepted as primary forces and not as compensations for negative feelings and beliefs.” ■

Petrina Chong Hollingsworth is the managing editor of *Attention!*® magazine.



#### **Conference Notes**

**Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.,** will lead several sessions during CHADD’s annual conference in Chicago, Ill., Oct. 26–28, 2006. Dr. Goldstein will discuss evaluating impairment of AD/HD and advanced interventions for the disorder and lead an Ask the Expert Q&A session at the conference. Visit [www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org) for more information.