

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Having a family is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain.

- Martin Mull, actor

AD/HD is a Family Affair

by Phyllis Anne Teeter Ellison, EdD

when I read this Quote, I Laughed out Loud, remembering my childhood growing up with three brothers—one of whom has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—and a mother not too far off the mark. Most of all, I thought of the many families

I have worked with over the years. What does the image of a bowling alley evoke? Noise, chaos, smelly shoes, balls bouncing down an alley, people yelling at the top of their lungs, chili dogs spilled down the front of your shirt, and kids running around well into the night. It sounds a lot like living with AD/HD!

First of all, AD/HD is a family affair—everyone is affected. It is hard to escape the joy, the chaos, and the many hurdles. My older brother with AD/HD was so funny and exciting—growing up was like *Saturday Night Live* every day. You never knew what to expect. One minute my brother was wielding a golf club like Jim Belushi in his samurai skit, the next he was singing *La Bohème* at the top of his lungs while my mom made pancakes. It's hard to believe, but my mom was an opera buff—it was her escape from four rambunctious kids.

When we played tennis and golf, my brother made me laugh so hard that I could not hit the ball. On a particularly difficult par three over water, he made me laugh every time I addressed the ball. I proceeded to hit thirteen balls into the water. He wouldn't let up until I told him I was using his golf balls. He immediately picked up my bag, walked across the bridge in a huff, and made me hit from across the water. That scene played out on the tennis court as well. Many of our family videos were of me giggling like a goose while he lobbed balls at my feet.

There was also a darker side to his AD/HD. In addition to all the fun we had, I remember all the challenges he faced in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Despite significant symptoms early in life, he was not diagnosed until late adulthood—AD/HD was not on anyone's radar screen in the 1950s. At the all-boys' school he attended he got into trouble all the time. He was *so* smart—but he couldn't keep quiet. He challenged authority, always questioning why he had to follow rules he thought were dumb. As you can imagine, this didn't sit

too well with the brothers who ran the school. He was very hyperactive and had a terrible time staying focused during class. Every form of punishment you could imagine simply did not relieve his AD/HD symptoms. Detentions, swats (yes, it was legal for schools to swat kids back then), and sitting in the principal's office didn't work. Long discussions at home didn't work. He was grounded so many times I thought he would never get out of the house. The tension at home grew with every note detailing his misbehavior and complaining that he was not performing up to his potential. He graduated from high school with lots of emotional scars and very bad memories. I often wonder how things would have been different if CHADD had been around when he was young, what might have changed if my parents understood that AD/HD was the problem.

During college my brother dreamed of being a pro golfer; he was very gifted. Unfortunately he was drafted in his sophomore year and was sent to Vietnam for three tours of duty. We worried about his safety and were relieved when he came home.

After the war ended he returned home and raised a lovely family. His transition to the business world was somewhat uneven but he found success as a plumbing/heating contractor. He was happily married and raised two sons—his family life was filled with much joy, but it was not always a smooth ride. He was so gregarious he made friends everywhere he went. His sons developed hand signals to let him know when he was telling his life story to everyone he ran into—the guy at the gas station, the lady at

the coffee shop, and his friends at the supply stores. He was late to job sites, late for dinner, and late to bill his clients. Throughout the years, his wife was loving, supportive and kept him on track. After a particularly difficult budget crisis in the 1990s his business faltered. Financial pressures precipitated severe depression and anxiety. He finally sought professional help, was diagnosed with AD/HD, and began a treatment program that helped him manage his symptoms.

There is no doubt that AD/HD had the most profound effect on my brother, but everyone in our family lived his drama, celebrated his successes, shared his happiness, and suffered his disappointments. My mom

pleaded with him to do better, and prayed that a higher power would intervene. My father thought more discipline was the answer, and his teachers didn't know how to help. My brother and I were best friends. He was the best brother I could dream of ever having—hilariously funny, protective, charming, and a great friend. I was a sidekick to many of his adolescent adventures—borrowing dad's scooter for a midnight ride, getting caught smoking while we walked the family Springer spaniel—but he took responsibility for the capers and the brunt of the consequences.

I know that my decision to become a psychologist, to work with children with AD/HD and their families, and to become part of the CHADD family is a direct result of his struggles. He is still an inspiration to me—he has found a wonderful balance in his life, a loving wife and is spoiling his beautiful grandchildren.

After all, regardless of how chaotic, noisy, and messy, family means everything. Oh yes, we did bowl—not very well but we yelled, threw gutter balls, and spilled French fries and ketchup all over the place!

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