HARNESSING

ADHD

More and more experts say it can be a gift rather than a malady

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Attention, ADHD sufferers - your condition just might be your key to success.

That's the refrain of an increasing number of experts who assert that attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is not a curse. If properly channeled, its characteristic symptoms of distractibility, impulsiveness and restlessness could be a blessing.

Take David Neeleman, CEO of JetBlue Airways, who calls ADHD one of his biggest assets. He credits the disorder with giving him the creativity that helped him develop an electronic ticketing system and pioneer several discount airlines.

Neeleman has reportedly refused to take any medication to treat his disorder because he fears it may dry up his creative juices.

He's in good company. Among the celebrated thinkers believed to have had ADHD or ADD (attention deficit disorder, where the energy level is lower), are Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein and Galileo. Musicians like Beethoven also are thought to have had the disorder.

Two new books, "The Gift of ADHD" by Lara Honos-Webb and "Delivered From Distraction: Getting the Most out" of ADHD. See ADHD Page F-3
ADHD: Viewed in a more positive light

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of Life With Attention Deficit Disorder” by Dr. Edward Hallowell and Dr. John Ratey, look at the upside of ADHD. They urge people with the brain malady to channel their symptoms into productive outlets.

“ADD is a gift that’s difficult to unwrap. If it can be managed properly, it can be a blessing,” said Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author who has treated ADHD patients for the past 25 years at the Hallowell Center in Massachusetts.

He and Ratey make the case in their book that people with ADHD tend to be creative, intuitive, tenacious and high-energy. Sure, a number of criminals have ADHD, but so do a lot of successful artists and CEOs. People with ADHD can think outside the box and are willing to take risks, which can make them successful entrepreneurs.

“It’s how you manage the ADHD that determines whether it’s a gift or a curse,” Hallowell said.

Experts say ADHD is treatable but not curable. They often prescribe medication, such as Ritalin or Adderall, to improve a patient’s ability to focus. But medication is no magic pill, they caution. Behavioral interventions are also necessary.

Patients often require help with self-esteem and social and organizational skills, said Dr. Merritt Hubsher, a child psychiatrist and founder of the ADHD Center of Northern New Jersey in Morris. The disorder cuts across all aspects of life, including work, home and relationships. Adults often need help with marital problems as a result of the disorder, while children frequently need assistance in school, academically and socially.

While ADHD used to be considered a childhood condition, an increasing number of adults in recent years have realized they have it. “Many of them grew up realizing that something was different about themselves. They seemed to struggle more than their peers and never knew why,” said Hubsher, who treats adults as well as children.

Only now that they know that they have this disorder are they able to get the help they’ve always needed and see themselves in a more positive light.

That’s precisely what ADHD coaches like Kerin Bellak Adams of Englewood want them to do. Adams, whose father, Leopold Bellak, was a psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of ADHD, helps adult clients cope with their disorder to make daily life more manageable. She provides them with systematic approaches to being more successful in the workplace and in their relationships by focusing on their talents.

“They can be utilized in such a way that they can bypass the limitations,” Adams said. “ADHD people have intelligence, creativity and sensitivity in a heightened level.”

If understood and properly managed, ADHD can lead to a stream of lifetime success and growth, she asserts. She harnesses their skills by helping her clients structure their lives. She also coaches them on organizational and time-management skills.

Among her clients is a successful attorney in Clifton who breezed through law school and regularly wins cases. His main problem? He forgets to bill clients. Adams helped him work out a schedule and calendar so that he knows which aspects of his job to tackle at which point of the month. She worked with him to develop a task system and broke down his to-do list into priorities.

“I am in better control now and less overwhelmed,” said the attorney, who didn’t want to divulge his name. “She [Adams] was able to put me on a more positive path. Through her coaching, I finally feel like I’m in control of my time.”

Dr. Hugh Bases, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician at the Institute for Child Development at Hackensack University Medical Center, believes that behavior modification, in addition to medication, can work wonders on ADHD.

But he asserts that parenting techniques can go a long way in the therapeutic process.

“Parents need to know their child’s problem is medical, not personal,” Bases said. “The kid can’t help it.”

Kathy Zaccoone of Verona, whose twin 6-year-old sons have ADHD, changed her parenting routines after her boys were diagnosed with the disorder.

“It’s a constant effort,” said Zaccoone, who shuttles her boys to psychiatrist appointments despite having a full-time job.

“You always have to explain things to them so that they understand. You have to reprimand and punish them if they lose control, and follow through on your threats. And have to be able to dig up more patience for them than for other kinds of children. You can’t lose control because they will learn from you.”

Zaccoone created schedules and calendars to help the boys organize their time and feel more comfortable in the structured atmosphere. She helps them enhance their ability to focus on tasks by playing board games with them that last an hour or more. She also enrolled them in taekwondo, where they thrive in the structured environment. At their kindergarten class for learning-disabled children, they were among the top students and have been moved to a mainstream class.

Zaccoone is proud of the transformation of her boys, who used to be so wild, they kicked other children in church, embarrassed her with out-of-control behavior at birthday parties and regularly disrupted their classroom.

“Parents need to accept that their kids have ADHD,” she said. “Then they have to decide how they will handle it. It’s not like an illness that goes away after a few days. It’s for life.”

Her sons, she said, will always have to remind themselves to focus their thoughts and to organize their time.

But having seen how much they have progressed, Zaccoone feels more confident about their future. “They’ve improved so much in such a short time, I definitely feel they will be successful in life,” she said.