



flow and oxygen to this area of the brain is what brings about the symptoms of the disorder, including impulsiveness, inattention to details, and defiance. The number of people in the world now diagnosed with some form of ADHD (hyperactivity is not always associated) ranges from five to 15 percent, and boys are twice as likely to have it as girls.

As my son got older I found that it was almost impossible to talk about ADHD without invoking negative connotations. In fact, it still is. There are ongoing debates about whether doctors and teachers are too quick to prescribe medications like Ritalin, a methylphenidate stimulant that helps activate the prefrontal cortex. Some even argue whether ADHD should be considered an official psychological disorder. Most everyone thinks that an ADHD diagnosis is a bad thing.

“Because the diagnosis comes out of a Western model of medicine, it’s going to be looked at as a problem,” says James Ochoa, Licensed Professional Counselor(LPC), the director of the Life Empowerment Center in Austin, Texas, and my son’s ADHD counselor for many years. “It’s just one more thing you have to move through.”

As the parent of an ADHD child I know it’s a challenge, but I can also say with confidence that ADHD is not a bad thing. In fact, I believe it can be a gift — specifically a creative gift.

The common perception of ADHD is that people with it can’t be directed and they can’t focus, but that’s not accurate. If you help someone with ADHD find an activity that interests him, he actually has a more focused commitment than individuals without the disorder. Professionals call this ability “hyper focusing.” The challenge for a parent with a child who has the diagnosis is to help him discover his interest.

“I believe the cure for ADHD is helping a child or adult find his sweet spot,” says Lara Honos-Webb, PhD, a clinical psychologist and the author of *The Gift of ADHD*. “It’s where your passion meets your purpose.”

Discovering my son’s “sweet spot” didn’t happen right away. We tried sports and various camps but they didn’t work. Then in the summer before he entered third grade he went to a writing camp. The requirements were two composition notebooks and a pen. The camp counselor encouraged the children to write through various activities. My son wrote an entire novel. We were amazed, as was his third grade teacher. He couldn’t even sit in a chair, but given something he loved to do and the right environment in which to do it, he was able to focus. His teacher encouraged me to test him for the gifted and talented program at his school. That program allowed him to explore creative areas he had never experienced.

The fact that my son ended up pursuing creative work wouldn’t be a surprise to many ADHD experts. There’s actually a profound link between ADHD and creativity. Frank Lloyd Wright, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Edison all had symptoms related to attention deficit disorder.

In an oft-cited 1995 study called "The Coincidence of ADHD and Creativity," Dr. Bonnie Cramer of the University of Georgia compared the scientific data for people considered to be creative to the scientific data for people with ADHD. She found similarities in everything from brain structure to temperament and mood. Both creatives and those with ADHD are underwhelmed by repetitive tasks and "hyper aroused" by spontaneity. Neither does well in controlled or rigid environments. Both tend not to play by the rules, preferring instead to create their own structures. As it turns out, creative people and ADHDers both have a unique ability to take ideas and "make sense of them by organizing them into new perceptual relationships." This is the essence of original thinking.

What's even more interesting about this connection is the fact that creative thinking is in more demand around the world than at any other time in history. Authors like Daniel Pink, Thomas Friedman, and Richard Florida have all pointed out that as business becomes more global and culturally complex, companies are in more need of inventiveness and empathy than they are of, say, rote number crunching.

As the president of frog design, I see our clients looking for just these kinds of values, and I also see the impact these companies have when they reposition themselves for the new global demands. Meaning is the new currency, and providing meaning has always been the job of creative people. What we need now are people who are willing to break the typical rules of business and reimagine the world's approach to the pressing issues of our time — the environment, healthcare epidemics, and the global economy.

Says Dr. Honos-Web, "The people who just follow directions will be outsourced."

I'm not endorsing anarchy, but I do encourage unsettling, original thinking at frog because true innovation in business can only come about by challenging long-held habits. Cultivating a creative environment and nurturing creative talent is the key to our success. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if many of the people I work with have ADHD. If they did I'd consider myself lucky to have them. There are plenty of ADHD success stories.

Take, for example, Paul Orfalea, the founder of Kinko's. He knew early on that his ADHD gave him trouble with day-to-day tasks so he became a master at hiring the right personnel. Because he couldn't sit still, he was always getting out of his office, visiting his stores and talking to his employees to find out how to improve the workplace. Kinko's eventually became known for its innovative work environment. FedEx bought the company in 2004, and it's now worth \$2.4 billion (Orfalea started it in 1970 with \$5,000).

"My learning disability gave me certain advantages, because I was able to live in the moment and capitalize on the opportunities I spotted," he has said in dozens of interviews.

David Neeleman, the founder and CEO of JetBlue, also attributes a large part of his success to his ADHD. His inability to pay his electricity bill on time hasn't gotten in the

way of his ability to take a broad look at the troubled airline industry and come up with a totally different and sustainable business model for a fleet of airliners.

It would be unfair to suggest that having ADHD means a sure path to success. As the parent of a child with the diagnosis, I know it's hard work. I also know that children aren't the only ones affected by attention deficit disorder. There are countless adults who need the same kind of guidance and directed focus later in life (studies show that as much as half of those found to have ADHD as children carry the diagnosis into adulthood).

“Lots of adults, out of sheer willpower or intelligence, are able to drive past ADHD,” says Mr. Ochoa. “But if their lives go wrong — they lose a job or get a divorce — then it can surface because they've lost the structure they need.”

Regardless of whether the diagnosis comes at seven years old or 70 (Mr. Ochoa has a patient who was diagnosed at 79), those with ADHD need help developing structure and routine so they can find focus for their creative passions — a scenario not so different from the environment I try to foster among the designers and strategists at frog.

In fact, my experience as a parent of an ADHD child and as the president of an innovation and design firm continues to lead me back to the same question: What if we looked at ADHD as an opportunity rather than a problem?

When my son was in middle school he discovered an interest in movies and began writing movie reviews and scripts. He was able to develop that interest into a useful, entertaining outlet. His reviews also opened up social circles for him in high school he'd never had access to before, which in turn instilled confidence and an important sense of identity that he was able to carry forward. Now he's a freshman film-school student at a prestigious university in the Northeast, and when people refer to him as a perpetual ball of motion, it's no longer said with a pejorative sympathetic tone. It now means he's ahead of the game.