Help For Your ADHD

You're Not Broken, Your Brain is Just Running a Different OS

By Jeff P. Jackson

When I was growing up in the late 1950s and early 60s, there was no such thing as autism, or “being on the ‘spectrum’” or ADHD, or any of the labels we have these days. Nowadays, it seems that most everyone is diagnosed with some sort of “abnormality” or brain disorder. But back then, it wasn’t that way.

I mean, we all knew that uncle Nick was just “wired different,” my nephew Joey just saw things differently, and sometimes needed a little extra time to wrap his head around something, and my friend Cliff liked to daydream. In fact, that’s what my teachers said about me: that I was “smart” but I was easily bored in class, and that I liked to daydream.

In fact, I never understood why my teachers just “passed me along” to the next grade, year after year, when I did so poorly on exams. But, projects were a different story—like for a semester-long project, I would wait until the day before it was due, and stay up all night throwing something together. But my projects were always genius. I guess that’s what got me through. I was aware that my classmates “resented” me because of it—yet they couldn’t really fault me. My projects always met all the criteria, in some clever way. (But they all knew I had thrown it together the night before, while they diligently worked on theirs all semester long.)

For years, I was convinced that high school was simply a place to “warehouse” teens because they were too emotionally immature to put into the workplace. It was simply a “holding area” while their brains matured. That’s how little I felt that I got out of my classes during those years. But, as it turns out, I was just never taught the proper way to study—at least for my brain.

I went on to college after high school, for a few semesters, but I kept dropping my classes early on (during the “drop/add” period). I just wasn’t getting it. I wasn’t connecting with any of it. The only classes I actually made it through a whole semester were sociology classes. Meanwhile, I was called to the working world, to earn money for my own independence.

The Awakening

So, it was seven years after high school when I finally felt ready for college. Meanwhile, at every place I worked, I had noticed that I learned so much—everything about every business where I worked. The inventory, how the products were used, how (and why)

they were developed, and so much more. So, I started realizing that I actually ***could*** learn! Up to that point, I'd thought I was as smart as a bag of hammers.

When I was finally ready for college, it was after I had bought a self-help book about solving problems using "dimensional analysis." *(Y'know, where you line up the dimensions (inches, miles, seconds, etc) so that they "cancel each other out" when you multiply.)*

But this time, I did it like you're supposed to: I the chapter, took each quiz, and if you missed any, go back to the section and find out why. I'd never done it that way before.

I know, it seems really simple.

The point is, Nobody ever told me HOW to learn, only WHAT to learn.

When I got done with this book, I had a new sense of confidence. Now I knew for sure that I was actually ***smarter*** than a bag of hammers!

(To this day, I still use that method of dimensional analysis to solve problems. It's actually fun when I can do things like that, where other adults get stumped!)

A Knowledge "Sponge"

Next I decided to dip my toes by trying Saturday classes at the local community college. It went great! So I applied to the prestigious university in town as a full-time student, and got accepted.

By now I had turned into a sponge. I learned everything very quickly. Especially practical labs. I took the most advanced, rigorous classes that were available, and I was a star student.

The other students always wanted to buy my notes, to study with me, and to be my lab partner. Tthe faculty would, seek me out during lunch to have "theoretical discussions." During that time, I also I worked in the medical school, and I was able to put everything I learned in my classes into practical knowledge that I used in my everyday experience.

What was the difference?

By accident, I had somehow learned how to be quite functional with my brain, the way it was. I had learned how to stay attentive during class, and how to take notes that worked best for me. Later, I'd re-write them into almost complete transcripts of the lecture, including my interpretations. I breezed through exams, and I didn't even need to study beforehand. I took graduate courses as an undergrad, completing the requirements for a combined BS/MS with a double-major (Biology and Psychology, but I also had enough credits for Biochemistry). Then I went on to grad school.

But, I did keep running into one problem at my research job: Often, my boss would fuss at me and ask, "Why do you have to do everything different from everyone else?" I gave him the only answer I had: "I didn't know how to do it, I'm just figuring it out as I go!" But it always worked out.

It's a Different Operating System

So the point is, that many people (perhaps most?) have a different “operating system.” Some may process information differently. More importantly, most focus their attention differently.

Imagine telling a Mac user their computer is broken because it doesn’t run Windows programs. Sounds ridiculous, right? Yet that’s essentially what we do when we tell people with ADHD that they’re dysfunctional because they don’t operate like “neurotypical” brains.

ADHD isn’t a broken brain. It’s a different operating system entirely. At least when it comes to “multitasking.”

Like Linux users in a Windows-dominated workplace, people with ADHD aren’t defective—they’re just running different code. And that code comes with some remarkable features that the standard OS doesn’t have.

The Big Picture

I like to look at things from the POV of “the big picture.” In this case, it’s how mankind evolved. In the big picture, it’s only been a short time (a couple hundred years) that we’ve been a technological society. That’s a blink of the eye in evolutionary terms. Really, only since the end of WWII that technology has been evolving so rapidly. In fact, it’s even more recent than that, where tech has become a part of everyone’s everyday life. So, in the whole scheme of things, for most of us—our brains simply haven’t caught up yet!

Where ADHD Brains Shine:

Crisis response - When everyone else is paralyzed by emergency, ADHD brains snap into hyperfocus. EMTs, ER nurses, firefighters—professions packed with ADHD individuals who thrive when stakes are highest.

Hyperfocus on passion projects - When something captures their interest, people with ADHD can work for hours without food, water, or bathroom breaks, producing extraordinary results.

Pattern recognition - That mind that won’t stop making connections? It spots patterns others miss, connects seemingly unrelated concepts, and generates creative solutions.

Creative problem-solving - Constraints activate rather than limit ADHD thinking. The ability to see multiple possibilities simultaneously becomes a superpower.

Understanding Attention Allocation

Here’s the real shift in thinking: ADHD isn’t an attention deficit. It’s an attention allocation difference.

“Neurotypical” brains have a relatively consistent attention distribution system—they can usually direct focus where it needs to go, when it needs to go there. Think of it like a garden hose with a nozzle you can adjust.

ADHD brains work more like a fire hose. The pressure is actually *higher*, not lower. But there’s no gentle spray setting. It’s either full blast or barely trickling, and you don’t always control which mode you’re in.

This explains so much:

Why you can't focus on your tax return but you just spent six hours learning everything about medieval armor-making. Your brain isn't broken—it's allocating massive attention to something that activated your interest-based nervous system.

One the other hand…

How long, in the history of mankind's evolution, have we had to do tax returns?! We've spent much longer having to worry about our own survival, and where our food was going to come from.

There's more:

Why you can remember obscure details from a conversation three years ago but forget what you walked into the kitchen for. Your attention captured and cataloged what was interesting or emotionally resonant, but the mundane errand didn't register.

Why deadlines suddenly make everything possible. The urgency creates the neurochemical conditions that let you access your attention reserves.

The neurotypical world calls this "inconsistent" or "unreliable." But it's actually incredibly consistent—once you understand the operating system. "ADHD" brains are designed to allocate massive attention to what's novel, interesting, urgent, or emotionally engaging. Everything else gets minimal processing power.

This isn't a bug. In many contexts, it's a feature. In terms of our evolutionary history, it's a very desirable feature to have.

Practical Strategies

Work With Your brain, Not Against It

Once you understand you're running different software, you can stop trying to force-install neurotypical programs and start using the tools designed for your actual operating system.

Offload Your Working Memory

Working memory limitations aren't a personal failing—they're a known limitation of your OS. So…build external storage.

1. **Capture systems** - Keep a small notebook, voice recorder, or phone app always accessible. The moment something important enters your mind, externalize it immediately. Don't trust it to memory—your RAM is being used for other processes.

2. **Visual reminders** - Out of sight literally means out of mind for ADHD brains. Put bills by the door. Leave your vitamins next to your coffee maker. Make the invisible visible.

3. **Body doubling** - Need to do something boring? Have someone else in the room doing their own work. The presence of another person creates just enough accountability and stimulation to keep your brain engaged. Virtual body doubling works too—video calls where everyone works silently together.

4. **The landing pad system** - Designate specific spots for everything you constantly lose. Keys *always* go on this hook. Wallet *always* goes in this basket.
Phone *always* charges in this spot. Reduce decisions, reduce memory load.

Energy Management Over Time Management

Stop trying to manage time. Start managing energy and attention.

1. **Identify your hyperfocus windows** - When does your brain naturally have the most juice? Morning? Late night? After exercise? Schedule your most important or difficult work during these windows.

2. **Surf your natural rhythms** - You're not lazy when you can't focus at 2 PM. Your brain chemistry is in a trough. Instead of fighting it, plan admin tasks, walks, or easy wins for low-energy periods.

3. **Attention span budgeting** - Know how long you can sustain focus on boring tasks (probably 10-20 minutes). Work in those sprints with breaks between. Don't attempt the neurotypical 2-hour focus block—it's not designed for your OS.

4. **Transition rituals** - ADHD brains struggle with transitions. Create bridges: a specific song you play when starting work, a physical movement, a 2-minute tidying ritual. These cue your brain that you're switching modes.

The "Good Enough" Revolution

Perfectionism and ADHD often go hand-in-hand, creating paralysis. The antidote? Radically lowering your starting bar.

1. **The 60% rule** - If something is 60% done, it's done enough. Send the email. Submit the draft. Turn in the project. "Good enough" completed beats "perfect" never-finished.

2. **Start embarrassingly small** - Want to exercise? Your goal is to put on gym clothes. That's it. Want to clean? Your goal is to pick up five items. The point isn't the outcome—it's defeating the activation energy barrier.

3. **Time-box decisions** - Give yourself 5 minutes to pick the option. Not the perfect option—just an acceptable one. Decision paralysis burns attention you need for execution.

4. **Done is better than perfect** - ***Tattoo this on your brain***. The world rewards completion, not perfection. And your ADHD brain will torture you pursuing perfection while never finishing.

Interest-Based Brain Hacks

Your brain runs on interest, novelty, challenge, and urgency—not importance or should. So stop fighting it. Make boring tasks interesting.

1. **Gamification** - Turn everything into a game. Race the timer. Create point systems. Compete with yourself. Silly? Maybe. Effective? Absolutely.

2. **Novelty injection** - Rotate your workspace. Change your route. Use different tools. New environments and approaches activate ADHD attention. Boredom is kryptonite.

3. **Manufactured urgency** - External deadlines activate your brain. Create them artificially. Public commitments. Accountability partners. “I’ll meet you at 3 PM with this done.”

4. **Temptation bundling** - Pair boring tasks with something you enjoy. Listen to your favorite podcast only while doing dishes. Watch that show only while on the treadmill. Let pleasure pull you through tedium.

5. **The body-first approach** - Can’t start the task? Start moving your body first. Five jumping jacks. A walk around the block. Physical movement often unlocks mental activation.

The Reframe: A Hunter in a Farmer’s World

Here’s the final reframe that might change everything:

You’re not disordered. You’re a hunter trying to survive in a farmer’s world.

For most of human history, we lived as hunters and gatherers. Success required: constant environmental scanning, rapid response to threats and opportunities, hyperfocus during the hunt, quick pattern recognition, comfort with uncertainty, and the ability to shift attention rapidly.

Sound familiar?

“ADHD” traits were **adaptive advantages.** The person who could spot the movement in the brush, hyperfocus during the hunt, pivot quickly when plans changed, and get excited about novelty—they ***survived and thrived.***

Then we invented agriculture. Suddenly, success required: sustained attention to repetitive tasks, delayed gratification, following schedules, sitting still, and consistency over intensity.

We built an entire civilization around farmer traits. Then we medicalized people who still have hunter wiring, calling them disordered.

But put that “disordered” person in an emergency room, a startup, a crisis situation, or any environment that rewards rapid pattern recognition and quick pivoting—**and watch them *excel!***

You’re not broken. The environment is mismatched.

The goal isn’t to force yourself to become a farmer. It’s to either find environments where hunters thrive, or adapt farmer-world tasks to work with hunter wiring.

· Sometimes that means career changes—moving toward crisis-driven work, creative fields, entrepreneurship, or roles with high variety and stimulation.

· Sometimes it means accommodation—building external systems, working in sprints, creating novelty, and accepting that your productivity won’t look like everyone else’s.

· And sometimes it means radical self-acceptance: understanding that you’re not lazy, broken, or defective. You’re running different software, optimized for different conditions.

In the right environment, with the right tools, that different operating system isn’t a disability…

... It’s an advantage.

You don’t need to be fixed. You need to understand your brain’s OS—and stop trying to run programs designed for different hardware.

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