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The Upside of ADHD

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Enthusiasm, empathy and high energy among traits the disorder carries

by Marilyn Lewis for MSN Health & Fitness

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Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) hasn't changed, but how experts view the disorder is evolving in a new direction. Instead of only focusing on the difficulties posed by ADHD, today, the upsides are likely to be noted, too: the quick-wittedness, the speedy grasp of the big picture and the great enthusiasm for nearly *everything*. These traits make ADHDers endearing and

simultaneously exasperating.

This change may sound like just a new way of describing the same old thing, but to those with ADHD, the difference is profound. An estimated 2 percent to 4 percent of American adults and 3 percent to 7 percent of children have the brain-based disorder. For them, it's the difference between seeing themselves as broken and thinking of themselves as having advantages, even if they have to cope with being fidgety, distractible or easily bored.

In praise of ADHD

JetBlue Airways CEO and founder David Neeleman is famously frank about his ADHD. He was diagnosed in 2001, seven years after he realized he had it. By then, he'd already founded and then sold Morris Air. He had done so well in his own eccentric way that he felt he was doing fine without medication. Still, Neeleman says he's not anti-meds: "I have talked to a lot of people who swear by the medication."

Neeleman credits ADHD with his creativity and "out-of-the-box thinking"—it led him to invent e-tickets while at Morris, for example. "One of the weird things about the type of [ADHD] I have is, if you have something you are really, really passionate about, then you are really, *really* good about focusing on that thing. It's kind of bizarre that you can't pay the bills and do mundane tasks, but you can do your hyper-focus area." He spends "all my waking hours" obsessing about JetBlue. The rest of his life, Neeleman says, would be a "disaster" if not for his wife, who manages their home and children; his accountant, who pays the bills and tracks his finances; and his personal assistant, who sends him his schedule every day and steers him from appointment to appointment, keeping him on track.

Ken Melotte, 43, of Green Bay, Wis., is quick to credit ADHD for his successes, too. "I have ideas immediately," says Melotte, who's on the management team of a national trucking firm. "I instantly start working on solutions, seeing different ways to do things."

Yet, ADHD has been a struggle for him. Melotte doesn't care for medication. The disorder vexes him most at work, as a project manager, when he had "a terrible struggle" keeping track of all the details. On the other hand, he believes that ADHD traits like empathy, intuition and the ability to motivate and inspire others made him a successful manager.

A "context disorder"

ADHD is considered a "context disorder," Thom Hartmann says. Hartmann, an expert on the disorder, is one of the few who saw the positive side of ADHD before it was fashionable.

"If a left-handed person has a job cutting origami with right-handed scissors, that doesn't mean they have a disability; they have a context disorder," Hartmann explains. "Short people trying to play basketball have a context disorder."

People with ADHD "may instead be our most creative individuals, our most extraordinary thinkers, our most brilliant inventors and pioneers," writes Hartmann in his 2003 book *The Edison Gene: ADHD and the Gift of the Hunter Child*. He posits that the people with ADHD may carry genetically coded abilities that once were, and may still be, necessary for human survival and

that contribute richness to the culture.

A spate of books has come out that echoes Hartmann's positive spin, including *Delivered From Distraction: Getting the Most Out of Life With Attention Deficit Disorder*, by Drs. Edward Hallowell and John Ratey, and *The Gift of ADHD*, by Lara Honos-Webb.

To Hartmann, "Any kind of difference, even those differences that may make life more difficult or be viewed by some as pathologies, have to have some sort of upside, outside of pure disease processes. Otherwise they wouldn't survive in the gene pool."

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