

What to Do When Your Bag of Tricks Comes Up Short

The downside to writing about coping mechanisms and life management skills is that it gives an impression that you've got everything under control. In my case, nothing could be further from the truth. If you don't believe me, just ask my wife or any of my colleagues. In fact, at times I am quite a mess. The real problem I have struggled with is that this can be even more frustrating after being diagnosed than it was beforehand. Prepare yourself for the inevitable when your coping skills fail you.

Diagnosis: The Double-Edged Sword

We all know the tremendous relief that our diagnosis has provided. We have all taken great comfort in knowing that there is a name and medical basis for why we have felt different all of our lives, especially since that name is not "stupid", "lazy" or "chronic under-achiever." The problem is that this sense of relief and comfort can easily turn into tough self-criticism. It is perfectly logical to think that since we now understand why we act the way we do, all we have to do is change. Unfortunately, this is a lot easier said than done. As effective as medication is, especially in the beginning, it can bring a false sense of security. The medication and education can, and often are, a means of being much tougher on ourselves than we have to be. You can't let yourself fall into this trap.

No matter how good your coping systems are, or how religiously you take your medication, there *will* be times when your ADD/ADHD will shine through. You have to remember that this is the way your brain is wired. You have lived this way all of your life. The relatively short period of your awareness and treatment can't compete. In fact, if you think about it, it isn't even a fair fight. My advice is that you have to take a step back and prepare yourself for situations like this.

Stick To What Got You Here

Our ADD/ADHD provides us with many hidden talents. I say hidden because we have unknowingly employed our natural defense mechanisms all of our lives. For your own sanity, it is important that you recognize and use them now more than ever. Here is where careful introspection comes in. As an adult with ADD/ADHD, no matter how rough your life

has been, you have gotten to this point. Stop and think what got you here. You are a survivor. Give yourself credit and use what has worked for you all along.

Back in college whenever my inability to read the assignments or actually turn in written work was affecting my grades, I instinctively sought out my professors. I asked for, and was often given, the opportunity to do extra credit assignments. For some reason, I was able to complete these, as I had more control over the process and the topic. It was a way of rectifying a problem that I myself created. More importantly, it showed that I was willing to put in the extra time and that my problem wasn't laziness and disinterest. That is one way that I made it through college with respectable grades. Back then I considered this "cheating" or "faking it". Looking back now after my diagnosis, it was a very effective coping mechanism.

There are many times at home when I am very unproductive. This causes much frustration to my wife and myself. There are certain jobs that I just can't

“Prepare yourself for the inevitable, when your coping skills fail you.”

bring myself to do. Thinking about my experience in college, I try to offer to do an alternative project or method that may be more time consuming if I think that it is one I can throw myself into. This channels my frustration into productivity. More importantly, it shows my wife that I am not lazy or being difficult. I am

willing to work harder than originally asked to, but I need to be involved in selecting and executing the task. I need to do it on my own terms without the threat of judgement, even if I have to approach it in an unconventional way.

Sense of Humor

Your sense of humor is probably as important, if not more so, as your medication or any coping mechanism you employ. Having a good laugh at yourself can easily remove the stress of any given transgression and get you poised to try again. It may be the only way to keep your wits about you. Remember

this, people with a naturally poor sense of self-esteem can't afford to lose what little they have. Laughing at yourself is the best way to keep this precious commodity in your bank.

For example, many of us, if not most, are very good storytellers. When I am in a situation that would normally frustrate me because of my ADD, despite the steps I have taken to overcome it, I try to take a step back and laugh at myself. In tougher situations I try and take myself out of the situation and think how funny this is going to be when I tell someone else the story. I begin planning how I will tell the story to others and which details I will either embellish or emphasize to entertain my audience.

About a year ago I was repeatedly late for an appointment with a therapist. I was determined to get to this appointment on time. The following week I got there several minutes early and found a parking spot close by. I was so preoccupied with punctuality that I locked my keys in the car. Not wanting to ruin this moral victory, I decided not to dwell on it and go to the appointment anyway. I knew - from previous experience of course - that there was a locksmith within walking distance. I went to the appointment and resigned myself to deal with it later. When the locksmith eventually opened the car, I realized that it had been running the whole time - not an ideal situation in midtown Manhattan. As I felt the frustration mounting, I pushed myself forward in time to how hysterically funny this story was going to be when I told my wife about it later. Concentrating on the story to such detail and how I would be telling it in the future, effectively took me out of the frustration of the moment.

Embrace Your ADD/ADHD

When your ADD/ADHD shines through, despite your best intentions, don't fight it. Embrace yourself for who you are. So many of us spend so much time and effort trying to act "normal" that we forget our inherent gift for taking things in stride and shifting gears. We are the antithesis of those rigid "normal" people who freeze up when things don't go according to their plan. We are the people who never had a plan in the first place. We have lived our entire lives flying by the seat of our pants. While this isn't an ideal situation, this lack of preparedness makes us adept at reacting very quickly to any given situation. The problem is that after educating ourselves about ADD/ADHD and spending so much effort in

trying to conquer it, we tend to lose sight of our inherent flexibility. Remind yourself to shake it off and roll with the punches as only we can.

In my law practice, my partner and I are active litigators. On the one hand he is extremely organized and plans every last detail of a case. On the other end of the spectrum there is me. I am envious of his organization and the attention he pays to detail. His problem is that when he is actually on trial and things are not going according to that plan, he gets angry and extremely frustrated. The poor planner does not have that problem. It is much easier for me to shift gears and adapt to the constantly changing

“Stop and think what got you here. You are a survivor.”

circumstances of a trial. After all, I have 38 years of compensating for a lack of preparedness. A trial, like a battle is a highly fluid situation. Planning is a fantastic tool for preparation, but rigidity in implementation can be the kiss of death. I have tried to understand this about myself and recognize it as a talent. My medication helps

me plan much better than I used to, but I *never* take it when actually on trial, because I need that edge that my ADD naturally provides. I need to be able to adapt my plan or even create a new one depending on the circumstances. The added preparation gives me more confidence before I begin, but I am free to respond to anything that may come up.

Introspection and Evolution

Take advantage of the fact that something didn't work and ask why it happened. This can be an invaluable way to further hone your life management skills. They may very well be showing you a flaw in a system or coping mechanism you have been using. Focusing on that can also take you out of the mindset of frustration. The important thing to stress here isn't so much the skills themselves as it is the *process* that is important. The process begins with introspection and leads to experimentation and refinement. As people with ADD/ADHD, we get bored very easily. While it is a good thing to establish good habits, always remember that complacency is our sworn enemy. Careful introspection can help you evolve the way you cope. Remind yourself that the search never ends, but I promise

that it does get easier as you to go.

For example, I had heard for so long that self-talk can be a remarkable aid to abysmal working memory. I got a great idea to carry a small tape recorder and record every thought that came into my head. In theory it sounds like a great coping system and it is. Unfortunately it isn't for me. The results were disastrous. I never stopped to listen to the tape and make use of the "nuggets of wisdom" I recorded. I was very angry when this didn't work. It seemed so simple and such a great idea. From this failure, I learned something very important about myself. I need visual cues. I am not an effective auditory processor. In the future, any mechanisms I employed must be based upon this model. The results have been much more productive. This discovery came from my taking a good hard look at myself and the problem and the reason *why* it failed as opposed to simply dwelling on the fact that it had.

Conclusion

So remember, don't beat yourself up when, despite your best intentions, your ADHD shines through. Keep your sense of humor and let it shine in all of its glory. Roll with the punches and make this potential pitfall a valuable lesson to learn from. Use it to further sharpen the tools in your bag of tricks. Excuse me, I meant to say coping skills. Trust me, you were born with the ability to do this. Good luck, and never forget that there are a lot of us out there just like you. ☀

Robert M. Tudisco is a practicing attorney in New York. He is also an adult diagnosed with AD/HD. He is a member of the National Board of Directors of ADDA and is active in his local chapter of CHADD. He welcomes comments and questions at Robert@addcopingskills.com.