



The Gift Of ADHD?

Two new books look at the upside of a disorder.

By Anne Underwood
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March 14, 2005 issue - Sam Grossman grew up thinking he was stupid, lazy and irresponsible—"a screw-up," as he puts it. Struggling with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), he constantly disappointed his parents and teachers alike. So how, at the age of 24, did he end up as a partner in a Massachusetts real-estate firm? He credits an unlikely source. "The key to my success," he says, was his ADHD.

For struggling parents, ADHD—which affects roughly 3 to 7 percent of Americans—may not seem like the key to anything other than frustration. But two new books, "Delivered From Distraction" by Dr. Edward Hallowell and Dr. John Ratey and "The Gift of ADHD" by Lara Honos-Webb, advance the controversial notion that distractibility, poor impulse control and emotional sensitivity have flip sides that are actually strengths—namely creativity, energy and intuition. "A huge proportion of criminals have ADHD," says Hallowell. "So do a lot of successful artists and CEOs. It's how you manage it that determines whether it becomes a gift or a curse."

Chief among the potential assets is creativity. A mind that flits easily from one thought to the next may not be good at mastering the material for a biology test, but the authors contend that a nonlinear mind can excel at combining ideas in new ways. "While the A students are learning the details of photosynthesis, the ADHD kids are staring out the window and wondering if it still works on a cloudy day," says Honos-Webb, a psychologist at Santa Clara University. This sort of thinking can translate in adulthood into the ideas that drive new businesses, launch innovative ad campaigns and crack scientific problems. Take David Neeleman, the founder of JetBlue Airways, who calls ADHD one of his greatest assets. He pioneered several discount airlines and invented the e-ticket. "We make great entrepreneurs," says Grossman, "because we think out of the box. We can't help it." And instead of dithering over a decision, they're willing to take risks. As he puts it, "Impulsivity isn't always bad."

Critics charge that the whole approach risks romanticizing a serious disorder. "People with ADHD are more likely to be in serious accidents, more likely to be fired for misconduct, more likely to commit suicide," says Russell Barkley of the Medical University of South Carolina, who's studied the problem for 30 years. But Hallowell and Ratey insist that the difficulties can be overcome with a broad treatment program (including medications such as Ritalin) that helps patients learn to capitalize on strengths and compensate for weaknesses. They should know. Not only did they help Grossman turn his life around, they both have ADHD themselves—and both ended up as Harvard psychiatrists.

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