

Struggling to focus in the adult world

Markham man struggles to overcome adult ADHD

BY KIM ZARZOUR
kzarzour@yrmg.com

"It's like there's a million channels in my brain and only one output – my mouth."

Joshua's brain is bedlam – it has been all his life.

When he tries to corral his thoughts, to explain to people what's on his mind, it's like students piling up at the classroom door on the last day before summer vacation. They just won't come out in an orderly fashion. And it's frustrating. Sometimes, the Markham man simply gives up.

All through school, his grades drifted along with his mind, and his parents and teachers despaired.

You're a bright guy, they'd say. You could do so much better. He knew he could do better, too.

"I always knew something was wrong. I was never being a kid. I was always up until 3 or 4 every morning."

A "complete perfectionist," he was also completely inefficient. "Distracted by a million and one

things. The story of my life. Always scrambling right before a deadline."

Book reports and social studies projects killed him. "I'd have tons of extraneous thoughts, running off on tangents, I couldn't put pen to paper because every time I had an idea, I'd have another idea."

Joshua, who asked that his real name not be used, managed to pull off adequate marks, even got through university by the skin of his teeth – skimming textbooks the night before exams, missing deadlines and constantly making excuses for late assignments. His work was good enough to take the penalty for being late – but still.

"I was fortunate that I could do that, but I know I wasn't reaching my full potential." As the pressure increased, his grades started slipping and his stress level boiled over-the-top.

Sleep and food, well, they just didn't happen.

He managed to get his bachelor's degree in political science and set his sights on a career in law, but he was scared. He was a grown-up now. A relationship had broken up, partly because of his trouble with time management. He couldn't manage



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Dr. David Teplin, an expert on adult ADHD. "These are people with lifelong difficulties with either inattention or impulsivity and hyperactivity," says the clinical psychologist and one of the few specialists in assessment and treatment of adult ADHD.

See **ADULTS** page 24.

Adults show ADHD symptoms in different ways

From page 23.

to even make and keep a doctor's appointment, and now he was expected to take on a high-pressure articling position in another city – how could he possibly pull it off?

That's when a friend showed him an article about adult ADHD.

The diagnosis, when it came, was no surprise; it was a relief, and a vindication, he says. "I knew I didn't think the same as everyone else."

When we talk about ADHD, most of us think about the little boy bouncing off his seat - and we think about him growing out of it someday. But experts say we're wrong, on both counts.

Recent research shows 60 to 75 per cent of children who suffer from attention deficit do not grow out of it. That translates to 4 to 5 per cent of the adult population. And, like Joshua, they may not be grown-ups bouncing off their seats, but rather adults stumbling through life, never quite sure what they're doing wrong. "These are people with lifelong difficulties with either inattention or impulsivity and hyperactivity," explains Dr. David Teplin, a clinical psychologist in Richmond Hill and one of the few specialists in assessment and treatment of adult ADHD.

"By the time they reach adulthood they're not jumping up and down, running into the street. It's

more an inner restlessness."

The most obvious adult symptoms have to do with executive functioning, which oversees planning and organizing – chronic lateness and boredom, underachievement, procrastination, inconsistent job performance, low frustration tolerance and difficulty concentrating.

Untreated and undiagnosed, ADHD can cause significant problems for adults. Rather than school, Dr. Teplin says, it's work and relationships, and the stakes are higher.

And not everyone manages to get by like Joshua.

In his black jacket, shades and pointy-toed boots, tapping on a Blackberry next to his shiny SUV, Tony Farro is looking mighty fine – but he is, in fact, mighty messed up.

Driven to distraction, that distraction tore his life apart.

Back in 1965 when Mr. Farro was born, ADHD wasn't a well-known diagnosis. So when the Maple resident struggled with school and authority, grown-ups simply chalked it up to misbehaviour.

"My parents were from Italy. They didn't know anything about that stuff," he explains. "I was just an idiot, a troublemaker."

At 14, confused by all the noise in his head and in his home, he discovered his parents' wine: it dulled

WHAT'S ADHD LIKE?

Dr. Ed Hallowell, a psychiatrist and renowned expert in ADHD, uses metaphors to describe what it's like: driving in the rain with bad windshield wipers; listening to a radio station with a lot of static; trying to build a house of cards in a dust storm; being supercharged all the time.

Common symptoms and problems of living with the disorder include:

- Poor attention, distractibility, forgetfulness
- Physical restlessness or hyperactivity
- Impulsivity; saying or doing things without thinking
- Excessive and chronic procrastination
- Difficulty getting started, or completing tasks
- Poor organization, planning, time management

(From *Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*)

the din and blunted the pain. But it didn't make the ADHD didn't go away. "I was always hyper, on the move. Alcohol was my medication. It let me not think about my prob-

lems."

And problems, he had a few. When he wasn't working, he was partying, and his wife was crying herself to sleep. The drinking spread. He thought nothing of forking out \$400-\$500 a night buying drinks for a bunch of strangers just so he had someone to join him for another drink. They weren't guys he could confide in – just alcoholics with nothing else to talk about except where they were going next Friday night.

"I felt so alone," he says. "I had nobody, no brother, no sister, my parents had died; I'd come home and just sit in the driveway and cry."

Four months ago, when he'd hit rock bottom, he finally sought help – and found the answer. He was diagnosed with depression, alcoholism, and ADHD. His son has also been diagnosed with ADHD. He watched Ritalin calm the boy; he hopes for the same for himself – and then, he hopes, he can get his life back.

Diagnosing ADHD in adults isn't straightforward, says Dr. Teplin. It may be masked with other problems like anxiety, depression, substance abuse and difficulties getting along with others. Usually, it takes an adult clinical psychologist, an adult psychiatrist or neurologist with appropriate training and experience to make the diagnosis.

There is no cure, but it is "certainly treatable," Dr. Teplin says.

While not everyone requires medication, stimulant medication is typically the first line of treatment, he says, along with cognitive behavioural therapy and strategies to help with day-to-day functioning.

When it works, it works, says 20-year-old Tyler.

Tyler takes Concerta, a stimulant, and he has started keeping a detailed schedule with start and stop times plotting out exactly how he uses his time – and it's helped. So has focusing on the positive. His ability to "hyperfocus" – concentrate intensely on activities that interest him (he took his snowblower apart recently, working five hours without stopping for food, phone or bathroom) – is a big plus on the job.

"When I'm working on something that's interesting I'm totally into it."

That is one upside that many see in this disorder – many with ADHD are energetic, creative and able to focus intently when the activity is of interest. It may have been what helped Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps to swim to his seventh gold medal. A slew of other famous figures have been linked to ADHD, including Howie Mandel, Ty Pennington, Whoopi Goldberg, and Albert Einstein.