



# PAY ATTENTION!

ADHD experts share their story and offer assistance to others

BY KATIE FUSTER

Neil Swanson knew that his brain operated differently from other people's. Sometimes this worked to his benefit. His distractibility helped him notice even the smallest imperfections in structures as he went about his work as a home inspector. At other times, these differences frustrated and confused Neil and those closest to him.

His wife of 48 years, Linda Swanson, says, "From practically day one, I was looking for why this guy, who has so many wonderful qualities has no sense of time, is always late, can never tell me how long something is going to take – just all these things that had massive impacts on our lives."

For many years, Neil thought he just needed more self-discipline. He set out on self-improvement schemes that only led to more disappointment and confusion. Meanwhile, Linda

served as what she calls his "executive function machine," enabling him to better perform his work.

The Swansons never stopped searching for the key to Neil's atypical brain. "We went to The Lab School in DC and got him tested, but they couldn't identify a problem," Linda says. "We went to psychologists, but we never found an answer."

Then one night, the couple was at a restaurant when the word "attention" came up. "This lightbulb went off," Linda says. "Wasn't there a thing called Attention Deficit Disorder? We went online and found one of those online screening devices, and darned if every one of those boxes wasn't a check for Neil."

Linda laughs. "It was like somebody interviewed him to come up with those questions!" Neil was properly diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, at 60 years old. Linda explains that the older a person is, the

less likely they are to have gotten a diagnosis.

"When Neil was a child, nobody was diagnosing ADHD," she says. "That was back in the time when it was called 'minimal brain dysfunction.' Nowadays, between seven and 11 percent of children have been diagnosed with ADHD, and maybe four to five percent of adults. Something like 85 percent of adults living with ADHD don't know they have it."

It's important for people with ADHD to be properly diagnosed, and receive treatment. Those who have not been diagnosed have higher rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, and have lower rates of high school and college graduation, and overall life satisfaction than the general population.

## TREATMENT

Part of the recommended treatment for ADHD is trying to find the right medication at the right dose to improve cognitive function, or the way mind processes information, learning, memory, and perception.

"ADHD medications are like eyeglasses—they don't change you or cure you, but they can help you," Neil says. "They can put you in a frame of mind that works better in our culture, in our schools, and at work. But the recommended treatment is what they call 'multimodal.' It's not just medicine, because as we often tell people, 'Pills don't teach skills.' So some kind of behavioral therapy or coaching is recommended along with the medication."

"For some, medication can be life changing. Also extremely beneficial in reducing the impact of ADHD is proper sleep, exercise, and good nutrition," Linda says. "In addition, experts are now suggesting that recreation and time in nature reduce ADHD symptoms."

## SUPPORT

Linda thought that once Neil was diagnosed and received treatment,



in the community at large to prevent such experiences and misunderstandings. Neil is the co-chair of the Partners for Community Resources and a consulting member of the Special Education Advisory Committee for Fauquier schools. Linda is on the boards of CHADD of Northern Virginia and DC and the ADHD Resource Group of Northern Virginia.

“Lately we’ve also been seriously exploring how we might help those kids who get in trouble because of their ADHD,” Neil says. Linda concurs that this is a particular passion for the duo. In fact, she recently received an MA with a concentration in Restorative Justice from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University.

As Linda explains it, “Certain brain functions are as much as 30 percent delayed in developing in those with ADHD, so if you can imagine a 16-year-old driver whose brain is functioning in some ways more like a 12-year-old, and the policeman comes up to the car after he pulls him over...” She shakes her head.

The impulsivity of some with ADHD sends them careening into contact with the criminal justice system, and once begun, the spiral can be difficult to pull out of. “Something like five times the number of people in prison have ADHD as compared to the frequency in the general population,” Linda says.

There is also another component to ADHD that many are not aware of. There is an ability with those who have this disorder to focus very intently on tasks or subjects that are of interest to them, so much so that these individuals may be able to “shut out” everything else around them. This type of behavior can affect the ability to complete important responsibilities and may even impact personal relationships.

It will take dynamic, knowledgeable people like the Swansons to affect the change the couple hopes to see, bringing compassion and long-desired changes to fruition as they work with the ADHD community. ❖

they could put the challenges the disorder caused behind them. “I thought there would be life before ADHD, and life after ADHD,” she says. “Boy, was I wrong! We both had a lot of learning to do.”

Neil and Linda, who met while earning their master’s degrees at Union Theological Seminary, went on to receive training in ADHD coaching, mental health first aid, and personal transformation. Together, the Swansons began Free to Be Coaching in an effort to use what they have learned to help others. Each meets with clients to help them understand the ways their minds work and maximize their given strengths and talents. The Swansons also give their clients a toolkit of skills and a good foundation to build on.

The Swansons are also active with the national nonprofit organization Children and Adults with ADHD, or CHADD. “We hold two CHADD support groups, one in Warrenton and one in Haymarket, for parents of kids with ADHD,” Linda says.

In addition, the couple partners with the Fauquier County Library for a yearly showing of the film ‘ADD and Loving It.’ “We do it in October because that’s ADHD awareness month,” Linda says.

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“One of the people in the movie just makes you cry because he goes back to his grade school classroom, and he talks about what it was like to be a student with ADHD forty years ago. His teacher would say, “Everybody, I want you to know, Patrick did not try, and that is why he failed!”

“That’s an attitude that’s still prevalent in our culture today,” Neil says. He and Linda see their job as educating people

**CHADD Support Groups Warrenton** Meets on the second Thursdays from 7-8:30 p.m. in the training room of the Warrenton Police Station at 333 Carriage House Lane. **Haymarket** Meets on the fourth Thursday of every month from 7-8:30 p.m. at the Haymarket/Gainesville Community Library at 14870 Lightner Road.

Katie Fuster lives in Warrenton with her husband and two children.  
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