

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Attention Deficit or Attention Differences?

I suppose there are advantages to having diagnostic categories that allow us the ability to cluster 'symptoms' and define 'disorders.' Perhaps it organizes our anxiety if we have labels and categories that define certain mental health issues. Maybe it guides the type of treatment needed or medications prescribed.

It can feel very affirming to see (in print) one's way of being if it is listed and spelled out as inherent characteristics that accurately describe one's system in life. Sometimes I wonder about the message we send, though, when, for example, a certain attention system is named a particular way and labeled a 'disorder' – and none of the good characteristics of the system are listed. The DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) describes the symptoms of Attention-Deficit Disorder as: often fails to give close attention to detail or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities; often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities; often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly; often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace; often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities; often avoids, dislikes,

or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort; often loses things necessary for tasks or activities; is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli; is often forgetful in daily activities.

Maybe, at the very least, we could invent another diagnostic category to speak to the other attention system. Maybe we could name it, "Attention to Detail Disorder." We might list symptoms such as: often needs to follow rules to an excessive degree; often needs everything to unfold just as it was originally planned; often manages anxiety by having everything in its place; often becomes tense and anxious in the presence of ambiguity; often becomes critical and judgmental of self and others when a mistake is made; often tends to be a perfectionist. Maybe it is only fair and would somehow balance things out if we included this category as well. Maybe it would work better if we could all identify which diagnostic category we fall into and where we are on the continuum of the diagnosis.

The problem with only listing symptoms regarding an attention system is that we do not hold carefully enough the positives of the diagnosis. Maybe it is easier to celebrate the upside of being organized –

we look more successful in school, our house may appear more orderly and pulled together – but what about the upside of the other attention style? While a person may struggle in school and the workplace when attention to details is required, this type of person can also have the capacity of intense, creative focus. If something captures their imagination, they might even study the subject on their own in an in depth manner. They might be very passionate about music or the arts. They may establish hugely successful companies (and hire support staff that are very organized and keep all the details in order). Didn't I read somewhere that Bill Gates is ADD? And what about the often common, delightful characteristic of the attention deficit person who doesn't tend to focus in on what the other is doing in a critical and appraising manner? Sometimes they tend to think more about what excites them than what the other is doing that is irritating - a characteristic more common in someone with the more accepted attention style of being able to focus on multiple tasks and keep details in order and things under control (including the actions of their significant others).

A parent who has grown up struggling in school with an attention system that did not work well in the classroom, can go one of two ways with their offspring that also display their type of attention system: they can disown their tendencies and be critical of their child and attempt to 'stamp out' their bad parts, or, they can identify with the attention system and speak to the frustrating parts of it, and also teach their child to honor and value the upside of how they are put together. I think we can guess which strategy develops a better self-image in a child.

In my practice, I often work with couples who have almost opposite attention systems – one will be good about details and holding things together, but rather rigid and judgmental – and the other more all over

the place, losing things, forgetting things, but sometimes more easy going and fun loving. I am beginning to notice a possible pattern that suggests opposites in attention systems seem to attract. It is almost as if each style creates its own vacuum that begs to be filled by the other.

And herein lies a secret: If you can embrace the differences, appreciate what the other brings to the table, and combine your efforts and gifts, the result can be quite powerful. If you can develop a playful sense of humor about the other's style (the organized one has to have everything just so and does not adjust well to change, and the disorganized one is forever misplacing things and loses a sense of time because they are lost in the moment) – then you can appreciate and enjoy one another. It is liberating to come to realize the annoying actions of the other are not intentional, they are inherent. On the other hand, if you spend an entire marriage criticizing the attention system of the other, then you are left, as a couple, in a constant state of frustration and paralysis.

In marriages, in families, in friendships, in church settings, it is really quite a powerful dynamic when the gifts and idiosyncrasies of the other are respected and revered. There are blessings and curses in each way of being that must be identified and embraced in order to coexist successfully and peacefully – whether you have Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention to Detail Disorder. After all, it is impossible to create a two-part harmony if you both sing the same note.

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