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Getting Organized

An e-newsletter of organizing tips for faculty members. February 2005.

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"Don't overwhelm yourself by thinking about all the work you have to do. Just do what you can do today."

--*Donna Smallin*, Author of *The One-Minute Organizer Plain and Simple*

Attention Deficit Trait: What is it?

Are there days -- or weeks -- when you think you have ADD? Can't seem to concentrate on your work and feel impatient and frenzied? Feel you're constantly being bombarded by e-mail, phone calls, pagers, paper, and people?

It could be Attention Deficit Trait, according to Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist who wrote the article *Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform* in the recent *Harvard Business Review* (January 2005).

Attention Deficit Trait -- or ADT -- is a cousin to ADD, but unlike ADD which is caused by chemical shifts in the brain, ADT is created out of our modern day environment. In the Information Age, we are hit with a ton of information and communication: e-mail, voice mail, cell phones, pagers, magazines, and paper, and we want everything faster and faster.

Think of CNN and FoxNews. While watching those channels, you have an anchor speaking, a scrolling list of headlines, and sports scores all running at once. How are you supposed to concentrate on one thing when there are so many things to keep up with? It's no wonder that our brains are being overloaded and short-circuited.

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Symptoms & Brain Functioning

ADT sufferers feel distracted, frenzied, and impatient, and they have difficulty staying organized, setting priorities, and managing time, said Hallowell. ADT symptoms come on gradually and can undermine your work, creating panic and guilt, and most people, said Hallowell, will never admit to these feelings and pretend everything is fine.

The frontal lobes of the brain are responsible for executive functioning, the area that guides decision-making, planning, organization and time management, and other high-end tasks. This area of the brain also manages basic functions, such as sleep, hunger, breathing, heart rate, memory, and positive and negative emotions, said Hallowell.

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Survival Mode

When the frontal lobes reach their breaking point, the brain goes into survival mode due to the distress signals being sent to the executive functioning of the brain, Hallowell said.

"When you are doing well and operating at a peak level, the deep centers send up messages of excitement, satisfaction, and joy. They pump up your motivation [and] help you maintain attention...But when you are confronted with the sixth decision after the fifth interruption in the midst of a search for the ninth missing piece of information on the day...and the 12th impossible request has blipped unbidden across your computer screen, your brain begins to panic, reacting just as if that sixth decision were a bloodthirsty, man-eating tiger."

There are serious consequences when your brain reaches this point. In survival mode, you:

- Think less clearly
- Make impulsive judgments
- Feel pessimistic
- Lose your flexibility
- Lose your sense of humor
- Forget the big picture
- Become prone to melting down, throwing tantrums, blaming others, and sabotaging yourself

Fear of not being able to keep up can trigger these distress signals, and even the rest of your body reacts by increasing your heart rate and blood pressure, among other things. It's no wonder that high-pressure work environments lead to higher rates of employee illness and turnover.

We are victims of our own speed and make ourselves feel bad if we're not actively doing *something*, anything. Notice what you do the next time you're in a doctor's waiting room or at the airport. Can you sit still, relax, and people watch? Or do you sit there, tapping your foot? Do you keep thinking you should be doing something constructive? Most people whip out their cell phones and make call after call, almost as if they would self-destruct if they sat there and did nothing.

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Management of ADT

Unlike ADD, ADT does not require medication. ADT can be controlled by managing your environment and emotional and physical health, but basic time management tips do not address the root causes of the problem, according to Hollowell.

When feeling overwhelmed, take a brisk walk, slow down, or do an easy task, such as such as writing a note to someone, cleaning out your desk drawer, or doing a crossword puzzle. Hollowell stresses that you shouldn't worry alone. Ask for help, delegate, or brainstorm with someone.

Hollowell does offer several suggestions to control ADT:

- Get adequate sleep and exercise
- Eat a well-balanced diet and take a multi-vitamin every day
- Every four to six hours in a day, have a friendly, face-to-face talk with someone you like
- Break large, overwhelming tasks into smaller ones
- Complete one or two tasks before looking at your e-mail
- Set up specific e-mail hours and then turn it off
- Manage your clutter and paper so they don't accumulate
- Take a walk or put on music while you're working
- Use the buddy system
- Help each other to stop talking on the phone, sending e-mails, and working late.

The most important way to manage ADT is talk about it, Hollowell said.

"ADT is a very real threat to all of us. If we do not manage it, it manages us....
Bringing ADT out of the closet and describing its symptoms removes the stigma and

eliminates the moral condemnation companies have for so long mistakenly leveled at overburdened employees."

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From the Bookshelf

Donna Smallin, author of *Organizing Plain and Simple*, has written a new book *The One-Minute Organizer Plain and Simple: 500 Tips for Getting Your Life in Order*. This handy, portable guide features a variety of tips for getting and staying organized, and the tips cover:

- Clutter and paper management
- Home management
- Schedules
- Spaces and things
- Everyday strategies

Smallin tosses in encouraging words for those moments when you may feel discouraged and overwhelmed. One piece of her sage advice:

"Aim to surround yourself with beautiful and useful things. Give yourself permission to let go of the rest. It's just taking up space and weighing you down."

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Got Clutter?

I have developed a session on organizing how-to's full of useful tips, hints and other secrets, and I will be happy to visit your department to give you a hands-on presentation, especially geared toward your needs.

- If you prefer a one-on-one session, I can check out those problem spots in your office and help you come up with a solution
- To schedule a session or a one-on-one appointment, call (713) 792-8061

Happy Organizing!

Janice

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