

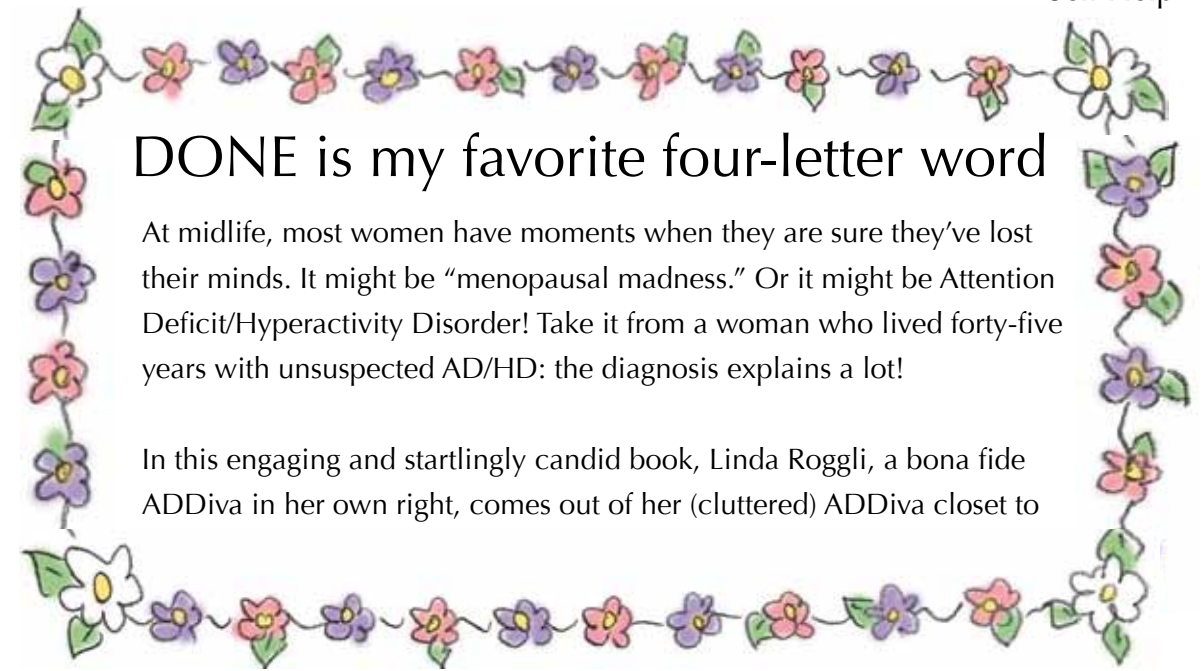
Confessions of an ADD Diva

MIDLIFE IN THE NON-LINEAR LANE



LINDA ROGGLI

ILLUSTRATED BY
WENDY SEFCIK



DONE is my favorite four-letter word

At midlife, most women have moments when they are sure they've lost their minds. It might be "menopausal madness." Or it might be Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder! Take it from a woman who lived forty-five years with unsuspected AD/HD: the diagnosis explains a lot!

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In psychology circles, I am known as an “External Processor.” I sift through the mundane and the profound aspects of my life by speaking the words out loud. With so much going on in my head, I sometimes have a hard time deciding what gets out the door first. And time is of the essence; if my fleeting thoughts aren’t released quickly, they may vanish into a black hole, never to be heard from again.

When I see a counselor or therapist, I am acutely aware that I have only fifty minutes in which to squeeze a week’s worth of memories, angst, joy, and questions. So I talk even a little faster than usual. That was certainly the case when I visited the therapist who was working with my husband Victor and me on some difficult marital issues. I was seeing the therapist solo that particular week, dealing with a “me only” snag in our relationship.

Even after a long day at work, my brain was engaged and lively. I told the therapist about the latest developments in my life and in our marriage. He responded with his usual good humor. Then he asked the question that would forever alter the path of my life: “Has anyone ever told you that you might have ADD?”

I giggled; this therapist was a great kidder. But he wasn’t laughing. I was confused. ADD wasn’t for adults; it was for little

boys who couldn’t sit still in class, or who daydreamed during tests. I was too old, too female, and too focused to have ADD! The therapist noticed my dismay and backtracked a bit.

“Stop by a bookstore sometime in the next week and pick up the book *Driven to Distraction*,” he said soothingly. “Don’t buy it. Just flip through it to see if anything resonates.” I smiled in agreement as the session ended and somehow I managed a civil goodbye.

But as I stepped into the sharp November air, an icy half-moon glaring through a tumble of black clouds, I knew I’d never make it home without stopping at a bookstore. I needed to prove this guy wrong. Either he was crazy—or I was.

Driven to a bookstore

By the time I flung open the brass and oak doors of the nearest Barnes and Noble, I had worked myself into a state of defiance. I marched right up to the Information Desk. (*Where do you find a book about ADD—the children’s section? Abnormal psychology?*) The slower-than-molasses clerk helped other customers as I impatiently drummed my fingers on the counter. Finally, it was my turn.

“*Driven to Distraction?*” he asked pleasantly. “Oh yes, that’s by Hallowell and Ratey. It’s in the Self-Help section. I’ll show you.” Dutifully, I followed him to the back of the store, although his guidance was completely unnecessary. I was intimately familiar with the Self-Help section; I’d spent many hours (and a lot more money) searching for The Self-Help Book that would fix me. I’d never found it, and I had no illusions that this book would fill the void, either.

I was mildly surprised that I didn’t recognize the red-and-blue paperback he pointed out. I thought I’d skimmed through every self-help book on the shelves. But then, since I didn’t have ADD, why would I waste time on a book that would merely gather dust? I grabbed *Driven to Distraction* and looked for a place to sit.

The store was busy, a pre-Thanksgiving Day rush, so all the comfortable, upholstered chairs were taken. I managed to find a vacant spot on the polished oak benches next to the magazines. I didn’t bother taking off my heavy wool coat; this would take only a couple of minutes.

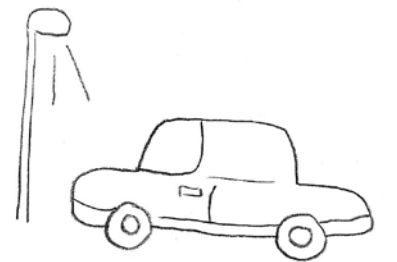
I glanced at the Table of Contents and then skipped through the book, reading a few sentences here and there. Nothing caught my attention until I hit Page 73 and a list of ADD symptoms:

- a sense of underachievement regardless of how much one has accomplished
- difficulty getting organized
- chronic procrastination or getting started
- many projects going simultaneously and trouble with follow-through

My mouth went dry; someone had read my diary and published it! I’m pretty sure I knocked down people in the store as I dashed to the checkout counter to pay for the book that would shake my world.

I read snippets of the book by the amber sodium vapor lights of the parking lot. Then I sneaked peeks at every stoplight on the drive home. The book stayed with me for two solid days; I read and wept, read and laughed, read with shock and understanding.

I’d found it: the reason behind my unpredictable behavior. After searching all these years, This Was It. And it even had its own catchy acronym: A-D-D. What a relief! I decided the therapist wasn’t crazy after all. He was brilliant!



I read under the parking lot lights

The next morning, however, I panicked. This was a permanent condition for which there was no apparent cure. Maybe this wasn't such good news after all. Maybe I was crazy! Or not. As I looked again at the full list of those ADD symptoms, I began to wonder if it fit me at all.

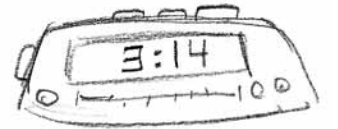
In *Driven to Distraction*, Drs. Ned Hallowell and John Ratey offered many examples of ADD adults who had trouble getting through school, who had lost jobs and were underemployed, who depended on drugs and alcohol to self-medicate their ADD. Most engaged in high risk behaviors like skydiving or driving race cars to snap their brains to attention.

I was different: I'd done well in high school, graduated from college, and managed my own advertising agency. I'd been fired from a job only once (one of my most shameful secrets) and I rarely drank alcohol. I wasn't much of a risk-taker—no bungee jumping in my past or in the foreseeable future.

None of the other therapists I'd seen had hinted that I might have an ADD brain. I needed a second opinion.

A river called Denial

The psychiatrist who specialized in adult ADD told me to come by at 3:00 p.m. I arrived at 3:14 p.m. He wasn't surprised.



I expected a test of some kind. Instead, the doctor asked calm, one-sentence questions. I answered in rapid-fire paragraphs that jumped from one topic to another and then yet another. I talked and talked, venting my frustration, trying to explain away my mild idiosyncrasies.

As our session wound down, the room quieted and I hesitantly asked The Burning Question: "Well, uh, do you think I have it?"

"Oh, yes," he replied quickly, with what was almost certainly a smug smile.

"Really? Are you sure?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he repeated with a bigger smile. "Let's start you on some stimulant medication ..."

That was the last thing I heard. Thirty-six minutes after I'd arrived, I was back on the road to my office, a prescription in my purse and the first grenades of war exploding in my head.

I don't want to have ADD. Doesn't that mean I have brain damage? I can't have brain damage. I own my own company! I have awards on my walls! My book is in the Library of Congress!

Besides, I'm not so sure I have it anyway. All this guy did was talk to me. Maybe he misinterpreted what I said. I had a migraine, so maybe I didn't hear the questions correctly. Or I talked too fast. Or too much. I should probably call him back and apologize. Then he'll see that it's not ADD. It's just me. That's how I talk. Fast.

But what if I do have ADD? Am I stuck taking pills the rest of my life? They sound dangerous—a controlled substance. What if I get hooked on them and turn into an addict who needs a fix every day? What if the pills destroy my creativity? I have to be creative! That's what I do for a living!

OK, but if I do have it, maybe taking pills would help me get things done. I have so many things half-finished. Or maybe I could be on time. I lost thirteen minutes back in 1971 and never found them again. I'm always thirteen minutes late. Unless I'm fourteen or fifteen minutes late.

Or maybe I would actually be successful at something—my definition of success. Other people think I'm already successful, but they don't know I'm faking it most of the time. I feel like a fraud, afraid that people will find out the truth about me. Thank goodness, they usually don't.

All right, if I do have ADD, what's the big deal? I've done pretty well for myself. I'm married with two kids, a career, and a nice house. I've been able to live with ADD—if that's what it is—my whole life, right? So I don't need medication or any other treatment.

I'm fine, I tell you. JUST FINE!

The internal argument went on for years, like pulling petals off a daisy: "I do have ADD. I don't have ADD. I do have ADD. I don't have ADD."



*ADD clues you won't find in the DSM-IV**

- *Illegible handwriting*
- *"I have to do it my way"*
- *Profound sense of failure*
- *Feeling like a fraud; hiding yourself*
- *Overcontrolling of self, others, events*
- *Interrupting yourself*
- *Easily frustrated; quick trigger to anger*
- *Very emotional; highest highs, lowest lows*
- *Obsessive tidiness*
- *Constantly reorganizing, creating a new "system"*
- *Making simple tasks complex*
- *Inability to stick with a diet, exercise; weight issues*
- *Many intimate partners; impromptu sex*
- *Difficulty with spatial tasks—puzzles, etc.*
- *A constant sense of being "swamped"*
- *Anxiety; a baseline of unease in the world*
- *Sensitive to labels in clothes, bright light, loud noises*

**Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*



I did try medication—several of them, in fact. Some of them made me sleepy, which piqued my interest. If my brain slowed down on stimulants, maybe it did have some wiring problems. Ultimately, medications didn't work for me (in part because I couldn't remember to take them). So I gave up on treatment.

That session with the psychiatrist did change me, though. Over a span of five years, I closed my company and retrained for a career that was far more ADD-friendly—life coaching—and eventually, coaching ADD women.

The more I learned about ADD, the more convinced I became that the good doctor (and the brilliant therapist before him) had been right about my diagnosis. Sure, I'd earned a bachelor's degree, but it had taken ten years and three colleges to do so. Yes, I was married, but it was my second husband and third marriage. (I married Number One twice!) And what passed for success from the outside certainly didn't feel like success on the inside. But did that add up to ADD? I still had nagging doubts.



Three's a charm

In perfect symmetry, it was Dr. Hallowell again who settled the issue for me. At the end of a keynote address to a national adult ADD organization, he mentioned that he was opening a satellite ADD clinic in San Diego. That's where my oldest son lived! I immediately made an appointment; finally I would take a *real* ADD test and find out from the *real* experts whether I had ADD.

The "real test" was a series of psychological evaluations. They were administered one at a time by a psychologist in a small, quiet room. There were no pictures, no noises, and no distractions. It's a perfect environment for high achievement. But these ideal conditions can actually mask ADD traits. Almost everyone with ADD performs better with no distractions, so the results of testing can skew too high. The staff at the clinic warned me not to prep for the tests by taking medications, getting a good night's sleep, etc.

Not to worry; I couldn't have envisioned a worse state of mind for my tests. I had broken my toe and was limping painfully in one of those ugly, blue, orthopedic boots. I'd had laser surgery on my face and my eyes were nearly swollen shut (my doctor had assured me that the swelling would be gone by the time I

went to California). I had stayed up packing the previous night, so I'd had virtually no sleep.

I got lost on the way to the clinic, my cell phone was dead, I wound up in rush-hour traffic on the busiest highway in southern California, and I was thirty minutes late for the appointment. Five more minutes and I would have missed it altogether. The psychologist was packing up to go home, but graciously agreed to administer the tests anyway. So I entered that quiet, distraction-free room.

I pride myself on doing well on tests, regardless of what they measure. But this time, I couldn't pull myself together. My anxiety was sky high. I was slow and clumsy on spatial tasks (never my strong suit anyway), and I was sure I had scored only slightly above "idiot" on the IQ test. I was so embarrassed by my abysmal performance that I almost canceled the next appointment, when the doctor would reveal the results. But I had to know.

First, the staff psychiatrist showed me the raw scores from the testing (my IQ was well above "idiot," thank goodness). Then he droned on about vocations and options. I didn't care. I only wanted the verdict. *Yes or no? Normal or not?* Finally I asked him directly: "But do I have ADD?"



The Truth About Diagnosis

- *There is no absolute test for ADHD*
- *It's OK to get a "second opinion"*
- *A "functional diagnosis" can be made via a thorough intake interview with an ADD-savvy physician or psychologist*
- *Expect to feel relief and grief after diagnosis*
- *Not everyone has ADD – despite what you may believe*
- *Having ADD does not mean you are brain damaged*
- *Medication helps some people; expect to try several of them*



He smiled at me, almost benevolently. "Oh yes," he said. "Classic ADD."

Classic. Like a vintage car. Or a Lauren Bacall evening gown. *Classic ADD.* I liked the sound of that. Perhaps I could make peace with this ADD aberration in my brain. Dress it in a sweater twin-set and a pair of Weejuns. Make it respectable and clever.

Even better, maybe I could "fix" it so I could finally be the person I'd always wanted to be. But the only treatment I'd heard about was stimulant medication and that experiment had failed.

I needed more information, so I did some research (OK, I did a *lot* of research) about ADD, women, and possibilities. What I learned was both a pleasant surprise and a disconcerting reality.



You've just had a "taste" of Confessions of an ADDiva

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