

ADHD: Tom' Story

"I have so much to catch up on-to make up for lost time!" These are the words of my son, Tom, diagnosed with long-standing Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) at the belated age of 22 and embarking upon treatment that has transformed his life. Where once he had no future, Tom now has a new beginning and at last he has the chance to fulfil his potential and make the most of all the opportunities before him.

We had no idea why, from toddlerhood, his childhood and our family life was so relentlessly difficult and unhappy. No idea why, when we tried every parenting strategy available, loved and cared for him we couldn't improve his constant challenging, confrontational and impulsive behaviour, his tantrums, distractibility and extreme hyperactivity and we couldn't enjoy our son. Frustration turned to desperation and despair as family relationships were under repeated stress as each member tried to cope with the effects of Tom's behaviour – without success- guilt, shame and demoralisation compounding exhaustion. Tom's persistent problems meant that he raced through the surface of life like a runaway train, scattering people and objects as he went. He was always in trouble for being unable to learn from his mistakes. He was endlessly bored and could not concentrate for long enough to hold conversations unless he was specifically interested. Life was like walking on eggshells and nothing but anger and arguments, and Tom was never able to achieve to his potential at school or further education.

School days were punctuated by detentions and other punishments caused by his persistent inability to pay attention in class, constant chattering, incomplete homework, to organise himself and be tidy despite a wide range of helpful strategies both at home and at school. This became an increasing problem as he grew older with the additional demands of researching, revising and preparing assignments for GCSEs. He was constantly viewed by teachers as being wilfully awkward and lazy and his life both at home and school was a permanent state of chaos. It was increasingly obvious that he would not retain instructions or information - yet he was obviously quite bright - and did not seem to understand the consequences of his actions. No-one could understand why he didn't learn from his mistakes, had a couldn't-care-less attitude to his life and seemed to court punishment. He had few school friends because he was over competitive and argumentative. We felt ashamed of his behaviour and our apparent inability to do anything about it, we became more and more isolated as social life was just too difficult for us all. Friends and teachers had well-meaning suggestions that he would grow out of it, saying he was just a boy and assumed that we weren't being firm enough with him. No professional to whom we turned for help over the years seemed to realise the extent of our problems with Tom – day in, day out, - or had anything to offer. We felt blamed as poor parents, yet we were doing everything we could and failing miserably. It seemed it was just a cross we had to bear alone and our spirits sank by the moment. It was heartbreaking to watch Tom's childhood become more unhappy as he rarely experienced anything but punishment – and the effect this had on him, his

brother – who had always behaved more appropriately and to whom we were the same parents – and all of us. It seemed we had no option but to stand by impotently and worry as Tom resisted the idea of any help and his life wasted and went downhill fast. Those involved with Tom had little time for his erratic, volatile, immature and unreasonable behaviour, yet underneath it all one sensed there was a lost soul desperately trying to feel normal who we just couldn't reach.

Just when all seemed lost and we were all at our lowest ebb, Tom came to me one day and begged me to help him. He had begun to realise he just couldn't cope as he was any longer. Time was now of the essence and at last Tom could be referred for help. It seemed he had been suffering all his life – as I had begun to realise after much reading over the years - from severe ADHD and ODD and was belatedly able to begin the medical treatment and other strategies he so badly needed.

The change in his demeanour has been remarkable since this time. He confided in me that he used to think the way he behaved was normal but that gradually he could see it was different from his brother and peers and he thought he was a freak.

He is now able to concentrate and be reflective for the first time in his life. He feels happier about himself and can now participate in his life instead of it taking control of him. This has given him a confidence that is unknown to him and he is keen to get on with his life and make up for lost time on all fronts. He now realises why he underachieved at school as he couldn't concentrate or motivate himself to pay attention, remember anything or revise. He can't believe that he has recently read his first book from cover to cover – his concentration was so poor that he said he could previously never get beyond the first line as the information just wouldn't sink in. His new found confidence in his abilities has encouraged him to drive a car for the first time in 3 years since he passed his test. His sustained application to activities brings positive feedback from those involved at work and leisure – again something he has never known. Instead of criticism, accusation and rejection, he can now enjoy praise and subsequent improvement in his self esteem. Up to now, apart from his talent at football, his problems have prevented him accomplishing anything for fear of failing once again.

He is motivated to continue with the treatment because he recognises that it works and that he now has a quality of life. He is beginning to build on his successes, unmasking the real person underneath the struggles of suffering from ADHD.

Tom has now held his first permanent job for 3 years, during which time it has been clear to see how much he is benefiting from treatment for his ADHD. He is growing in confidence and maturity by the day, he is visibly walking tall as he is proving to be a valuable member of the team. He now gains great benefit and interest from being sent on courses to further his career and is popular amongst his colleagues. The real Tom is beginning to shine through.

Two years ago Tom decided he felt confident enough to leave home. This was a huge step for someone with ADHD, especially when coping with change is more difficult than most people.

My delight at this new beginning for him is, however, tempered with sadness and remorse – sadness for the lost years never to be recaptured, both for him and the family – and remorse from how I feel I failed him when he was anything other than a wilfully difficult and relentlessly exhausting and demanding child and teenager, wrecking his and our lives with his extreme and intolerable behaviour.

Frustration that no-one to whom I turned knew that he needed understanding and specific help and that months turned into years, taking its toll on us all.

It took me a long time to get used to the house being unnaturally quiet. I still expect to find a trail of devastation throughout the house – things dropped where they fall, food and drink on every imaginable surface in the kitchen, the spilt shampoo, talc, toothpaste etc in the bathroom, the flood on the bathroom floor and sodden towels and dirty clothes every time he took a shower – to name just a sample of how his untreated condition forced him – and us – to live. No amount of training made any difference to this. The chaos, disorganisation and unreasonable living in the house has stopped – after all these years. The everyday struggle for us all has ended – although it will always be with him, albeit it much improved. Somehow the relief is bittersweet. Such a waste of life. Such a waste of a family. Nothing can turn back the clock. I would have given the earth to have been able to do something positive for us all so many years ago. Every one of us bears the scars.

However, now we must focus on the new beginning. We are now enjoying a much better relationship with Tom, benefiting us all. I can't pretend life isn't still a battle for him – his worst problem is still and always will be his total inability to budget and manage money – one of the common difficulties of ADHD. He constantly owes money and never has any. Tom's gaining a sense of responsibility and pride in his accomplishments – slowly but surely. How I hope he succeeds. He says how much he enjoys his independence but now realises how much we had done to support him – he was too close to it before to see how much we cared or were trying so hard to help him. When asked if he feels he benefits from his medication, he has no doubts whatsoever and wonders how he ever coped before.

Tom seems so much happier in himself these days. His new ability to reflect has opened his eyes to thoughts and feelings he was never able to experience or, indeed, express before treatment for ADHD. He is frustrated and bitter at having wasted so much of his school days and childhood by not having help before, realising the impact this has had on his life. He recalls how lonely he was at school and was sometimes bullied because he was "different". Although he is now going from strength to strength, he is acutely aware that a lack of school qualifications due to his ADHD is hindering his progress; that he is still behind many of his peers socially, financially and in career development. He sees it all so clearly now. Acceptance of his disability and that he will probably always need to take medication to function appropriately and to his potential has not been easy for him, although he has gradually come to like and believe in himself. He confessed that he had initially viewed the benefits from medication as psychological. However, in the gradual process of acceptance of suffering from an on-going condition he has discovered from himself the "scary" difference between feeling so unfocused and "struggling" to gain or maintain concentration without it and retain information when taking medication. He says he feels as though he has just woken up to his life and is discovering positive things about himself that he never knew before. He is facing the world with confidence for the first time and his obvious happiness in enjoying and maintaining his first meaningful relationship with a girlfriend is especially heart warming.

If only we had known about ADHD when Tom was much younger, so much heartache could have been prevented. Although much improved, some of the associated difficulties that have compounded over the years while he was undiagnosed, will always be with him. However, Tom can now cope better with these and has the chance to catch up on the lost years of his life. He can go forward with increasing confidence in the knowledge that he is, after all, not bad or crazy but someone with very

real qualities that have been rescued from the layers of untreated ADHD. As his mother, I have suffered with him but it is with much relief and happiness that I see him emerging from the chrysalis of ADHD into a brave, if not daunting, new world that I hope at last will offer him at least some of the rewards and support he deserves.

“Anne Douglas” writing under a pseudonym to protect the identity of her son.

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