

GOD, ADHD, and Me

A VETERAN'S JOURNEY

JOSEPH SORRENTINO

Whether one is a Ph.D., an M.D., or got mostly “D’s” in K through 12, one can benefit from reading this book. Street-smart from growing up in a dysfunctional family in Jersey City, New Jersey, Joe learned to grow his strengths and compensate for his weaknesses. This book presents a rich, warm narrative strengthened by the matchless unchanging truth of Scripture and the rapidly developing science of learning disabilities.

—Dr. Edward E. Aston IV
M.D. Dermatologist

I found this book well-written and introspective. Thank you, Joe, for sharing it with me. You are so very humble and open, and your life story is interesting, engaging, and well-articulated. I really appreciated your sense of gratitude and thankfulness to God. I cannot imagine being a person who lives a life without faith, and yours has clearly shaped you. That you are able to connect the dots of your life and see how God has woven all of your life experiences together is such a gift!

—Dr. Stephanie Burns, Ph.D.

Mr. Sorrentino has written a delightful book that is a memoir with a message. His autobiography incorporates a thought-provoking review of his childhood memories transposed upon a midlife diagnosis of ADHD. He eloquently describes the conflicted relationship he had with his father and how that relationship influenced his formative years. As the book progresses, this is followed by reflections he has on multiple relationships that he had had with individuals through key times of his life. Mr. Sorrentino is loquacious as he describes milestone events and cleverly interjects anecdotes with phrases pulled from his psychiatric report.

As he transports the reader through the years he also seamlessly incorporates Bible verses and spiritual messages which clearly indicate his precious relationship with God and the profound influence Christianity has had upon him. Mr. Sorrentino’s journey of self-dis-

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covery is a delightful read, and he balances well the combination of internal reflection, psychiatric diagnoses, and his evolving relationship with God in a way that is endearing and enlightening. I highly recommend his book without reservation.

—Dr. Monica Harms, M.D.

Praises to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for
giving me the insight to share my story.

Thank you to my extraordinary wife, Laurie, who has always understood and supported me in all my endeavors. We were put together by God to go hand-in-hand for His purpose.

A salute to the United States Navy for the twenty years of discipline, education, and mentoring. A special thanks to Admiral Hyman Rickover and the Nuclear Submarine Safety program.

Terminology

Definitions

ADD—Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD—Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity

Codes

The International Classification of Disease has a set of codes to classify diseases, injuries, and causes of death. ICD codes are found on patients' paperwork, including hospital records, medical charts, visit summaries, and bills. Here are the ICD Codes for disorders related to ADD/ADHD:

314.01—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

315.00—Developmental Reading Disorder

315.80—Developmental Expressive Writing Disorder

Foreword

As a newly married couple, my husband and I joined a Rooted Bible study group at our church. We were assigned to a married couples' group with all new acquaintances, including Joe Sorrentino and his wife, Laurie. Our group became quick and well-connected friends during our ten weeks together; so much so, that several of us decided to continue to gather for our weekly Bible study hosted by Joe and Laurie. Naturally, small groups provide opportunities for members to share their stories, and as I grew to know Joe personally as a friend and father figure, I was impressed by Joe's compassion, gentle heart, sense of humor, devotion to Jesus Christ, and of course, those ukulele skills! Joe shared his testimony and opened up about his childhood and adult life, overcoming adversity, and the struggles with ADHD that impacted his life. During one of our conversations, Joe shared that he started journaling as a way to work through his experiences. As a lifelong educator, I was intrigued. So my response to Joe was, "You should write a book."

I have devoted my life as a mom, friend, teacher, curriculum writer, and designer and facilitator of professional development. Specifically, as an educator, I am dedicated to enhancing the skills and instructional practices of all individuals within the school setting, including classroom teachers, administrators, school psychologists, school counselors, and even paraeducators. Meeting the needs of all children in the school setting and preparing them for future success is not an easy task. Yes, as a classroom teacher, I, too, had students that were, shall I say...challenging. As I reflect on my early years as a teacher, working with children and adults, I wish I had a better understanding of the challenges of those diagnosed with ADHD and adverse childhood experiences. A toolkit of strategies

and perspectives about their circumstances would have enhanced my capacity to better support them. Perhaps a book such as this.

I am thrilled and excited for you to embark on this journey. Before you do, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the individuals in your life. We all have friends, colleagues, and/or loved ones that struggle with ADHD. Quite possibly challenges with attention, ability to focus, engagement, task completion, organization, managing emotions, and even coping skills, the list goes on. How will this newfound information be of use to you?

Thankfully, Joe opened up to me and our group. I truly believe there are so many that will benefit from his experiences. Now, you, too, will have a chance to engage in this story. Whether you are a parent, sibling, friend, educator, counselor, or even an individual in the medical field, this powerful story will resonate with you. Be prepared to have it impact your life and your relationships. Joe's incredible story will undoubtedly tug at your heartstrings; you may even shed some tears and literally laugh out loud along the way. I hope you, too, will discover strategies and life skills to overcome challenges of your own, as well as support those around you. As God's children, this is our calling.

—Rhonda Spencer, M.A. Ed.
Educator, Curriculum Writer,
Professional Development Facilitator

Introduction

Throughout my childhood, the people around me did not understand my behavior. I didn't understand it myself. My parents were too involved in their own problems to help me. Teachers labeled me as stupid and told me I would never amount to anything. Friends teased me mercilessly. Preachers told me to clean up my act.

I felt useless. Empty. Worthless.

I responded by crawling into my shell and staying away from others, believing that if I let people get too close, they would judge me or ridicule me. I especially avoided those in a position of authority, or whom I perceived to be successful, or who had an intact family. I chose friends who were fellow outcasts with no parental guidance. That led me into deeper trouble, which followed me into adulthood.

At age forty-five, I was diagnosed with ADHD (Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity). Doctors told me that people who have ADD/ADHD are less intelligent and therefore less successful in their careers and relationships than *healthy* people. I believed I was incapable of understanding what normal people took for granted.

This diagnosis identified certain weaknesses in me that are common in people with attention and/or learning disorders. My difficulty with sequencing—a left-brain process that involves dealing with information that is presented in sequential order, like the alphabet—affected my learning ability, my anxiety, my attention span, and my distractibility. This in turn affected my school learning, visual short-term memory, acquired knowledge, and auditory memory.

My diagnosis also identified some unique strengths that I'd had all along but that had gone unrecognized by most. Turns out I had something called synthesis ability—I could look at pieces of a complex concept and join them together in a way that makes sense. The

report also said I was “field-independent.” While most people see the forest, field-independents see the individual trees within the forest. This is a big advantage in solving complicated problems.

I had superpowers that most people lacked!

My supervisors started giving me jobs that suited me, challenged me, and made a difference. This work, in turn, gave me more valuable skills, which enabled me to work my way up from the job of shipfitter to being a Quality Assurance Nondestructive Testing Examiner in the US Nuclear Submarine Safety Program.

At last I began to see my ADD/ADHD as a strength instead of a debilitating force holding me down.

After retiring from the Navy at thirty-eight years old, I started hanging out with my brother, Vinny, in Hollywood. Through him, I met Laurie Zagon, a professional artist who became my wife. A friend of Laurie’s recommended I attend a twelve-step program for codependency. That led to one-on-one therapy sessions.

Another friend of Laurie’s invited us to her nondenominational Christian church. After completing a small-group class on the gospel of John held at the pastor’s home, Laurie and I accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and invited Him into our hearts and lives. I studied the Bible in my own unique way.

As I looked back over my life, taking the time to analyze my past in detail, I saw the progression of my ADHD from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. I also analyzed my spiritual life. I began to recognize the links between those two journeys.

ADD/ADHD can feel like an anchor, weighing down your life and keeping you stuck in a dark place with waves crashing all around you, threatening to drown you. But when you recognize your weaknesses and capitalize on your strengths, your *disorder* can be a foundation to build your life on.

Knowing your limitations allows you to spend more of your energy on developing your strengths. If you focus on your God-given strengths, you can recognize and accept guidance from reputable sources, such as a trusted friend, counselor, pastor, or solid Scripture-based teaching. You will be able to outsource tasks you’re not good at.

Then life will be far more rewarding for you and the people around you.

If you have been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, or a loved one has suggested you may have it and you recognize some of the symptoms in yourself, I think you’ll be able to relate to my story. My hope is that learning about my journey will help you to rethink the way you are conducting your own life so you will learn how to live in peace with yourself and your surroundings.

If you know someone who has ADD or ADHD, or you suspect they might have it based on what you’ve observed, I hope you will encourage your loved one to get tested so a professional can make a proper diagnosis. Or perhaps that person could read this book and use it as a tool for self-examination. Either way, the goal would be for them to adjust their lives to overcome their specific weaknesses and take full advantage of their unique strengths.

As long you stay out of the light, you will remain stuck in the dark. I encourage you to examine your defense mechanisms, the things you do to isolate yourself from others. My defense mechanisms have been communicating only at shallow levels, deflecting serious conversations by joking, and changing the subject when something I know little about is discussed to hide my lack of knowledge about it. Can you relate?

I encourage you to review your past experiences. Identify and analyze the incidents that held you back or made you feel inferior. Also look for the ADD/ADHD moments that moved you forward in life. Recognize those experiences as God-given gifts that should no longer be hidden. Create a proactive and structured approach in working with ADD/ADHD. Let people see you for the amazing person you are.

As in sports, life is won in the second half of the game. Perhaps this book will be your halftime—the pep talk you need to enjoy a satisfying and victorious second half of your journey.