



The mysterious paradox of being a high achiever with ADHD [A Workbooklet]

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Introduction



Today was an awesome coaching day. I sat back after work and reflected on my day. One client after another was insightful about their own strengths and limitations, creatively and bravely designing new ways of thinking and doing to make real, positive changes. When I was basking in this little glow, I realized that, even though each of my clients is working toward more effectively managing their lives having ADHD, they are, each and every one, very successful adults.

As lawyers, professors, and other professionals they have extremely high educational attainment (more than me, for example). Most are married and raising functioning families. They are effective in their jobs (even though they often don't feel that way). They can manage their money (at least enough to get by). They think about their health. They are high achievers on all of those things we consider adult outcomes of success.

But, then I bumped into a mysterious paradox: How can this be?

ADHD makes it harder to direct your own intentions, actions, and thoughts. Harder to act on what you know. Harder. And, therefore life outcomes tend to be less rosy. Statistics support the negative effects of ADHD on life outcomes. Bad stuff, like not graduating from high school, not going to or graduating from college, getting fired from jobs, greater frequency of alcohol or drug abuse, poor health habits, money trouble, marriage problems, and more accidents. ADHD is about a lot more than feeling a little bored at today's meeting, losing your keys, or finding yourself checking your Twitter feed when you should be working. ADHD can look like those things, but when you add up a lifetime of ADHD challenges, you can get mired in negative outcomes that are pretty awful.

How can it be that so many people with ADHD are such high achievers?

HIGH ACHIEVERS WITH ADHD HAVE UNIQUE TALENTS & INTERESTS

Going back to my clients for just a moment will make it plain that high achievers with ADHD typically have quite special interests and talents. One argues legal cases of international importance. Another reports to the UN on very specialized research. Others are scientists working in esoteric fields of study or running businesses with creative missions. These are people who have developed very specialized interests and talents and have built their life's work around those interests and talents.

These specific activities or tasks can be the foundation for high achievement as we have seen in the press, which loves to talk about CEOs, famous singers, actors, and athletes who have ADHD.

You can try honing in on your unique talents and interests by filling out this little chart:

Worksheet: Unique talents & interests

My unique talents and interests

What are my unique talents?

Spend more time on these areas of talent or high interest:

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

Three areas of high interest for me:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

HIGH ACHIEVERS WITH ADHD CAN DO WELL IN SCHOOL

Even though educational attainment is lower for people with ADHD in general, some do extremely well in school.

Research shows that being really smart may actually mask the symptoms of ADHD. Highly intelligent children and adults with ADHD have been shown to rely on more efficient parts of the brain to make up for the weaker executive functioning associated with ADHD. So, people with high IQs tend to perform better in school and in life despite their ADHD. Life as a person with a high IQ does not necessarily mean an easier life, but it can mean you do better in school. Similarly, doing better in school does not automatically lead to high achievement and some very high achievers did not do so hot in school. However, there are certain types of work in life that do require higher educational attainment. Just ask the lawyers and professors I work with. Sometimes thinking about educational options or what worked for you while you were in school can help with today’s struggles.

You might be done with your education, but if you want to think about educational options, try exploring using this little chart:

Worksheet: Do well in school

My schooling options	
What educational options might make my career or life more interesting for me?	Topics to explore regarding my education: <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Three strategies that worked for me in school that I could apply to my work or life: 1. 2. 3.	

HIGH ACHIEVERS WITH ADHD WORK HARDER

Most of the people I know with ADHD work really hard at their jobs to handle some of the inherent inefficiencies that come along with ADHD. They will work later, on weekends, or during lunch to make sure they are producing as expected (at least as expected by themselves). Getting a doctoral degree, building your own business, or researching for the UN are difficult enough. Imagine how hard you have to work to do achieve those very things when you have ADHD – when organizing, prioritizing, activating to work, avoiding distractions and managing your time are so challenging.

Working harder can also mean working on the things that matter and not working on the things that do not matter to you. So, you don't have to work hard at everything.

You can try thinking about how hard you are working – your unique working style – by filling out this little chart:

Worksheet: Working harder

My unique working style

What types of work require me to work harder and are worth my effort?

Things to remember about working hard with ADHD:

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

Three things I work really hard on currently but are not worth all my hard work:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

HIGH ACHIEVERS WITH ADHD SEEK SUPPORT

Generally, those who achieve a lot in life have support from others – their parents, a special teacher or mentor, a spouse, or a coach. This is true for adults with ADHD as well, but can be even more important. Talking to someone and seeking help can help lead to high achievement.

Support includes appropriate treatment for ADHD. According to research, treatment for ADHD significantly improves long-term outcomes, even though it often does not “normalize” outcomes. Treatment can include ADHD diagnosis, medication, and what is called “non-pharmacological” treatments like ADHD coaching. Part of being a high achiever with ADHD is seeking out support when you know you would benefit from the help, a new perspective, or a little guidance.

Try filling out this little chart to think about types of support that would benefit you:

Worksheet: Seeking support

My areas of support

What types of support have worked for me in the past?

Steps to take to get more support:

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

Three areas of my life or work that would benefit from additional support:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Conclusion



Today when I bumped up against the mysterious paradox of being a high achiever with ADHD, I thought carefully about my clients. I realized that part of their experience is to exist in the paradox – that being a high achiever with ADHD means that they must deeply understand that life outcomes are more difficult for them to achieve, while, at the same time, relying on their interests and talents, their smarts, working harder at what matters, and getting support to help them achieve quite a lot.

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