



**ADHD  
101**

column with  
**Aaron Bailey**

Aaron Bailey lives and works in Whitehorse and, as a person who has ADHD (combination type), a learning disability (LD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and mental health struggles, he not only understands the difficulty and frustration that is often part of the ADHD journey, but he wants to help others understand too. He holds an advanced Child and Youth Worker diploma from St. Lawrence College, a Bachelor of Human Services from Griffith University, and he recently completed the ADD Coach Academy Basic ADHD & Life Coach Certification program. After 12 years of working in this field, in various positions, and running his own part-time business, Aaron launched his ADHD Life Coaching business full-time.

# WELCOME TO MY ADHD BRAIN

Hey, What's Up Yukon readers, let me introduce myself ...

My name is Aaron Bailey. I'm an ADHD Life Coach here in Whitehorse, and my goal is to share with Yukoners what I have learned about myself and others, with ADHD, over the past two decades. I was diagnosed with ADHD-Combined Type, a learning disability (LD) in mathematics and a generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), when I was 11 years old. I'm not a doctor or a psychologist, but I have been in the education system and have worked with youth for 12 years. I am extremely honest about who I am and how my brain works, and I use that to connect with people and help them find their own tools and strategies so that they can thrive with ADHD.

*Let's dive into the wonderful world of ADHD together ... Yahoo!*

I am so ADD. Whoops, had an ADHD moment. Sometimes I get so distracted, I must have ADHD! We hear the abbreviation ADD (or ADHD) tossed around, all the time, but what does it really mean? When I forget where I put my keys, does it mean I have ADHD? When I get distracted by a squirrel or a shiny object, does that mean I have ADHD? Well maybe, but not necessarily.

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and can

be described as a "complex neurological disorder that impacts parts of the brain that help us plan, focus on and execute tasks." So, basically, everyday tasks? Yes! ADHD also has three different subtypes:

1. **Inattentive (previously known as ADD)**
2. **Hyperactive and Impulsive**
3. **Combination (what I have)**

ADHD has been highly stigmatized and, while commonly diagnosed, is unfortunately rarely fully understood. When I was first diagnosed, I often heard, "It's just kids being lazy" or "It's an excuse for him to be hyper." We know that's not true but have yet to fully shake the stereotypes. ADHD is a neurological disorder; it's not a choice. We know there are sections of the brain that are not functioning as they should, which causes inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity and executive-functioning difficulties.

*But what is actually happening in the brain? (I'm glad you asked.)*

Even though the word hyperactivity is in the name, it's actually an underactive brain. Again, I'm not a doctor—just a guy with ADHD—so I'll defer to the neurologists to help me out here: According to Dr. Larry Silver, ADHD was the first disorder found to be a deficiency in specific neurotransmitters (chemicals in our brain that help to send messages to different regions of the brain)—norepineph-

rine and dopamine. Research is still underway to pinpoint where ADHD symptoms arise from; however, Dr. Silver describes four regions of the brain that experience impaired neurotransmitter activity:

1. **Frontal cortex:** We need this for high-level functioning, maintaining attention, organization and executive functions.
2. **Limbic system:** We need this to regulate our emotions.
3. **Basal ganglia:** Besides being a funny word, we need these circuits to help us regulate communication entering the brain.
4. **Reticular activating system:** We need this major relay system to help us with inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity.

Another ADHD researcher that I love, Dr. Robert Silvestri, goes on to explain that the executive functioning in the brain of someone with ADHD is underactive and that messages are not being transferred appropriately. For example, when a student with ADHD *should* be sitting in class and listening, our limbic center is yelling, *Get up and move!* Our frontal lobe is supposed to inhibit that thought and say, *Nope, we are sitting still and listening.* Due to low levels of dopamine, that connection isn't being made. Students with hyperactive ADHD will seem restless, fidget or even get out of their

seat. Students with inattentive ADHD may daydream or stare off into space.

Dr. Silvestri explains that brain scans done on students with ADHD find that when students begin to exhibit the typical ADHD symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity or impulsivity, such as fidgeting, daydreaming or disrupting other students, they receive a jolt of dopamine, which, in turn, helps their brains function better. Therefore, because students with ADHD have an underactive brain and we aren't able to get the stimulation internally, we go looking for that stimulation in our external environment (yay for fidgeting!).

Great, I've just used a bunch of jargony science words, and the life of an ADHD person is looking super bleak. Not so fast! My personal favourite definition of ADHD is from David Giwerc and Barbara Luther, from the ADD Coach Academy (AD-DCA). They describe it as "a unique brain wiring that requires engaged interest, with a clear, purposeful intention, in order to activate and access attention so an individual can manage the brain's executive functioning." The reason I like this definition is because it shows us that we actually do have the ability to focus (Say what!?)—all we need to do is find out what activates or engages our brain.

People with ADHD often grow

up believing that they are stupid and unable to learn; trust me, I've been there. Growing up, I was rarely able to retain information ... let alone sit still during an entire class. I always felt different and weird compared to my peers. I internalized these emotions and concluded that I was stupid and would not go far in life.

However, if we can flip the script from *Why? Why can't I learn? Why can everyone else do this but me? to What? What do I need in order to learn? What do I need to do to engage my brain?* This powerful shift allows us to pause and reflect on our own needs. For me, a big help has been music and physical exercise. I know that when I listen to music, I am able to retain information when studying. Or if I do a quick exercise routine, I know my brain will receive the stimulation required to help me focus for maybe the next 15 minutes.

This is why I love the definition from ADDCA, because the focus is on the positive! It's not that we are unable to focus, we just need to figure out how our brain works so we can unlock the strategies that work for us. It's my goal to help unlock the "secrets" of our brains and to develop individualistic strategies, because everyone's ADHD is different and requires different tactics to conquer. ■

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