

# You, Too, Can Have One

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Attention deficient disorder (ADD) is a disease wherein a person (hereinafter referred to as a “child” since it is usually diagnosed while a person is in elementary school) is said to be unable to pay attention. This is like saying a child is unmotivated. Fact is, all children are motivated—they’re just not motivated to do what you want them to do. Likewise, ADD children are paying attention—they’re just not paying attention to what you want them to. The teacher is pointing to the blackboard but the child is “distracted” by the birdie on the windowsill. We call this—in the Year of Our Lord 2004—a “sickness.” It is a disease state, a mental disorder, an illness.

When Dan, Michael, and Joel had it, back in the Year before Our Lord 1302—we called it “survival.” Ancient man—as far back as cave man—survived by noticing things like the birdie that suddenly flew up out of the jungle, quite possibly indicating the presence of a saber-toothed tiger that intended to eat him. Alternatively, for Dan, Michael and Joel, Moses’ descendents, it could have indicated those damn Philistines were moving in again, which is how I got to thinking about Ron.

Ron had attention deficit disorder and, consequently, did poorly in school and hated it. When he was seventeen, he told his parents he was leaving and gave them the opportunity to sign him into the Army, so that at least they would know where he was. Ron, in his infinite, intuitive wisdom, had nailed it: the Army gave him both focus and distraction. The Army organized his life and kept him targeted, while at the same time, moving him around a lot and giving him new and interesting things to do. It also let him become a scout, wherein he tiptoed through the jungle, noticed the birdies, and yelled, “Incoming! Hit the ground!” thereby saving the lives of his brothers, which they appreciated a hell of a lot.

So here’s the point: today’s mental illness was yesterday’s asset.

Central New York—specifically, Syracuse—has the least amount of winter sunlight in the pseudo-sane world: November, December, January and February, ten days of sunshine. No, not ten days a month; ten days for the whole four months. Syracuse, therefore, is the geographical core of something called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). The disorder starts with a feeling of tiredness, sleepiness—you just can’t get out of bed in the morning—and progresses to flat-out depression. People mope around all winter, and wish they were home in bed—which is where they are supposed to be.

The indigenous personnel of Central New York—consisting mainly of bears, groundhogs and aberrant squirrels—hibernate. In addition to no sunlight, Syracuse gets lots of snow and very little heat. (As I write this, January 14, the temperature is –12 and we are working our way toward our annual ten feet of snow.) Any living critter in its right mind knows that God intended you to sleep through this. Only the human critter, which uses its free will to override God’s intentions, would be dumb enough to think you should go to “work” under these circumstances. You should go to bed, and stay there. People who give themselves permission to stay in bed do not get depressed; they get

warm and snuggly and, if they're lucky, laid (you are supposed to crawl out of the cave in the spring with a new cub in tow). They do not get seasonal affective disorder.

So here's the point: today's mental illness is dysfunction between man and environment.

Asperger's syndrome is a mental illness that consists of intellectual brilliance and a mild form of autism, which is the inability to relate happily to other members of your own species. A lot of people with Asperger's syndrome go to medical school and become doctors. These are people who, in their childhood phase, have pet rocks—and empathize with them. They are very good students, in possible part because they have no friends to distract them from their studies. They like to take things apart, like batteries, clocks, and the family pooch.

It helps to get through medical school if you are brilliant and don't like being around people very much. The down side to this, of course, is that medicine is applied to people and sooner or later the Asperger's person has to go one-on-one with members of his own species, which is a real bummer. The famed neurologist Oliver Sacks has spoken (brilliantly, of course) of his difficulties with Asperger's. Most doctors go undiagnosed—seriously, what doctor is going to tell another doctor he's got a mental defect? So, of course, they also go untreated and get reputations for being real sons of bitches, nevertheless, they are a useful asset in society. Becoming a doctor involves renouncing human relations in order to do one hell of a lot of book learnin', and what normal person would do that?

So here's the point: today's mental illness serves a purpose.

So here's the big point: you, too, can have a mental disorder. You probably do—it just hasn't been isolated yet. If you isolate certain aspects of anybody, you can call the isolate a mental disorder. Alternatively, you can look at the whole person in the context of the whole world over the period of all time and say, "Damn! It works, doesn't it?"

One of the things the Army taught Ron was not to try to build the perfect soldier, but to build the perfect team. Ron had ADD and couldn't remember the daily codes for shit, so he always made sure to have a radioman with a good memory. You put together a team that completes itself by each person contributing according to what he's got to offer.

We all need each other in order to be a complete society. Could we please go gently, and stop labeling difference as sickness?