

# When having a hundred things to do is a disorder

Are you running late and is your 'to-do' list driving you crazy? You could, like me, have adult ADHD, says Helen Croydon

**L**ast month I missed two flights in the space of 18 hours. The first was due to poor punctuality, the second because I didn't check the boarding time and failed to hear my name being called. As with all my regular mini-disasters I made it into a hilarious dinner party story. But inside I didn't find it funny. I started to analyse why I am always late. Needless cab journeys because I am too rushed to take the Tube. Countless "running 10 mins late" texts.

After a week of beating myself up, I concluded that the cause of my lateness stems from an urge to utilise every last minute, but when I consulted a psychologist, my consultation brought home a more startling realisation.

Trudy Hill, a psychologist at the Susie Ambrose Clinic in Knightsbridge, Central London, deals with chronic lateness. She asks if I write appointments in my diary. Yes, but then I never look at my diary. Do I often misplace things? I laugh. This winter I went through five pairs of gloves. Dry cleaning tickets? Not a hope. At ATMs I don't put my cash in my purse, I stuff it in a pocket and hurtle on. When I

come to pay for something I have no idea where my money is.

Hill asked about my job history. I'm now on my fourth career after a degree in Japanese, an accountancy traineeship, five years as a broadcast journalist and now, freelance writer. My strengths? Ideas and creativity. My weaknesses? Accuracy and remembering facts. We established a number of other issues: regular insomnia, toddler temper tantrums, daydreaming in meetings and risk-taking.

"This is by no means a formal diagnosis," Hill said, "but you display a lot of symptoms of adult ADHD (attention

deficit hyperactivity disorder). Symptoms fall within a spectrum of severity, however, so you may well be on the mild end and not need to address it." I didn't react at first because I didn't think it was possible that I could be labelled with a psychological condition. I consider myself balanced and confident. ADHD only concerns children surely? And isn't everyone absent minded when they have a hundred thoughts going through their head?

ADHD or ADD is a genetically inherited neurodevelopment disorder affecting the the production of dopamine. That in turn affects the brain's ability to

concentrate and stay on task. People with ADHD have trouble planning and remembering tasks. They are known to have active imaginations, problem-solving abilities, and bursts of energy. They get bored easily, have a tendency to be impulsive, and a sub-set of the condition is hyper-focus. The latter is related to the former.

As I researched online I seemed to spell out my condition. On the one hand I felt relief, on the other hand, there was a realisation that my life has been negatively affected. It's an avoidance of more serious things, a shun long-term relationships.

There were positive things about it though — intuition, exceptional problem-solving skills, an ability to find solutions. Einstein is said to have had it. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. Even Timberlake has it. David Beckham is said to have it. The founder of JetBlue Airways, Burt Becket, is said to have it. The inventor of the e-ticket, John D. Taylor, is said to have it. That he always lost his tickets is a common theme.

The NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care estimates that around 8 per cent of the UK adult population display symptoms severe enough for clinical diagnosis, though the actual number is probably much lower. ADHD is not officially recognised by the NHS. The Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in October 2006 officially recognised it. Campaigners claim that many people don't take it seriously.



Above: Helen Croydon, centre, takes part in an ADHD group workshop run by Andrew Lewis. Top: doodles drawn by another member of the workshop

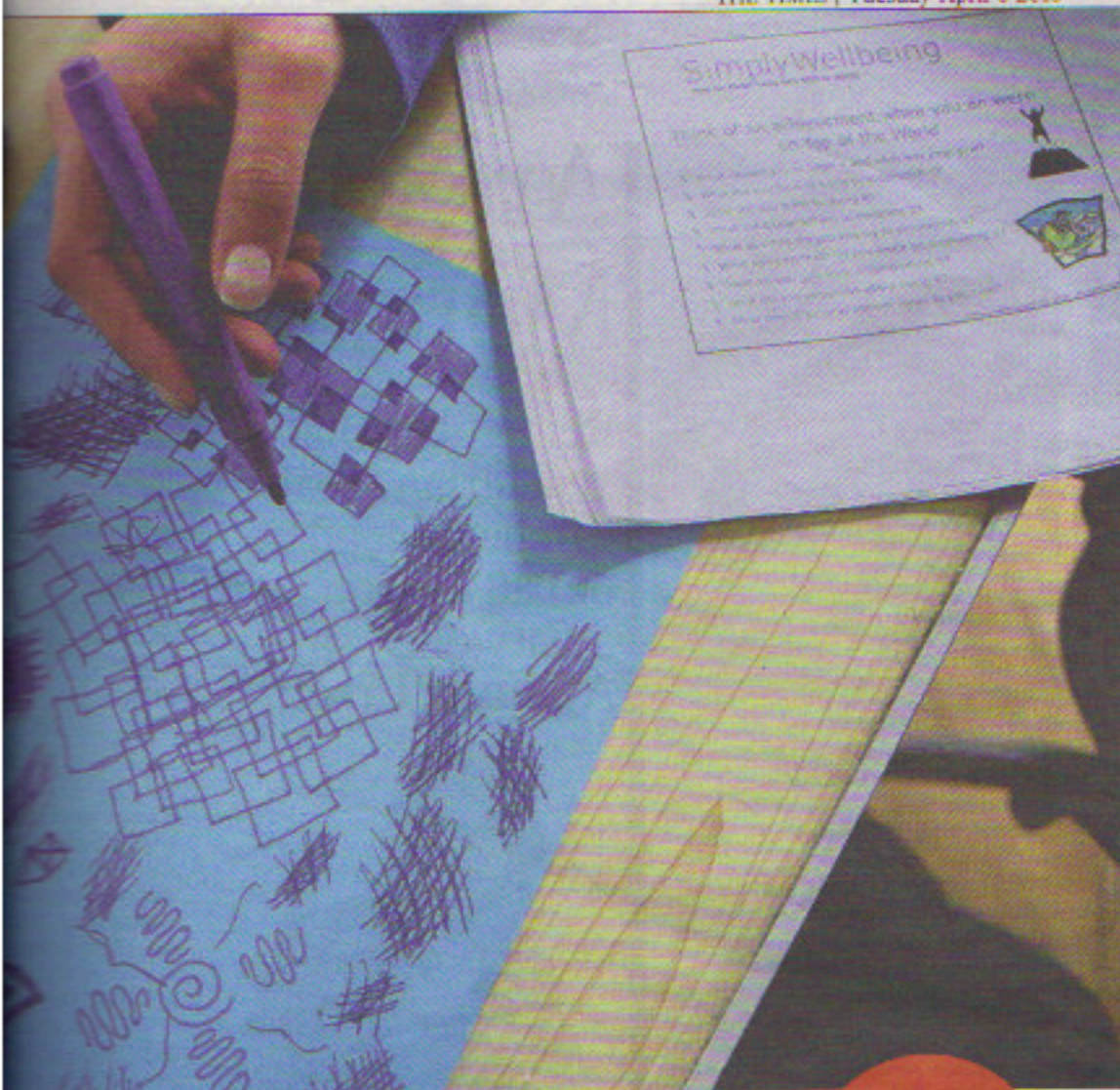
ON THE

Relationships are always complicated, but professional relationships based in your own territory are some of the most complicated.

Last week we heard Heather Mills's







MARY TUNNEY FOR THE TIMES



A group workshop run by the author of the book

(inattention disorder). Symptoms range from mild to severe, however, and can be on the mild end and not affect it. "I didn't react at first because I didn't think it was possible that I could be diagnosed with a psychological condition. I consider myself balanced and not ADHD-only concerns children and adults everyone absent minded and I have a hundred thoughts going through my head." ADHD is a genetically inherited neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the production of dopamine, which affects the brain's ability to

concentrate and stay focused. People with ADHD have trouble processing details and remembering names but they are known to have active imaginations, problem-solving abilities and high energy. They get bored easily but have an ability to hyper-focus. There are three sub-sets of the condition: inattention, hyperactivity-impulsive or combined. I related to the former.

As I researched online I started to cry. It seemed to spell out my personality. On the one hand I felt relief but on the other hand, there was a realisation that perhaps my life has been negatively shaped by it. Is it an avoidance of monotony that makes me shun long-term relationships?

There were positive traits I recognised, though — intuition, expressiveness and an ability to find solutions. Albert Einstein is said to have had ADHD. Justin Timberlake has it. David Neeleman, the founder of JetBlue Airways, put his invention of the e-ticket down to the fact that he always lost his tickets because of it.

The NHS Information Centre estimates that around 8 per cent of the UK adult population display symptoms severe enough for clinical diagnosis, though the actual number who have the disorder diagnosed is predicted to be much lower. ADHD in adults was officially recognised by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) in October 2008 but campaigners claim that many GPs still don't take it seriously.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT ADHD

- There is no evidence that ADHD occurs in adults without first appearing in childhood
- Diagnosis in adulthood considers childhood symptoms that may have gone unnoticed
- From 3 to 9 per cent of school-aged children display ADHD symptoms. 65 per cent are thought to carry some symptoms into adulthood.
- There is no proven cause of ADHD. Experts agree it is genetic and that it could be triggered by smoking or drinking in pregnancy
- Treatment includes amphetamine-based medication, cognitive behavioural therapy or psychotherapy. Nutritionists suggest zinc, ginkgo and Omega-3 supplements

The group Adult Attention Deficit Disorder UK is campaigning for increased awareness and NHS funding. Its co-founder, Susan Dunn Morua, says: "Doctors say you can't have ADHD because you're too clever, or you're too successful or you have a degree." In Morua's case, adult ADHD was diagnosed in America but when she came to the UK in 2006 she was told that the condition did not exist in adults.

ADHD can be treated by amphetamine-based drugs but many choose alternative treatment such as meditation or life-coaching.

Andrew Lewis, 48, trained as an ADHD coach and set up simplywellbeing.com after trouble in having his disorder diagnosed by the NHS. I attended one of Lewis's group workshops in West London. "Half the battle is recognising your symptoms and accepting you need to do things differently to other people. Traditional approaches don't work with people with ADHD. If you tell us to write a 'to do' list, we'll put 100 items on it, start them all at once and get overwhelmed. My workshops are about identifying what works individually," says Lewis.

"Lateness comes from trying to do too much or our inability to plan. We know that it takes half an hour to drive somewhere but we won't consider the ten minutes to load the car." His workshop covers calming meditation exercises, nutrition advice and activities to develop coping strategies. We split into groups and discuss incidents where we feel ADHD has helped us and where it has caused problems. I am struck by the similarities among us. None of us has used a map to find a location; very few of us wear a watch; we gulp drinks instead of sipping; most of our bags are overflowing and unzipped. Yet beneath the chaos are stories of frustration.

Sarah, 42, is a mother of two young children: "I think it's worse for women because we have to juggle so much. When my kids started school my problems got worse. I had a list in my head — make lunches, pack bags, get uniforms. I feel like I have to do it all. I get confused about which to start first. Then I feel time pressure and don't do any of it. I forgot about a parents' evening recently."

Lucy, 30, a civil servant, is saving to go back to university after dropping out twice. "At school teachers couldn't decide if I was really stupid or really intelligent. The only thing I was ever good at was writing. In other classes I'd switch off. At university I never got my coursework in. I didn't know how to get overflowing information in my head on to paper."

ADHD strikes me not as a disorder but as a creative personality type. I would never want to take medication but I would like to understand it. I use the tips from Andrew's classes and have started weekly meditation to slow my mind. If I can learn to channel the creative chaos in my head into productivity, then missing those two flights could be the most valuable learning experience I have had.