

“The Truth Finally Set Me Free”

Diagnosed in her late 40s, one woman has traded in shame for self-compassion.

BY DONNA JACKEL

WAIT-A-MINUTE.” THAT WAS MY FATHER’S NICKNAME for me. Whenever I was called to the dinner table, to do chores, or to get ready for bed, that was my reply. I wasn’t disobedient. If I was immersed in a book or watching a favorite TV show, it took me a minute—or two—to refocus.

I always felt different from other kids—more impulsive and intense, a bit dreamier. Once a “friend” tied my shoelaces together as we sat in the bleachers. Oblivious, I stood up and fell face forward. That got a big laugh. The middle school I attended didn’t assign lockers, so we had to carry our coats around all day. “Where’s your coat?” a friend would ask. I’d laugh in embarrassment and race to my last classroom, hoping it would still be there. If I liked a subject, I got good grades, but if I found it boring, it was Cs and Ds.

Weaknesses Became Strengths

In adulthood, my idiosyncrasies (that’s how I thought of them) caused deeper disruptions. I forgot to pay my credit card bill on time so many times that the company closed my account. I missed doctors’ appointments, lost expensive items, like prescription sunglasses, and kept friends waiting, misjudging how long it would take me to reach our meeting place. People tired of my apologies, which lost their meaning as the behavior continued.

When I became a journalist at a daily newspaper, weaknesses became strengths. I hyperfocused on my work, drowning out the noisy newsroom. I thrived under the pressure of deadlines and the freedom to leave the office to interview sources. I was energized by being a forever student. The best thing? It was work I excelled at.

With marriage, another person entered my chaotic world. Initially, my husband grumbled good-naturedly when I lost a house key or a car key, or made us late to a movie, concert, or play. Over time, his patience wilted.

Then came parenthood, the time when the number of balls one has to juggle multiplies. Many times those balls came crashing down. Dinner was on the table every night—sometimes 15 minutes or an hour late. By then, the kids were hungry, tired, and grumpy. My daughter and son were the last ones dropped off and picked up at karate class or soccer practice.

Of all my escapades, the most memorable was my losing both car keys during a one-week vacation at Martha’s Vineyard. My family—including two dogs—boarded the ferry home without me. It took me three days to secure another spot on the ferry for the car, which had to be towed aboard.

I Wasn’t a Space Cadet, After All!

Well into my 40s, I considered my symptoms to be character flaws—until my daughter’s third-grade teacher told me she suspected my child had ADHD. I bought a book on the subject. I couldn’t put it down. I didn’t recognize my daughter in the

long list of symptoms, but the book could have been my biography. What relief! I wasn’t an inconsiderate space cadet.

I tried a stimulant, but, to my disappointment, it only made me feel edgier. It took another doctor, years later, patiently trying various medications, to find the right one.

I grieve over the turmoil I have caused my family. “It’s hard to keep one instance separate from the rest, because it happened so frequently,” says my 20-year-old son. “Forgetting to do something. Being a half-hour late for no reason. It’s stressful.”

Happily, my kids have thrived. My daughter, an excellent student, has created an elaborate, color-coded system for studying. My son takes a stimulant to help him focus and, like me, he earns his best grades in the classes he finds engaging.

Still, I wonder how my life would have turned out if I’d been diagnosed and treated in childhood.

But the truth, however late it arrived, has set me free. I still lose things occasionally. Our house looks lived in—I’ll never be confused with Martha Stewart. Thanks to technology, I seldom miss appointments or arrive more than 10 minutes late. I run my own freelance writing business. Recently, I hired an organization expert to help me break down goals into doable action points. I’ve traded in shame for self-compassion. We all have our limits. **A**

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