

**IMPULSE**  
**A Handbook for the Moral and  
Spiritual Challenges of ADHD**

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*IMPULSE:*  
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*For Elizabeth, who has lived with my ADHD for almost as long as I have, and with more grace.*



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## Perspective

It was a warm spring afternoon and the last place I wanted to be was in the resident psychiatrists' seminar, reviewing in minute detail one of the developmental experiments of the French psychologist Jean Piaget. Through the window to my right I saw the constant fidgeting of a lawn full of starlings, and I could not keep from glancing their way. Dr. John Peters, our teacher, noticed and when we were done, he asked me to stay a minute. He lit his pipe and asked gently if I had perhaps been a hyperactive child.

Something went “click.”

In retrospect the best comparison I can think of is, as if I were playing the video game “Tetris” in which the objective is to get the various falling shapes to line up and fall into their proper positions, and suddenly everything oriented itself properly and I knew it was going to come out right. I was a resident in child psychiatry—why had it never occurred to me before that I might have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?

In elementary school, my academic grades were good because I caught on quickly, but homework was sheer torture and my behavior grades tended to be sorry, with notes about “poor self-control,” “talks constantly,” and “difficulty remaining in seat.” In junior high school, it was more of the same, plus a blossoming verbal impulsiveness that got me into more than one fight.

Maybe that was why the first year of medical school, which consisted chiefly of memorizing great quantities of detailed and dry factual material, was so difficult that I began to doubt my intelligence.

I told Dr. Peters I had been extremely active as a child, and began to recount some of the other problems, and he could tell that I identified strongly with what he had

suggested. I devoured all the information I could find on the diagnosis, and each bit tended to confirm my suspicions.

Over twenty-five years later, I am practicing child, adolescent and adult psychiatry. I still have ADHD, of course, but for the most part I have adapted and got help such that the symptoms rarely cause me big problems. I have also raised a son with ADHD, treated thousands of afflicted patients of all ages, and published several research papers on the subject.

The parents who bring these children for diagnosis and treatment have many worries. They are concerned about academics, whether the problem is failing grades or just not performing up to the child's potential. They are distressed by the impulsive behaviors that may be aggressive, destructive, or just disrespectful. Our conventional treatments address those problems, and with considerable success. One area of great concern, though, is typically *not* being addressed: the moral and spiritual. There is paucity of research and of clinical attention to these issues, and that is why I wrote this book.

In the realm of culture, including religion and moral beliefs, we clinicians try to start from where the family and patient are. This has come to me relatively easily, so while I am a Christian, families from many traditions—Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, American Indian spiritual traditions and others—have reported being comfortable discussing these issues, and generally pleased when I have done so. For ten years I have been honored to be the only non-Jewish member of the Professional Advisory Board of the Jewish Association for Attention Deficit Disorders. As a member of the Association of American Indian Physicians, too, I try to appreciate the spiritual traditions of my ancestors.

Because there is virtually no systematic research on these subjects as they pertain to ADHD, this book is based mostly on clinical experience and years of thought. I hope and pray it will help to generate testable hypotheses and

stimulate quality research. In the meantime, perhaps you will find some useful ideas in these pages.

This book is intended to be “ADHD-friendly.” It is a short book. It can be consumed in smaller bits or greater, depending on the reader’s degree of interest and attention span at the moment. I have strived to balance brevity and clarity and not to over-explain or pontificate.

One thing I have deliberately not included is clinical case descriptions. No doubt they would enliven the book, but I am a practicing doctor and do not want my current or former patients to have to wonder if a particular vignette was about them, for example, or to be offended because I didn’t write about them.

Though *Impulse* is addressed primarily to parents and family members of people with ADHD, and to teens and adults with the syndrome, I trust that clergy and spiritual leaders, advocates, educators and health professionals will find practical help and stimulating ideas herein.

The text is peppered with quotations and aphorisms from all manner of sources and cultures, as ADHD is a worldwide phenomenon. I have quoted many religions’ sources, partly to illustrate that all faiths teach more or less the same things about these issues.

Janice Longboat, a Six Nations traditional healer, says her grandmother taught her that if you can heal the spirit first, it is much easier to help the body. That rings true to me, and our restless spirits often need some healing. I pray this book will help that process.



## Chapter 1: A Hyperactive Pilgrim's Progress

*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*

Jesus (Matthew 9:12)

Let us be clear: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, is a real disorder of brain development, not merely a label used by conspirators who wish to “medicalize” ordinary bad behavior and drug unruly children into compliance. There are literally hundreds of studies supporting this reality. Among the most dramatic are those that show how the prefrontal cortex—the portion of the brain wherein lies our capacity to control ourselves—does not “light up” with metabolic function while trying to sustain mental effort in the ADHD brain, the way unaffected brains do.

ADHD is the current terminology from the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV). In DSM-II, in the 1960’s, it was “Hyperkinetic Reaction of Childhood,” reflecting the prevailing belief that virtually every psychiatric condition was a “reaction” to something in the environment.

Toward the end of that decade, my teachers John Peters and Sam Clements published a paper making a case that the problem was in the affected individual’s *brain*, not just in his or her environment, and urging adoption of “Minimal Brain Dysfunction” as a better name for the condition. The name didn’t stick, but the basic idea was convincing. A few years before his death, Sam told me that the number of reprint requests from academic types and professionals in the field for that original paper had far surpassed fifty thousand—a remarkable achievement.

Even now there are debates about diagnostic criteria and where to draw the lines, and therefore about how many of us are afflicted, but a *conservative* estimate is that three to five per cent of children and half that many adults have enough symptoms, and enough problems due to the symptoms, to satisfy the current definition of ADHD. In short, there are a lot of us, and our disorder has the potential to cause problems in every aspect of our lives.

As children, we are typically hyperactive, impulsive and distractible. We get into everything, because we are constantly hungry for stimulation and novelty. We would rather be punished than be bored or ignored. Fast Freddie and Fidgeting Phyllis, either our entire bodies or some parts thereof are in constant motion.

We are reckless and loose-lipped. We will say anything that that comes to mind, to anyone, anywhere. We may jump off the roof and break a leg, run into the street without looking, or smack someone who accidentally bumps us. We hate everything that requires sustained effort, especially if it is repetitious schoolwork, and we might just make up answers to the last half of our arithmetic problems to fill up the page, so we can say we finished the work and go play.

In our teens (or at any age, if we are girls) we are usually less hyperactive, but feel restless and bored and daydream a lot. We have little frustration tolerance, so when we start driving cars, we are not only inexperienced but also impulsive, easily aggravated, and with the boundless confidence of youth we stomp our accelerators—and crash our cars more than the kids who do not have ADHD. In our quest for stimulation, we may be among the first ones tempted to use street drugs or become sexually active. Often we hate school and either drop out or fail to achieve what everyone has always called our “potential.”

As adults, our biggest problems continue to be in those areas of life that require sustained effort and tolerance of frustrations. We have mostly outgrown the hyperactivity

and the physical impulsiveness, but keeping a job, finishing a degree program, sustaining a long-term relationship, or keeping up with our checking accounts may be harder for us. The world, however, expects us to be able to do those things.

Fortunately, treatment helps. Medications can help us sustain attention and mental effort, sit still, and control our impulses more easily. Coaching and behavioral interventions, individualized educational programs, and psychotherapy may help us with specific problems. As in other chronic conditions like diabetes, there is no permanent cure for ADHD, but its symptoms can be managed and its adverse impact on our lives can often be minimized.

Parents recognize there is something wrong. When they bring their child to me for help, one of their frequent concerns—which they may or may not express right away—is whether there is some kind of character flaw, some moral defect involved. Years of experience as a professional, a parent, and a person with ADHD myself, have taught me that the honest answer is usually, “Not yet—but there are potential problems in that area.”

We all start life with certain relative talents and weaknesses, and ADHD brings moral and spiritual challenges to our lives just as it brings educational, social and occupational ones. ADHD is not the result of bad parenting nor is it a “character flaw,” but it has real potential to interfere in character development.

Through all these problems and developmental phases is a *person*, struggling to find a place in this world and to fit into it, looking for the same sources of satisfaction in life as everyone else. This hyperactive pilgrim’s progress is our focus; let us begin with his or her journey toward the deeper satisfactions of a life well lived.

## How Morality and Spirituality Develop

*As the child, according to its natural disposition, commits thousands of faults, the father instructs and slights, but again hugs him to his bosom.*

Adi Granth, Sorath, M.5 (Sikh)

Babies learn quickly. One early lesson is that certain behaviors bring smiles and pleasant sounds from the grown-ups, while others bring scowls and harsh words. As language is acquired, these become explicit, and baby hears “No!” and begins to see patterns in what Mommy and Daddy approve or disapprove. Toddlers will begin to say “no” themselves at some point—the “terrible twos” may wait till three or four—and to test the limits with their parents, experimenting to learn the precise boundaries of disobedience. All our controls at first are outside ourselves.

In early life we are self-centered and parent-centered. Sometimes these are in conflict, as what mama wants is not always what we want, but our attachments allow us to get over those.

As the young child begins to be aware of other children and to play with them, some notions of fairness and peer reciprocity take hold and begin to influence behavior, but selfishness often takes over. If mama is about to win a game of Candyland, Junior might announce a change in the rules that gives him extra turns or “do-overs.”

The child in kindergarten and first grade still wants to please the adults, and begins to experience the joys of actively being helpful, too. As elementary school progresses, the other children’s regard begins to matter and rules are followed for their own sake. Playground games are strictly regimented among fourth and fifth graders, whether or not adults are supervising. Something like a generally accepted social contract is operational: the kids have learned that games work better when we follow rules.

What are the rules, and how did we learn them? Ideally, they were made explicit by those who raised us, they were simple, specific, and consistent, and they were repeated enough for us to learn them well. Ideally, we were praised for doing good things and when we misbehaved, the consequences were reasonable but sufficiently powerful, and predictable. Ideally, we were given to know that the rules have purpose: they keep us safe, protect our belongings, and allow us to trust each other.

As older schoolchildren, we begin to understand that there are important values other than the rules. Generosity, concern for others, and doing good deeds are valued, for example, and those who practice these virtues are rewarded with the good regard of peers as well as adults. Selfish behaviors and excessive self-interest begin to bring social disapproval.

As adolescence dawns, our abilities to think abstractly blossom. As we become capable of thinking about the big difficult issues—the mysteries of life—we practice doing so. This process often involves questioning the philosophical and religious principles our parents have taught us, and trying on other ideas to see how they fit. For parents with strongly held beliefs, this can be extremely troubling.

G.L. Peters was one of my favorite pastors when I was a young teen. He predicted that many of us would try out ideas contrary to those of the church, and quoted Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and *when he is older* he will not depart from it.” The author of Proverbs understood that temporary departures in youth are far from rare. Islam recognizes the same reality with a saying that angels are recording our deeds but “the pen is lifted” during youth.

Finally, it is vital to remember that development does not end when adolescence is completed. It is a lifelong process. This is true across all dimensions, including moral and spiritual.

Later we will examine some of these developmental processes in more detail, and suggest ways to enhance the spiritual and moral development of people with ADHD at various ages.

### **A Key Concept: Goodness of Fit**

*As a mother nursing sick children gives rice and curry to one, sago arrowroot to another, and bread and butter to a third, so the Lord has laid out different paths for different people, according to their natures.*

Ramakrishna

*The extent to which ADHD causes distress and dysfunction is determined not only by the symptoms of the disorder, but also by the demands of the environment.*

As any parent with a hyperactive child knows, there is no guarantee that a professionally trained schoolteacher will have adequate knowledge and skills, let alone the patience and energy required, to do a good job teaching a child with ADHD. In a typical Sunday school, staffed by volunteers with little or no training, the situation is often even worse. Fidgeting, interrupting and impulsive hitting disrupt scripture lessons as much as arithmetic.

Remembering myself as a five-year-old, before air conditioning was common, in a hot Louisiana church with the world's hardest pews, still evokes the old frustrations. I remember eternal sermons, and prayers that I was certain must bore God as much as they did me. I remember trying with infrequent success to remain still enough and quiet enough to avoid Mom's dreaded whisper, "Just wait till I get you home!"

All of us tend to occupy those niches we feel to be a good fit. We try to find jobs that we like and can do well. We tend to avoid tasks, situations and people that are unpleasant or difficult. When the demands of the environment cause too much stress, we don't do well and we don't feel good. For

the individual with ADHD, there may be more such situations and environments than for most others. These may include the environs in which we practice religion. Yet here we are, and we have to meet those demands as best we can.

*Thank you for being Lord of the restless as much as of the reflective, Lord of the annoying as much as of the endearing, Lord of the bored as of the studious. Amen.*

## **Exercises and Activities to Try**

### **For Parents, and Adults with ADHD**

*Remembering for empathy and growth:* Think back when you were twelve or thirteen. Can you remember the first times you questioned your family's religious beliefs? Were at least some of those episodes the result of being frustrated about restrictions on your freedom or your fun that follow from those beliefs? Do you remember the first time you had intellectual doubts about religion or morals, not the result of frustration alone? How have those doubts resolved or changed? Repeat the exercise for your later teens, and again for your early twenties. Now the most important part: in what ways are your current beliefs *similar* to those with which you were raised?

### **For young people with ADHD**

*Heroes and models:* Think of four people (adults) you especially admire or respect: one who is related to you, one that you know personally but is not related to you, one real person that you don't know, and one fictional character. For each one, summarize in a sentence or two what it is you admire about her or him. In what ways are you already like them? In what ways do you aspire to become more like them? Discuss this with people your own age and with adults. Do the adults view this differently?



## Chapter 2: Internalized Values—the First Moral Challenge

*Restless the mind is, so strongly shaken  
In the grip of the senses—truly I think  
The wind is no wilder.*

Bhagavad-Gita VI: 34

Clearly understood, thoroughly internalized and sustainable values are the foundation of moral behavior. Yet Gabrielle Weiss and Lily Hechtmann, studying hyperactive children grown up, found that former hyperactives as young adults were significantly less likely than their control-group counterparts to have *any strongly held moral beliefs*. Overall, they concluded, “the findings suggest that hyperactives, in general, have more immature superegos than the matched control group.”

“Superego” is the concept Sigmund Freud developed to describe the two main facets of self-control. First is the conscience, which alerts us to wrongdoing, induces guilt and thus prevents future misdeeds. The other is the “ego-ideal,” that with which we aspire to identify ourselves—our individual ideals and heroes. Superego originates with our parents, and then is subject to influence from the rest of the family, the overall culture, and later by peer-cultures.

What might explain Weiss and Hechtmann’s findings? Logically, the hyperactive children either never really acquired moral beliefs, or they acquired some but abandoned them. The former possibility has some face validity. ADHD runs in families, and it seems likely that ADHD adults without strongly held beliefs will not be passing along values to the next generation themselves.

Most parents *feel*, however, that they are teaching their children to know right from wrong. People tend to

believe this is accomplished mainly by punishing wrongdoing. In fact, it is more complicated than that. Avoidance of punishment can modify behavior without having much impact on beliefs and values, just as it does in lab rats or pigeons. Furthermore, in most concepts of moral development, this method of self-governance—strictly to avoid consequences—is considered to be at the primitive end of the spectrum.

At the highly developed end of that spectrum is behavior guided by internalized (thoroughly accepted) moral principles. Somewhere in-between is the “rule of law.” Laws and rules are specific and apply to a limited number of situations; moral *principles* can be applied where there is no specific law, rule or penalty.

Temperamental traits also tend to run in families. Impatience, poor frustration tolerance and the tendency to over-react impulsively, all well-known traits associated with ADHD, will often be present in several family members at once. A parent with these traits may be inconsistent and excessive with punishments, and accompany their punishments with great displays of anger or frustration. An impatient adult trying to explain the reasons for a rule or belief to a distracted child is bound to become frustrated—another example of the goodness-of-fit problem.

Fifty years ago, psychiatrist Adelaide Johnson observed another kind of problem in some of these families. She noticed that it is not uncommon for a parent to be smiling inappropriately while describing Junior’s misdeeds, giving a mixed message to the child. Dr. Johnson suggested these parents’ own superegos might have missing parts, which she called “superego lacunae” (Lacunae are holes). One need not lack conscience, however, to find it difficult to suppress a smile while scolding a little charmer.

Given all this, how shall we help our hyperactive children to acquire and hold fast the moral beliefs we wish to pass along?

## Saying the Words

*In caring for others and serving heaven, there is nothing like using restraint.*

Tao Te Ching 59

All of us play back, like audiotapes in the memory, statements our parents said over and over. Sometimes we are horrified, especially the first times we catch ourselves using our parents' exact words to our own kids. But this is as it should be: we learned well those things we heard repeatedly, as will our children. It is wise, therefore, to consider with great care what things we want our offspring to tell themselves because we told them.

Effective "taped" messages are simple, clear and repeated. A certain vigilance is required of parents, to be sure that the things they say over and over are the things they want the children to remember. These should reflect parents' true values, above all. You may notice a tendency of educators and others to try and state values in positive terms. For example, instead of admonishing kids *not* to steal or damage the property of others, we could say *to* respect other peoples' property.

Sooner or later, the child will ask, "Why?" Sometimes she really wants to know; other times, she may be trying to delay the inevitable or to stir up a stimulating argument. Any parent may be tempted to snap, "Because I said so!" If the question has not already been answered repeatedly, it may be better to give a short answer that reflects the parent's beliefs: "Because the scriptures say it is wrong, and we believe the scriptures," or "Because grown-ups agree that life is better when we respect one another's property. *By school age, the child should have heard these admonitions and the reasons for them enough to be able to repeat them himself.*

For the child with ADHD, I suggest making a deliberate choice as to which rules are most important, and

emphasize those first and most often. It is good to remember, too, that much of the misbehavior of the hyperactive child is less a violation of morals than a nuisance and inconvenience to adults. To be honest and to avoid harming others are much more important than keeping still.

## **Questioning Adults' Values**

*Hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.*

Proverbs 1:8

French psychologist Jean Piaget demonstrated that sometime around age twelve or thirteen, a child's ability to think abstractly develops rapidly. Then, because they can, they will.

Those who are more naturally rebellious to begin with will be among the first to question the moral authorities they learned before. Why should we believe the Bible, the Koran, the Analects of Confucius, they demand to know; why must we accept the rule of majority, or the wisdom of the tribe's elders?

This is an important developmental process. It provides the young person another step toward internalizing our values more fully; after the questions are answered, the youth has made the value her own. It gives the parents and teachers an opportunity to explain the basis of our beliefs in a more adult way—but remember the attention span issue, and don't lecture endlessly.

Complex and difficult ideas, whether we are discussing algebra or morals, must be taken in small enough bits that the ADHD mind stays on the job long enough to grasp them. Most of the time, the teen with ADHD who sincerely asks "Why?" wants and needs the bottom line, a succinct statement first. The thing can be broken down and discussed in more detail later. This challenges adults who deal with these adolescents to develop these summary

statements about what we believe, and why. I recommend doing so before they are teens, so the words will be ready when needed.

Parents of teenagers are often convinced their youngsters hate and despise them. On objective surveys, however, most adolescents indicate they admire their parents, grandparents, teachers, clergy and other adults whose authority they seem to be challenging daily. So we are stuck being a role model, too, a thankless but vital job. Superego, remember, includes not only conscience but also ego ideal.

### **Modeling Values**

*Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?*

Jesus (Luke 6:39)

We provide the most *direct* models for our kids and each other by doing right things, doing so visibly, and demonstrating the process through which we determined what was right. *Indirect* models are provided other ways, as through stories and parables.

Storytelling can be especially useful to impart values to kids with ADHD, because it is naturally easier to listen to a good story than to a sermon or lecture. Favorite stories will be requested again, and ultimately remembered. Older children, teens and adults can read stories for themselves. All this makes story selection very important, whether we are speaking of favorite scripture stories, stories passed down through families, or tales from personal experiences.

As children develop their reading and listening skills, stories of increasing length and complexity can be introduced. For young children, Aesop's Fables and some of the more exciting scripture stories provide excellent attention-grabbing moral lessons. Any child can laugh at

“The Fox and the Grapes,” or thrill at Daniel’s faithfulness saving him in the lions’ den.

Biographies and biographical stories can be powerful models for people of all ages. I was recently inspired by the biographies of Wilma Mankiller, showing not only her success and service as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, but also her coping admirably with serious injury and illness; and Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan whose faith and passion for social justice saw her through incredible hardships.

The wise parent will be selective in choosing which of his own life experiences to tell; the younger versions of ourselves are also role models. Tales of mischief and getting in trouble can become too-easily romanticized unless the consequences are presented with as much emphasis as the exploits that led to them.

On the other side of that coin, there may be stories that need telling but are painful. My late father, while running for state senate in Louisiana in the late 1950’s, publicly refused to join the White Citizens’ Council (Needless to say, he lost the election). A few years later my late father-in-law, a white minister, declared in a sermon in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, that anyone of any race was welcome in the church. Both families received death threats and both soon moved to other states. These small acts of moral courage had painful results. Both men later found the memories so difficult they preferred not to discuss those events. These stories, however, need telling: doing the right thing can cause pain, but not doing the right thing is worse. We are proud of our fathers, and will make sure our grandchildren know their stories.

*Lord, let the pressures of life serve only to make your values hard as diamonds in my soul. Amen.*

## **Exercises and Activities to Try**

### **For Parents**

1. Think of three things you did when you were young that you are now proud of, and three things you did when you were young that you are now ashamed or guilty over. Think of the times in your childhood and your teen years when you were most scared, most excited, most hurt. Think of the funniest things that happened to you. Have you told your children about these things? Do they include some that can teach moral lessons or to build character?
2. In a similar vein, what stories your older relatives told had a positive effect on you? Which ones might have some positive impact on your own offspring?

### **For Young People**

1. Without writing it down, think of something you did that you kept your parents from discovering. Looking back now, how bad was it? Can you predict what your parents would say if they found out? Try to imagine their exact words. Was your secretiveness more from guilt or from embarrassment?
2. Which of the following virtues would you put in your “top three” as most important for adult life? Kindness, courage, honesty, intelligence, beauty, wit, faithfulness, charm, energy, communication skill, reliability, sense of humor, self-control, perseverance, humility, generosity, compassion. Now break it down: which would have the most importance to your employer? Your spouse? Your children? Which would a spiritual leader emphasize?