

Linda Roggli:

It's October, 2020, and even in the midst of a crazy year, it's still ADHD awareness month. And we're still here with TADD talks from ADDA, the Attention Deficit Disorder Association, nine minutes short, pithy soundbites on living with adult ADHD. Stay tuned here it comes.

Nicole Johnson:

Hello everyone. My name is Nicole Johnson. I'm a licensed mental health and substance abuse counselor with a private practice located in Onalaska, Wisconsin, which is a small town near La Crosse. I am very honored to have been asked to participate as a TADD talk speaker for 2020's ADHD awareness month. Today, I'd like to share my experience and thoughts about being a therapist diagnosed with ADHD in my mid thirties, focusing on the journey towards acceptance. I'll start by sharing with you what my journey towards acceptance of my ADHD diagnosis has been like, then I'll move into defining acceptance, and finally outline a few ways accepting my ADHD diagnosis has been helpful.

Nicole Johnson:

When our now 21 year old son was in kindergarten and first grades, I was sure he had ADHD, but getting my hunches validated by a medical professional, other than his mom, proved to be quite difficult. As a kindergartener, we were already getting calls from the teacher to go in and talk with her about difficulties he was having in school. The school building was older, it was constructed in the 1970s when schools had half walls and no doors on the classrooms. And the teacher thought it would be helpful to plaster the walls from floor to ceiling, with posters, educational resources, the alphabet, you get the picture, I'm sure. As I was making suggestions to the teacher about what I thought she could do in the classroom to help support our son's efforts to concentrate on his schoolwork, I paused, looked around the room, listened to what was happening just past the half wall in another classroom and said, "well, I don't have ADHD, but if I did, I would tell you that this environment is not at all conducive to learning." Fast forward two years, we'd moved to a new town, which meant we were dealing with a new pediatrician and school district.

Nicole Johnson:

I was working as an outpatient therapist in a big hospital. One day I was chatting with a colleague friend of mine in the mail room, telling her how I finally felt validated because I'd requested our son be reevaluated for ADHD. He had finally been diagnosed and started on a stimulant medication, which left me feeling relieved and hopeful. I'd added that when discussing the results with the pediatrician she asked who else in the family might have ADHD since the inheritability rate is so high. I told my colleague that nobody in our family had been diagnosed with ADHD that I knew of. But if I had to guess, I'd say maybe my sister who usually had a lot of energy and seemed a little scattered when we were growing up. Well, my preceptor just so happened to be in the room, catching up with signing med scripts at the time.

Nicole Johnson:

He was a phenomenal child and adolescent psychiatrist who had the super special job of telling me to hurry up and get my clinical documentation done so he could sign off on it, as well as the awesome opportunity to observe my behavior in our department meetings and interact with me in our weekly specialized treatment team meetings. He stopped what he was doing, looked up and said to me, "are you kidding?" I looked at him with a puzzled look and said, "what do you mean?" He frankly told me, "he doesn't get it from your sister, he gets it from you." I was dumbfounded and sure he was wrong. So just to prove a point, I took an adult ADHD symptom rating scale home and asked my husband to fill it out for me. I wanted to know what he observed since he had known me and lived with me for several years. After wanting confirmation that I wasn't going to get mad at him, he handed it back to me after he finished filling it out.

Nicole Johnson:

I only needed to glance at it to see he endorsed every ADHD symptom in the columns considered to show a high consistency with ADHD. I was shocked. And then I felt a sense of impending doom. I said this is not good as I verbally interpreted the information to him. Immediately, I felt broken, like there was something wrong with me. I felt embarrassed and ashamed and then angry that it hadn't been diagnosed earlier by the physicians and the psychiatrist who saw me in their offices, bawling and miserable because I couldn't keep up with all the demands of working, studying for a licensing exam and being a mom. I started berating myself. I thought, how could I easily see the ADHD symptoms with my son and completely miss it in myself? How could I be so clueless about myself?

Nicole Johnson:

Do I have absolutely no self awareness whatsoever? I'm a mental health therapist for crying out loud. I'm supposed to know these things. Part of my denial laid in the fact that besides math, I got fairly good grades, good enough to be accepted to a university in the big 10, and after graduating admitted into a graduate program. I had two degrees and one professional license at that point. I was perplexed, even as a mental health therapist, I believed at the time that people with ADHD couldn't do those things. So since I'm here talking with you today, I must have learned something along the way to challenge my denial and shame so I could come to accept my ADHD diagnosis and myself. First, I figured out that acceptance is not the same as defeat. It is acknowledging and believing truth. It has required me to be willing to see things the way they really are.

Nicole Johnson:

Through acceptance, I've been able to become more aware of my strengths, talents, and abilities, in addition to being able to take a realistic look at my weaknesses, limitations and areas for growth. It has allowed me to relax, be myself, have more fun and worry less about what others think. And it's helped me grow in so many ways. It helped me view our son's ADHD diagnosis as a blessing in disguise. If it weren't for his diagnosis, I may never have been diagnosed and would have continued to suffer. Related to this, his diagnosis helped me see that as parents, we have expectations starting from the minute the pregnancy is discovered about how we think our kids should be or turn out. We expect them to be perfect, AKA normal, while secretly hoping for more. This only sets us up to be disappointed when things don't turn out the way we expect. Remembering this has helped me cope with many other challenges I've faced since then.

Nicole Johnson:

Additionally, getting diagnosed with ADHD helped me understand that ADHD has nothing to do with intelligence. I've learned that overcompensation in the form of sleep deprivation, lots and lots of coffee, missed social events, limited time with my family and friends and perfectionism, mixed in with intelligence, all hid my ADHD and my shame. And when I didn't have the extra time and energy to do all of this after our first child was born, the bottom fell out and I crashed. But after going through all of the denial, disbelief, shock, anger, and grief and shame of being diagnosed with ADHD, I felt validated. I realized that my personal struggles were due to a brain-based neurological issue, not my character. My ADHD diagnosis gave me a starting point in developing a clear path about how to make things better in my life. I learned about what a comprehensive treatment plan for ADHD looks like.

Nicole Johnson:

It has helped me figure out which accommodations and work environments I need to be most successful. It has helped me provide better mental health and substance abuse therapy services to my clients and gave me a new purpose in my clinical work. I feel excited when I have the opportunity to help teens, their parents and other adults in their understanding of ADHD, so they can live happier, more fulfilling lives. My new interest in understanding ADHD made me a better advocate, as we pursued evaluation for a 504 plan at school for our 15 year old daughter, who also has ADHD. And it helped me assist our son in obtaining accommodations when he went off to college. Acceptance has also helped me make peace with my past and understand the role ADHD has had in it, including all the accidents and speeding tickets

I've accumulated over the years, and wouldn't you know, I'm married to a man whose side gig is as a driver's ed instructor.

Nicole Johnson:

And finally, acceptance led me to ADDA, where I've met a whole group of awesome people who I've been able to laugh with, relate to, gain knowledge from, share information with, and feel connected to. So to wrap things up, I've learned that acceptance is hard. It takes awareness, understanding self-compassion feedback from others, tears, failures, and a desire to keep getting better. It truly is a journey, not an event. And that's today's TADD talk about the journey towards acceptance. I'm Nicole Johnson, licensed mental health and substance abuse counselor. It's been great being with you today. If you want more information about me or my work with ADHD adults, find me online at the good therapy website directory, or you can email me at nicole@lacrossecounselingandwellness.com. Lacrosse is spelled L-A-C-R-O-S-S-E. Take care and thanks for your attention.

Linda Roggli:

Okay, that's today's ADHD wisdom much more to come. And why not join us for the virtual 2020 international ADHD conference coming up in November, details at add.org. And while you're at it, why not join ADDA? It's a great investment in your ADHD life.