

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.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

Hello and welcome to TADD Talks with ADDA. I'm Dr. Roberto Olivardia, Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts. Today I'd like to share my thoughts about using humor to prevent and conquer ADHD shame. I remember the day clearly in 1999, when I had a 30-page paper to write that I of course left for 24 hours before it was due. I couldn't get myself in gear in the morning and then proceeded to spend two hours examining and salivating at a menu from a local eatery that specialized in chicken wings. Hmm. Should I get the garlic parmesan? The honey barbecue? The teriyaki combo? Finally made my decision, ordered them, waited for their delivery, ate them, cleaned up and was so tired from my binge that I rested. Suddenly it was 8:00 PM and not one word written. Needless to say my plan to be done at midnight was a bit off.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

Instead I had started at midnight, stayed up all night and finished. I was so frustrated. How the hell did this happen again? I spent two hours looking at a menu like it was the precious words of a notable author. But I stopped short of attacking myself and instead laughed. I thought, when I tell my friends this, they're going to find it funny, because it is. It is funny in it's absurdity and also in it's normalcy for someone with ADHD. I'm hoping that this anecdote brought at least a chuckle to you the listener. Having ADHD is filled with frustrations and challenges. If we deal with those situations with anger, resentment, self criticism and attacks, will simply leave us feeling worse about ourselves, which will find its way into the next experience, undermining our self confidence right away. Often frustration toward a situation easily merges with anger toward ourselves and identifying ourselves as the problem rather than the ADHD.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

It is important to practice self compassion, especially living an ADHD life. ADHD expert, Dr. Mark Bertin wrote that self-compassion (quote), "builds an acceptance of our own strengths and imperfections. Like we'd see in our best friend. We recognize that we are not unique in having difficulties. We aim for awareness, seeing things as they are without over identifying with them (end quote)." Humor contains a level of self compassion. When we work on having a sense of humor around ADHD, we're not minimizing the situation and we're not denying it. In fact, it's the opposite. Humor engages us to something that may be painful, dark or frustrating, but in a way that makes it more easily digestible. This moves us toward working with ourselves and developing strategies for those things that frustrate us. Think about some great standup comedians who couch painful narratives into witty, sarcastic and clever humor. When we can laugh at something, it means we have disengaged enough that we can look at it as if we were watching a movie, but not totally disconnect so that it is out of sight and out of mind.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

It gives us perspective. And with that perspective comes a power to change. Mindfulness is observing the moment as it is happening. Humor doesn't judge, but rather reports. We often see humor as a denial of pain, but it is through humor that can often pop the painful blisters of the ADHD experience. I can rattle off a list of crazy things I've done in my life. Some I look back on and still wonder, what the [pause] was I thinking? The problem was sometimes I wasn't thinking. I can see how through someone else's eyes. It can be funny and rather than feel inferior, I can join them in the humor. And at the same time, recognize the seriousness of some of those situations. Laughter and humor is healthy for us. When we laugh, it boosts our immune system, lowers stress hormones and boosts serotonin and dopamine levels, which is mood elevating.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

It relaxes our muscles. As a parent, there are going to be those days you want to do anything but laugh. But sometimes we have to, or else where you're going to cry or worse yell. Children with ADHD are doing the best they can. We need to take a deep breath and discharge some energy. Laughter is a release of energy and sometimes painful energy that then allows us to clear our heads and think more rationally. There are social benefits to humor. It can strengthen relationships and resilience, especially when you surround yourself with funny people. I am so grateful for the friends in my life whose sense of humor is a bit twisted and demented like mine. You know who you are. When I remember in 2011 at the CHADD conference in Orlando, Florida, my room key didn't work on the door, room 2021.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

Put the key in, it wasn't opening. So I aggressively was shaking the lock, trying to jam the door open thinking maybe it was stuck. I called the front desk from the room, told them my name and number, of room number, and asked if I could get a replacement key to which the receptionist told me that my room number was 2012, not 2021. At which point I said, well, whoever's in room 2021 is probably calling hotel security because they're probably thinking that an intruder is trying to get into their room. I shared this with other people at that conference, at the ADHD conference, and was met with a lot of laughter and validation. Because let's face it, when you have ADHD, it's almost necessary to laugh at certain scenarios and share them with other people with ADHD and know that we're not in judgment, but there's a sense of community in that humor.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

It brings us together. Humor highlights our flaws and brings into light that to be human is to be flawed. Our job after the laughter is now, in our calmer more present non-judgmental state, figure out a strategy of how to deal with our ADHD. Even if you find it difficult to laugh at some of the things ADHD gives us, because sometimes they really are hard to laugh at, humor can still be a tool to deal with any painful emotions or exhausting days. Watch funny videos, like news bloopers or runway models falling. I know it sounds mean, but again, twisted sense of humor here. Watch standup comedian shows, like Margaret Cho's, "I'm the One That I Want," where she discusses her experiences with racism, eating disorders and addiction. And yet you're laughing the whole way through. Or Patton Oswalt's show where he discusses comedy, but then also discusses the tragic loss of his wife. Or comedian Phil Hanley's stand up clip from the tonight show discussing his struggle with dyslexia.

Dr. Roberto Olivardia:

I credit my sense of humor for getting me through tough situations and dark moments. It is through adding some levity that the burden feels more manageable. Maybe you won't be able to laugh in the moment. That's okay, but try to have a laugh at some point so that the shame or judgment can clear away or be prevented to build up in the first place. And then take advantage of that clarity of space to mindfully work through the wacky journey that is ADHD. And that's today's TADD Talk about the importance of humor in dealing with ADHD. I'm Dr. Roberto Olivardia. It's been great being with you today. If you want more information about me or my work with ADHD adults, please email me at roberto_olivardia@hms.harvard.edu. Stay safe and here's to health and humor. 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.