

Neurodiversity - ADHD

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Meet Sandra

"I was diagnosed with ADHD at 45"



DUAL FREQUENCY

Neurodiversity



ADHD

‘I was diagnosed with ADHD AT 45’

Growing up in Liverpool in the 1970s, Sandra Scott, now 53, always felt different. ‘There’s usually that one kid in the class, whose wiggling, fidgeting, chatting all the time - and that was me!’, she recalls.

‘I remember being as young as five, and constantly in trouble with the teacher’, says Sandra, who would get bored very easily, so struggled to sit still and stay quiet. It earned her a reputation of being the ‘class clown’, as she’d often show up late, forget her PE kit or shout out in lessons. She was constantly told by teachers that she was not fulfilling her potential. As a result, she hated school and lacked confidence in her academic ability.

Yet, as a kid, no one understood what was going on. Her mother used to call her a ‘livewire’, but, having no other children, assumed it was just the way she was. And, everyone else, she says - teachers, parents at school, neighbours - ‘blamed it on the fact that my parents divorced when I was nine and was from a single parent family’.

At the time, there was very little awareness about neurodiversity, Sandra explains. ‘This has only grown since the 1990s, and 2000s - but, back then, you used to hear people say that dyslexia, for example, was just middle class parents making excuses for kids that can’t spell!’

So, she left sixth form to study home economics at college, before going on to work as an air hostess for British Airways, in her 20s - which she absolutely loved, as she was able to learn more languages, be up on her feet all day and chat to new people. After getting married and having her son Ronan, she left the airlines at 31. When he reached infant school, she decided to study Modern European Languages at The University of Liverpool. ‘Looking back, I don’t know how I did it!’, she marvels: ‘I had to fit it all in around my husband’s job so I’d wake up at 5:30am to write essays, then get my son ready for school at 7am, before going to uni in the day. I’d pick him up from after-school care, do dinner and put him to bed, then teach

Spanish at after-school clubs, to fund my tuition.’

Amazingly, she became the first mature student at the university to graduate in three languages - French, Spanish and Italian. And, at 41, she also completed a PGCE, to teach Modern Foreign Languages

Clearly, the same boundless energy that had once got Sandra into so much trouble at school, was now proving to be rather a multi-tasking superpower in her career. And, it was only by chance, in a teaching job, that she finally discovered why.

‘The recruiter said I’d be brilliant at a special school, as she thought I’d be good at engaging the kids’, explains Sandra.

In her class, every student had ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder): a condition which affects people’s behaviour - and, according to the NHS, means that you can seem restless, may have trouble concentrating or may act on impulse.



WHAT IS ADHD?

- **A neurodiverse condition that is identified by hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity**
- **The degree of which varies in each individual on a spectrum, so you can be one of them, or a mix of all three**
- **However the common denominator is a lack of emotional regulation**

When she arrived, many of the other teachers didn't bother using books in class, as the kids were known to throw them. So, the first thing she did was to set up a library; and she won them over by bringing the stories alive in innovative, active ways - such as teaching Romeo and Juliet, using a fencing lesson.

This teaching style was such a hit, that one day, a student piped up, 'Miss, you're just like us!' And the teaching assistant agreed. As, did her Headteacher, whom, when she mentioned the comment, said, 'I'd always thought you'd had it, too'. Sandra was completely blindsided. She had a lot of knowledge of ADHD due to this job, but had never suspected in herself. Yet, it turned out that most of what she knew came from working with boys - and it manifests differently in girls, who are traditionally socialised to be more compliant and aim to please people. Consequently, it's less likely to be picked up in them. This resonated a lot with Sandra, whose own mum set strict boundaries: 'I tried desperately to toe the line, so if I was told to sit in a chair, I would - but it took a massive effort. People look at a kid like that and think, they're fine, but they have no idea what's going on in their head.'

Following this revelation, Sandra undertook testing through the NHS, which included detailed questionnaires and analysis of her school reports. And, in 2013, at the age of 45, she was officially diagnosed with ADHD.

Even then, she was shocked: 'I was like, really? At the time, I had so many misconceptions around it, so I couldn't understand how I'd been able to do uni and work for this long, if I had it.' And, when the doctor delivered the news, he said, 'Sandra, if you'd been put on medication [for ADHD] when you were younger, you'd have a PHD by now!'

In spite of this, she was not angry at the missed diagnosis. 'It allowed me to forgive myself, because it explained so many things. I used to wonder why I am so naturally untidy, for example. And, I thought, ok, that's why my purse is in the fridge!'

It also helped to make sense of her struggle to focus on things she didn't find interesting, the difficulties sitting still and her need to be so busy. 'I can't just sit down and watch the news at 10pm. I'll be baking, sewing or reading, too - I could fill every waking minute if I want to', she says.

Plus, it explained other frustrating forms of forgetfulness: 'I've spent a fortune on parking tickets, because if someone starts talking to me, I just walk away and forget what I'm doing. Every year it's my New Year's Resolution not to get them!'

The diagnosis was a surprise for Sandra's then 66-year-old mum at first, but once she looked into it, it made complete sense. 'I said to mum, you know it's not normal for a six year old to cut off the cat's whiskers?! I loved animals, I just wasn't thinking. As a child, I was very impulsive, not aware of the consequences of my actions.'

'Looking back at my life', she reflects, 'I realised that I'd spent so long conforming to what society wanted me to be - but that, if you try to fit into a box, it fights against your spirit. To be truly successful, you need to be true to who you are.'



Indeed, Sandra knew that she could either be a victim of this diagnosis; or she could use it to take charge of her own destiny - and find out what she could do to make it better.

As a result, she put several practical strategies in place, to mitigate some of the challenges which ADHD can pose. For instance, to stop herself losing her keys, she bought the 'most ridiculously large bunch of key-rings, at least seven inches wide, so it's much harder to lose!' She also checks the calendar on her phone, once an hour, to stop herself forgetting appointments. And, a giant noticeboard above her desk, with a kaleidoscope of post-it notes and to-do lists pinned onto it, helps her to stay organised - as she knows that she has a tendency to get easily distracted, and not follow through with projects. However, over the years, she's realised that her neurodiversity is to thank for many of her best qualities, too. The condition helps to explain the unusually high energy levels, drive and ability to multi-task, that she has been able to harness in her career - and the pursuit of her passion for languages, for example. She now speaks seven languages, including fluent Italian, French and Spanish.

In 2013, she also left her job in teaching to become Director of Special Educational Needs at the ADHD Foundation (adhd.foundation.org.uk). At the same time, she set up her own business, Chataway (chataway.co.uk): a language learning company which launched in 2016 and aims to build people's confidence by getting them to practice speaking, quickly. Three years later, she expanded the business to include Chatafit, a programme that teaches children languages through fun fitness activities.

Now she is a co-director of IP Presents, too, a company that sells innovative products that promote, fun, fitness and learning (ippresents.co.uk). In January 2020, at the Bett trade show (for educational technology), they beat Google, Microsoft and Lego to win the award for 'Best stand for fun and learning' - for their clever interactive teaching device, called The Lü. And, she is also in the process of launching a charity with a friend, called InclusiviTEA, which helps to train people with a disability to find work. This proactive, positive zest for life often comes at the envy of her friends.

'People always say to me, "Oh, you're so busy! How do you do it?"', she laughs. 'I actually find myself having to reassure them, which can be frustrating.'

Today, Sandra is adamant that she is '100 per cent grateful to her ADHD' - and credits it as being one of the main reasons she has been able to do so much. 'I think a lot of people with ADHD are actually very high achievers, when they set their mind to it and are allowed to have different interests'.

However, she is also aware that this is not always the case. According to the charity ADHD Action, an estimated 30 per cent of adult prisoners have ADHD. And, that, if it goes undiagnosed and no action has been taken to help with impulsive behaviour, then the reoffending rates are around a third, too.

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Yet, 'with the right support', says Sandra, 'the outcomes can be so different: a great teacher has the power to transform a child's confidence and make sure no one gets left behind.' 'I would always ask the kids at my school: What is your gift? I'd say, don't you know that everyone has a gift? You've just got to find it!' Here she shares her toolbox of tried and tested tips - for students with ADHD, and their teachers - to find these gifts, build savvy support strategies, and unlock their natural superpowers...



Do you have ADHD?

How to harness them

Celebrate your differences!

- Endless energy!
- Different interests
- Brilliant at multitasking
- Fast-working brain power
- Innovative & resourceful lateral thinkers
- Entrepreneurial flare
- Excited to start new projects
- Good at working to a deadline or under pressure
- High empathy levels
- Drive and ambition

Surround yourself with kind, positive, supportive people - who understand and accept you just the way you are.

Do plenty of cardiovascular exercise - to let off energy, every day!

Have lots of different projects that you enjoy - to maintain your interest, so you don't get bored.

Lists! Lists! Lists! - These are crucial to make sure you finish these projects.

If you forget your timetable at school, print out and laminate 10 copies - then pin one inside a pocket in your school uniform, so you always have one with you.

Check your timetable or phone calendar every hour - if you need extra help remembering important appointments.

All of which mean that, when you set your mind to something you love, you can achieve great things! But it's still important to get as much support as possible, to give yourself the best chance of harnessing them...



TEACHER TIPS

FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH ADHD



▼ Feedback

Give plenty of positive feedback - I always say that teachers are competing with the Nintendo that kids go home and play! They love tangible rewards like this, so mirror this by giving plenty of praise.

▼ Praise first

Praise first, critique later - if you tell a child with ADHD something critical, and praise them at the same time, they only hear the negatives. So give praise first, then have a gap, before going constructive feedback.

▼ Structure

Write the structure of your lesson on the whiteboard - at the start of the class, so that they can follow it throughout, remember what they're doing; and also check in with to check their understanding at each key point.

▼ Swot up

Swot up on personal details - for your students, such as the names of pets, which will help engage their focus and attention!

▼ Be mindful

Be mindful of young kids especially and show them you care! - Children with ADHD can achieve so much but they need your support, and a good teacher can make all the difference.

▼ Speak to your students

Tell your students they have a gift - and that you're going to help them find it. Don't give up on them!

▼ Incorporate movement

Incorporate movement into the classroom - and don't force children with ADHD to sit still. Instead, use software such as The Imitation Game, which does xxx.



▼ Don't sweat the small stuff

If a kid forgets something, like PE kit, or homework. It won't help by shouting. Instead encourage them to find practical strategies, such as pinning laminated timetables inside uniforms, to help them remember them.

▼ Check in

10 Minute check-in at the start of the day - if you can spare a couple of minutes to go through their lessons that day, before class, it can be a massive help, so try to put in the time to support them.

▼ Watch out

Watch out for perceived 'over-reactions' - the lack of emotional regulation in someone with ADHD, can often result in what is seen to be an over-reaction. Do not ignore this cry for help.