

Adult ADHD¹ and Taekwon-Do, a weakness or a strength- a personal viewpoint

¹ ADHAD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - <http://www.adhd.org.nz>

This essay is about how having ADHD as an adult both hinders and helps in the practice of Taekwon-Do and just as importantly how Taekwon-Do has helped in my life.

Definition (abridged)

The official terminology of ADHD is where the first part is commonly referred to as attention deficit, I personally prefer the description of attention inconsistency which I recently found in a book 'Driven to Distraction'² this is accepted as being caused by a short circuit in the brains inhibitors, whereby the person lacks the "Pause Function" between impulse and action which allows the person to stop and think, thus frustration and anger set in quicker.

I will summarise some main points to indicate the parts of ADHD which Diane (my Wife) and I recognise, both in myself, our Son Stuart and others with ADHD: but will first begin with the following analogy, we ;

1. Have a neurological syndrome defined classically as; impulsivity, distractibility and hyperactivity/excess energy.
2. Are generally smart³, but unless trained to do so, the smartness gets tangled up inside which leads to frustration and at times anger.
3. Can hyper focus on an upcoming event/goal, and can be irritable, even rageful, when interrupted or when making transitions between tasks.
4. Have the advantage of high energy, intuitiveness, creativity and enthusiasm (though these can be short lived and not encouraged/directed in the right fashion. i.e. they need lots and lots of positive reinforcement.
5. Can at a young age be termed to be socially inept and it take longer for them to pick up on social triggers and nuances associated with social interaction.
6. Need exercise to calm and focus the mind.
7. Can be classed as having a missing pause button - the instinctive reaction to think before reacting.

Most people focus on the negative aspects of ADHD however this can be turned around by looking for the positives, namely;

- Spunk
- Resilience
- Persistence
- Charm
- Creativity
- Hidden intellectual talent

Having ADHD is like listening to many radio stations at once, but not really taking any of it in, we need simple tools to reduce the Chaos, in the form of Diaries, clearly defined Goals and daily planning.

² Driven to Distraction by Edward M Hallowell, M.D. and John J Ratey, MD

³ I use smart here to reflect intelligence rather than social tomfoolery

History

Those who have known me in the many years before Taekwon-Do cannot begin to understand how I have the patience and the stability required to practice a Martial Art.

By its very nature, having ADHD means I do not naturally have the ability to concentrate on a specific subject for any length of time, though at the same time it does endow me with the ability to change thought patterns very regularly. These traits are very apt for the hustle and bustle of business and a sport like Basketball, but totally against sitting on the beach on a hot summer's day, drinking a glass of wine and watching the sun go down.

I naturally fit into the quick/fast aspects of Taekwon-Do but find the fortitude required to learn a foreign language (I have yet to master English as my primary language) and the intricacies of a *tul*⁴, a major challenge.

So how did I cope and get through life before and following my introduction to Taekwon-Do. In a nut shell by surrounding my self with people who are the direct antithesis of myself, i.e. calm, collected and reasoning.

And I think this gives me an insight into why I love Taekwon-Do so much.

Diagnosis (unofficial)

To cut a long story short, it wasn't until our son Stuart was born and growing up that I even heard about ADHD and it's through watching him that I began to understand myself.

Before this I was just who I was. Putting our son though a less structured school system, than in my day, exasperated a condition which for me (during my school years) was controlled by strict (often brutal) discipline. Stuart's and our journey as parents, led eventually when he was a teenager, to us joining Taekwon-Do (though I would be amiss in mentioning that it was our daughter Laura who introduced the family to Taekwon-Do).

Both of us struggled with the *tu* and the theory but relished the, leadership/discipline, destruction and the sparring. The fitness and fun were an added bonus'. We also relished an environment where each lesson was different but the overall skills taught and message was consistent.

And slowly but steadily, as the length and skills of *tu* developed so slowly and steady we began to realise how it was affecting us.

Taekwon-Do as a Student

Due to the aforementioned overt attempt at control through my school years, I had developed a healthy disrespect of leadership, especially when not earned. So it took me a while to develop a respect for my tutor, I felt it was not ok for it to be right just because he said so.

⁴ *Tul* – Korean for Pattern

This may sound disrespectful, but to me as an adult learning Taekwon-Do, especially from a younger Instructor, the need to earn respect was a vital component.

And vice versa, it took a while for the instructor to fathom me out. As I was in my 40's, he was not used to the constant barrage of why questions. In his mind I could picture his thoughts, *'this is something that should not be questioned, it should just be done'*.

(For Stuart, this was not so much the case as, he I think welcomed this additional level of discipline, coupled with exercise which added another level of calm to his busy mind).

So looking at some of the various aspects of Taekwon-Do, how do I fit into them?

- ✓ Sparring – its quick, its fast and you need to think on your feet,
- ✓ Destruction –you get to break things, legally,
- ✗ tu| – For me learning a tu| takes an inordinate amount of concentration and repetition,
- ✗ Theory (with the added bonus of a mild case of Dyslexia) –Korean, Dyslexia and ADHD, just don't mix. With English I have the advantage of spell check, no such luck with Korean, the only way I can get the message stuck inside my head is a mountain of rote learning, tens of pads of written notes, flash cards and constant quiz's leading up to a grading, and yet within one month after the grading 80% of it is lost.

Developing this further how have I changed/adapted so that I can take advantage of the completeness of Taekwon-Do.

ADHD and sparring – Though it's quick, its fast and you need to think on your feet, I have learnt to analyse how to spar;

1. By understanding how to action a move and then repeating it through line work and tu|, your naturally ability is enhanced.
2. By learning to analyse an opponent before action you increase your ability to respond correctly, thus increasing the natural ability to think and act fast.

ADHD and destruction – it's not quite that simple if you want to do it better

1. From my first training when I got to break a board with a front snap kick, I have loved destruction and I wanted to do it more.
2. Again the key to doing it better is to practice it over and over again. Yet at the same time imagine that each time you do it, it is the one and only chance to get it right.
3. Forcing myself to slow down and analyse makes destruction, easier, faster, safer and more fun.

ADHD & tu| – Learning a tu| forces you to slow down and concentrate. At first it appears boring monotonous and with no specific aim, but you soon learn that to do it right you must continually strive for better results.

Yes it's hard, and to me it is still boring and monotonous, however I now know there is a benefit to the hard work

As an aside, I can imagine those reading thinking this is the same for all learners, and to a degree I agree, but having now progressed from purely a student to a student and teacher, I try and see the differentiation between people and how each part of Taekwon-Do either suits them or is a struggle.

ADHD & Theory –

The key to learning theory is its relevance in the practice of the art of Taekwon-Do and the daily rigours of life, so I have separated it into two aspects

Theory of how to do Taekwon-Do

This is probably the easiest part of theory to learn as it has a direct correlation to practicing the aspects of Taekwon-Do I enjoy the most, The theory of Power is a prime example; though the difficulty remains in trying to recall it verbatim, the basic ideas eventually sink in.

Theory in pattern meanings, translation to Korean, etc

This part of Theory has no particular relevance or use in my daily life, especially as I generally attend practice only 2-3 times per week, and the use of Korean terminology is at best haphazard (this is not intended to be an indictment or otherwise)

There is no simple and easy solution to this, other than spending time every day learning theory. This unfortunately is just not practical, especially when I take into account work and family and community commitments. So for me it's a bumpy ride and a need to accept that to pass I have to swot up for gradings. This was easier during the *gup*⁵ years but harder and harder as *dan*⁶ gradings fall further apart.

As noted above it would be easier if I had the opportunity/desire to practice every day, I can only imagine this happening once I take up the mantle of a permanent instructor. I will then be able to use the opportunity to cement this aspect of theory in place.

Based on the maxim; '*To teach is to learn twice*', I have found that teaching all aspects of Taekwon-Do not only increases my own knowledge, it also reinforces the learning to date and invigorates the quest for additional knowledge.

⁵ gup – Coloured Belt grading syllabus

⁶ dan – Black belt grading syllabus

⁷ Quote by Joseph Joubert French Essayist and Moralist 1754-1824

Myself as an ADHD Taekwon-Do Instructor

As a general rule, my lessons are not planned in detail; rather I tend stick to what I think are the basic principles of a good session incorporating the following elements, in a relatively fast session where pauses and stoppages/breaks are kept to a minimum.

1. Variety
2. Fun
3. Fitness
4. Stretching

This can be achieved through the varied use of:

1. Basic movements
2. *tul*
3. Self Defence
4. Step Sparring
5. Free Sparring
6. Destruction

The major key for me is variety, because this is what keeps me interested, however I need to further develop the skills to recognise that some students will take longer to develop in some areas.

If I am bored as an instructor then I believe my lessons will be boring.

Having said this, I do need to learn and acknowledge different learning styles and that can only be learnt as I take up mantle of Instructing more.

Conclusion and summary

As a student, should I be treated any differently – No as I believe good instructors inherently recognise different learning styles and take action accordingly.

As a Student, should I get preferential treatment? – You may be surprised to learn that I once thought so, especially when I came over to ITFNZ from my previous ITF sanctioned club. And it was only with the patience and fortitude of my new instructor⁸, did I come to realise that though each student is an individual and though we practice an art, there is still a correct way and a minimum standard we should try and attain.

⁸ Mr Brett Kraiger – Spirit Brooklyn

So as a student, is having ADHD a strength or a weakness – One of the key attributes in succeeding in any given area is to know your own weaknesses and develop strategies to either negate them or turn them into strengths.

Prior to taking up Taekwon-Do this was primarily achieved by;

1. Being quick off the mark, in other words react faster in sport, think of an idea in business first and then,
2. Surrounding myself with people who are the direct antithesis of me, i.e. calm, collected and reasoning.

To go back to the title of my essay:

Adult ADHD⁹ and Taekwon-Do, a help or a hindrance – a personal viewpoint

Following the realisation that I am ADHD and having now practiced Taekwon-Do for over ten years, I firmly believe having ADHD can, depending on the person, be either a weakness or a strength.

However, knowing I have ADHD has made it a **strength**,

Dennis Burns

2nd dan

Spirit Taekwon-Do Brooklyn.

⁹ ADHAD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - <http://www.adhd.org.nz>