

# Piecing Together My Broken Life

**After an ADD diagnosis in his 30s, Michael Anderson lost confidence and hope. Here's how coaching helped him turn things around.**

by [Carl Sherman, Ph.D.](#)



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A diagnosis tells you what's wrong, what's broken. But you need to know what's *not* broken.



David Giwerc, an ADHD coach

Michael Anderson is doing well. The 45-year-old ADDer is happily married, and he makes a good living as an ADHD coach and business consultant in suburban Chicago.

But life wasn't always so sweet. The first 30 years of Michael's life were mired in negativity. He couldn't stop ruminating on his shortcomings and lamenting his mistakes. Even after being diagnosed with ADHD, in 1993, he continued to flounder. Despite meds (which helped significantly) and psychotherapy (which didn't), he struggled with drinking and had trouble keeping jobs. Worst of all, he felt misunderstood and unloved by his then-wife — who was the first to suspect that he had ADHD.

Help arrived in 1996, when Mike made contact with David Giwerc, an ADHD coach and past-president of the Attention Deficit Disorder Association. Mike credits David with helping him focus on what was *right* in his life — what he could do well, not what he couldn't — and with giving him the courage to end his marriage and look for a new partner with whom he could forge a satisfying life.

**Mike Anderson:** I used to walk into a room and forget what I went there to do. I'd start eight chores and finish none, and that would lead to arguments with my first wife. She often pointed out what I was doing wrong, or what I wasn't doing at all. But she was also the first one to think that I might have ADHD. She showed me an article about it, and I thought, "My God, this is about me."

I started taking Ritalin on a Saturday, and the effect was striking. I got more done that morning than I usually accomplished in several weeks. I thought, "This is great. Now I'll be normal." But it wasn't that simple. If I seemed inattentive or impulsive, or if I did something my wife didn't like, she would ask, "Did you take your pill?" It made me think the only way to be acceptable to people was to be on medication. That bothered me, so I stopped taking it. I took medication sporadically until 2000, when I finally began taking it full-time.

To work through my anger and frustration, I tried therapy. But by then, I knew more about ADHD than the therapist. I'd go to sessions ready to fight with her, to prove her wrong. It seemed to be doing more harm than good. Without medication or any real support, my life unraveled. I was drinking, spending money, losing jobs. My marriage was falling apart. I was desperate.

**David Giwerc, president of the ADD Coach Academy in Slingerlands, New York:**

It's not uncommon for ADDers to feel desperate or hopeless. Studies show that 87 percent of adults with ADHD feel that way before they're diagnosed. And finding out that you have ADHD isn't enough. A diagnosis tells you what's wrong, what's broken. You need to know what's *not* broken. Your brain isn't defective. It's just "wired" in a different way.

**Mike:** I first heard David speak at a conference in Washington, D.C. He was talking about negative belief systems, and how ADHD is not just about losing your keys or forgetting to balance your checkbook. That struck a chord. I felt that he understood ADHD — maybe because he has ADHD, too.

**David:** After the lecture, Mike came up to me and said, "I want you to be my coach, because you speak my language." In our first few sessions, he spent almost all the time talking about his weaknesses — and the mistakes he had made in his life. He was very negative. When I asked what he was good at, there was silence. I thought, "Here's a brilliant, talented guy, and he's not even aware of it."

Like many people with ADHD, Mike was a perfectionist. When something was difficult, he'd get stuck trying to come up with the perfect plan. To help him shift out of this pattern, I asked Mike to list the things that were working in his life in a "success diary." It gave him a positive place to go when he started ruminating.

**Mike:** Working with David helped me see that I wasn't a screw-up — and that I wasn't the cause of all the problems in my marriage. My then-wife understood ADHD from her head, not her heart. When something went wrong, she played the ADHD card. That made me feel like a kid. She began to seem more like my mother than my wife.

Getting divorced was one of the most painful things I have ever done, because it meant not living with my sons. But I knew I had to leave my situation. I married Rawnee in 2002. She took time to learn about ADHD — and understands that "this is how Mike is wired." I love and respect her for it.

**David:** It's important to have a partner who understands who you are, and what you can do. Rawnee sees the good in Mike. She appreciates his strengths and accepts his weaknesses.

**Rawnee Trudeau, Mike's wife:** Mike told me when we first met that he had ADHD. As a school social worker, I knew a little about the condition. But when

you live with someone who has ADHD, you notice patterns in the way they respond to things, and learn how it affects their thinking. Understanding this has helped me get better at taking a step back when I get frustrated. Instead of getting upset, I ask what's going on, and we talk things over.

This isn't to say that ADHD hasn't caused problems in our life. Mike's been trying to clean up his home office for a while, and he was determined to do it today, because my family is coming to visit. I was on the phone, when I noticed the smell of paint. Mike was so focused on getting the job done that it never occurred to him that he should paint the shelf in the garage, not inside the house.

When Mike does goofy things like this, a sense of humor helps. We call them "McFly moments," after one of the characters in *Back to the Future*.

Some days are easier than others. If Mike is focused on something going on in his mind, and I need him to be focused on the here and now, it is frustrating.

**Mike:** David taught me that I'm a verbal processor. When ideas are flying around in my head, talking things out reduces my impulsivity and distractibility. Rawnee is more literal-minded, so there were a few times when she thought I'd already decided to do something, when I was still working the problem through.

**Rawnee:** When Mike has got a lot of ideas percolating, I know he needs me to help him talk things out. I sometimes tease Mike by saying I'm his "external brain."

**David:** When we started working together, Mike was going for a master's degree. He had all these great ideas, but they were coming so fast and furious that he couldn't get them down on paper. It was frustrating. He learned that, if he can write down even a few key words, the ideas will come back to him later. When Mike was working on something complicated, he'd call me, and within an hour he'd have 10 great concepts sketched out.

**Mike:** Learning how my mind operates has been invaluable. Sometimes I'll talk into a tape recorder, or jot down ideas as they occur to me. Then I'll start mind mapping. I draw a circle in the middle of a piece of paper, and label it with the main problem. Next, I write all the aspects of the problem or possible solutions in smaller circles, and connect them with spokes to create a network of ideas

**Rawnee:** Around the house, I've learned that Mike is better at big chores, like vacuuming and cleaning the bathroom. Organizing makes him crazy. If he tries to put stuff away in the refrigerator, it ends up all over the kitchen.

We complement one another. If he's being impulsive, it's time for me to step in and suggest we review the situation. On the other hand, there are times when I get stuck. I'd been trying to decide what color to paint the bedroom for a year when Mike said, "This is what we're going to do. If we don't like it, we can paint it over."

*By Michael Anderson, Rawnee Trudeau, and David Giwerc, as told to Carl Sherman, Ph.D.*

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