ADHD: To Shout Out or Not to Shout Out; That Is the Question

DIG Coaching is the leading coaching practice for adults and children looking to manage attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms and attention deficit disorder (ADD) symptoms. We focus on managing symptoms of attention deficit disorder, adults with ADD, or adults who have children with ADHD. DIG Coaching, led by attention coach Jeff Copper, helps adults and children (particularly those diagnosed with or impacted by attention deficit disorder or its symptoms) in life or business who are stuck, overwhelmed, or frustrated. DIG Coaching helps adults and children get unstuck and moving forward by helping to open their minds and pay attention to what works.
To disclose that you have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or not to disclose, that is the question. When I coach people around this dilemma, I frequently ask them how disclosing the information will serve them.

I ask because they need to be clear on the choice they are making. In a sense, making the disclosure is like breaking a window. It only takes a second, but putting the pieces back to reform the window is almost impossible. Or as they say, once the cat is out of the bag, you can’t get it back in.

The issue at hand as it relates to disclosure comes down to this. People are judgmental. They talk. Misinformation and myths abound. Negative beliefs many times can and will be used against you. If you can live with judgments, then go for it!

For most people I’ve coached, the reasons to disclose include wanting help, understanding, and above all, relief from pressure. Each reason is valid; however, I think it’s important to understand clearly what you are looking for. Are you choosing to disclose ADHD so you can use it as an excuse or an explanation? If you use it as an explanation, then you are communicating why something happens while retaining the responsibility and wherewithal to work on getting around it. An excuse is more submissive, kind of a “woe is me” attitude. It decreases expectations while putting the burden on others to change. Using ADHD as an excuse is disempowering.

Providing an explanation and retaining the responsibility to get around your own challenges is empowering, but it can be done without disclosing your diagnosis. You can, instead, disclose the symptom: “Can you send me an email on that? I’m so forgetful, there isn’t much chance I’d remember it.” Here, you are taking the pressure off, gaining understanding, getting help, and accepting the responsibility without revealing the diagnosis. If you can achieve the same benefits by disclosing only the symptoms and avoiding the judgments associated with the diagnosis, why not do so?

If you can’t take the judgments—and disclosing the symptoms as an explanation only goes so far—what’s left is using ADHD as an excuse. In other words, you need others to make accommodations for you. Many I’ve coached have found it useful not to disclose ADHD in such situations, but rather prefer to tell others what is needed: “I need your patience because, when I get a thought in my head, I have to blurt it out or I will forget it”; or “I need voice dictation software because I can’t type as fast as thoughts come to my head.”

In these situations, others accommodate you without the disclosure. The trick here is knowing what you need. This is where an ADHD coach or behavioral psychologist can help you identify what works for you consistently and can help you articulate it to others.

Certainly, there are times for some when change or accommodations are needed and disclosure is the only way. There is nothing wrong with this choice. The key is to analyze your options and make a conscious decision.

If you choose to disclose, consider doing it slowly and in stages. Test things out. Disclose less sensitive information and see how it is received and handled. Allow the right people to earn the privilege to your private information over time—the right amount of time. As you disclose, educate others in your own words on
ADHD, and maybe cite some resources to support what you are saying. If someone is less than trustworthy with your private information, don’t take it personally; people can change their minds. The key is not to react negatively; it won’t improve things.

Like everything in this world, absolutes are rare. While you might not disclose your ADHD diagnosis to the world, you might want to share that information in your personal relationships. Relationships thrive on intimacy and trust. If you feel secure with your ADHD and the individual with whom you have a relationship, you will find it easy to disclose. If you struggle, consider this… is it your ADHD, or do you distrust the other person? Being insecure with your ADHD is one thing. Not trusting someone is a different issue!

Disclosing your ADHD is easy to do and almost impossible to undo. There are valid reasons both to disclose and to remain silent. Think through your individual situation and make a conscious decision about your options and what is best for you!

1The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) provides for the development of an individual education plan (IEP) as a means to provide accommodations to those with special needs. As sad as it is, many still refer to it as an individual excuse plan (IEP).