The Tragedy of an ADHD Brain

The invisible grief of knowing what to do—and still not being able to do it.

By: Melissa Wood (HeyMsLaker)

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Introduction: Yep, I'm On It.....1
Chapter One: That's ADHD.....2
Chapter Two: We Know.....4
Chapter Three: Before We Know We're Different.....6
Chapter Four: Where Does Your Dopamine Live?.....7
Chapter Five: The Tiger During Math.....9
Chapter Six: The First Kid Who Taught Me.....11
Chapter Seven: Maybe We Need Goals for the Adults.....13
Chapter Eight: My Mail Is on an Erupting Volcano.....14
Chapter Nine: But Look at Everything You Can Do.....16
Chapter Ten: Give Me the Rusty Anchor.....17
Chapter Twelve: The Real Tragedy.....19
Chapter Thirteen: Understanding Changes Everything.....19
A Note Before I Go.....20
Where Does Your Dopamine Live?.....21

Introduction: Yep, I’m On It

Someone asks me to send her the pictures from the trip we took. “Yep, I’m on it,” I say. I mean it too. There is no lie happening here. I have received the request, understood the request, agreed with the request, and fully intend to complete the request. Somewhere inside my brain, SEND PICTURES has officially been added to the agenda.

I don’t send the pictures.

The next day she asks me again, and again I say okay. Of course I’ll send them. Two hours later, she reminds me while I’m in the middle of another task. I hear her, but I am already doing something, and the request goes somewhere in my brain where I know it exists but cannot immediately access it. It is caught in the junk. This time, I don’t even answer.

Later that evening she asks again. “Hey, do you have those pictures?” I want to send them to my wife. She has ADHD as well. The fact that she is so patient with me because she understands makes the negative feelings even stronger. My phone isn’t nearby, so I apologize and tell her I’ll get them. I stand up and walk into the bedroom to get my phone. By the time I reach the bedroom, I have forgotten why I went there.



Then I see the laundry. I was supposed to do that. I start sorting it, and for a few minutes I am completely absorbed. I separate everything, finish the job, look at my beautifully sorted laundry, and get that wonderful little feeling of accomplishment. Look at me doing something I was supposed to do. I leave the bedroom feeling productive.I do not have my phone. I have not sent the pictures. I have forgotten the thing someone I love has now asked me to do approximately five times.

This is the part where someone without ADHD might reasonably ask, “How do you forget something five times?” I don’t know. I wish I could explain it in a way that makes perfect sense. The strange thing is that I didn’t forget that she mattered to me. I didn’t decide the pictures weren’t important. I didn’t decide laundry mattered more. At every point when she asked, I genuinely intended to do what she needed. Except that time when she asked and I was hyperfocused on a task. My brain said, “this interruption deserves no response.” I replied, “but I told her I would send them 3 times ago.” Brain: “who cares, why doesn’t she take any of the pictures on your trips? You’re always the responsible one who has to ask her to be in pictures, take them, send them. Just finish this super duper, extra special important thing and don’t even respond, just send them after. I promise we’ll do it.” Me: “what was I doing?” Brain: “see what she just did. Interruptions are really hard for you. Go work downstairs.” Me: “whatever, I’m going to cut this part of you out and fry it in a pan of oil.” Brain: deadpan. Me: deepbreath. Pictures: not sent. Work task: it’s left the building.

That is the first thing I want people to understand about ADHD. The visible behavior is only the surface. Underneath it is an entire experience that nobody else can see. Me getting upset because she asks me a question while I’m working. Even more upset when I can’t explain, it’s not the questions, or the interruption, it’s the fact that I can’t get back what I lost, and I’m mad that I’m mad, and it’s all directed at ME.

Chapter One: That’s ADHD

When people describe ADHD, they usually describe what other people can observe. We forget things. We lose things. We interrupt. We procrastinate. We show up late. We start projects and abandon them. We walk into rooms and forget why we are there. We have fourteen tabs open on our computers and possibly the same number inside our brains. No, we have way more open in our brains.

Those things are real, but they are byproducts. They are not the part of ADHD that hurts the most. The part that hurts is what happens inside you when you realize you have done it again.



It is the sickness in your gut. It is the heaviness in your shoulders and the sadness in your eyes. It is the anger that sometimes rises when the other person becomes frustrated, because their frustration validates the shame you were already carrying. Then you feel ashamed that you became angry because you know they have every right to be frustrated too.

Sometimes love hurts just as much. The person you disappointed tells you, “It’s okay. I love you anyway.” They mean it. They genuinely accept you. Somehow that can make the tears come faster because you know this person loves you so much, and you still wish you had just sent the damn pictures. Given them the birthday card you already bought but never sent. And now it’s six months later, they are halfway to another year older and the card means nothing. It meant so much to you. This is one of those times where even you think, what is wrong with me?

I don’t hate myself anymore. I have spent a lot of time working on that. I have worked with my psychiatrist, and I have spent a lot of time by myself reshaping the way I think about who I am and understanding that my struggles with executive functioning are not evidence that I am a bad person.

Actually, let me be vulnerable here. I wrote this book instead of doing what I told myself I was going to do. And then I had a panic attack. When I wrote down my real life examples, when I thought about my kids (school kids) and their shame that starts at five or even younger. I realize something new about ADHD everyday. It’s also about lies. I’ve learned to lie to myself. About not hating myself. How cruel is that?

When I was young I knew school was just a bit harder for me. But I begged for extra credit to make up for every test I failed because I never started it. And then when I finally did I didn't finish. I built scaffolds. I worked hard. I got people to like me and that increased my confidence. I never remember hating myself. I was good at sports. I went to college. I became a teacher. After failing the exam four times, because well, ADHD.

But I did it. I love my job. Teaching means the world to me and I've helped a lot of kids and they've helped me. Now, the scaffolds have collapsed. My brain is redesigning itself at 40. This is even harder to explain to everyone. You have ADHD? What? You were such a good listener, such a good kid, really good at school. Everyone's forgetful, who cares? I do those things too. The comparison makes me want to scream. Moving on…

My teachers were nice to me because I was nice to them. My grades were good because I worked twice as hard and did extra credit. All the time. Homework was my life. Sports were my dopamine. People love a kid who gets good grades and performs well at sports. I had a need to be accepted. And I was. That kept me surviving. Got me through all my impulses. I could explain them away and avoid some of the trouble at least.

But now? At 40? The guilt and shame flooded me. For two years I had no idea what was going on. I was swimming without a life vest. I finally found a psychiatrist who helped with that explanation and even a lot of days when I say to myself they have, my guilt and shame have not completely left. Sometimes they sit on either shoulder. One reminds me that I did it again, and the other reminds me that somebody I love was affected by it.

That is ADHD too.

Chapter Two: We Know

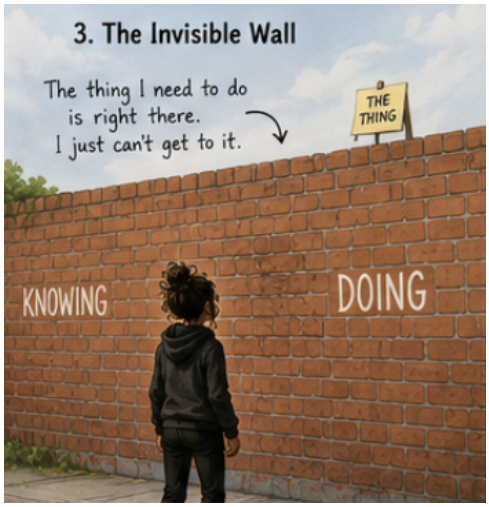
I think one of the greatest misunderstandings about ADHD is the belief that we don't know what we should be doing. We know. Believe me, we know.

I know I need to open the mail. I know I need to make the phone call. I know I should answer the text. I know I need to pack the suitcase. I know the table needs to be cleared. I know the laundry should be moved. I know I scheduled a particular task for this morning because I specifically decided that today would finally be the day I did it.

Sometimes I know so thoroughly that I spend an enormous amount of time thinking about the fact that I am not doing it. That is one of the cruelest parts. I can be completely aware of the task while remaining unable to initiate the task.

The real disconnect is between knowing and doing. Read that twice!

I imagine that disconnect as a brick wall. The thing I need to do is on the other side of the wall. I can see it. The brick wall is transparent, if you will. I understand exactly why I need to get there. Someone beside me can point at it and tell me, “You need to go over there,” and I want to scream because, I KNOW.



The problem is that there is a fifty-foot brick wall between me and the thing. That wall is the gap.

This is where people start giving us tools. Planners, calendars, reminders, alarms, sticky notes, timers, visual schedules, body doubling, apps, checklists, accountability partners, affirmations and organizational systems. I believe in these tools. I teach them. I create them. I built an entire app because I believe support matters. I made tools everyday for my kids and for my teachers. Different tools because every kid is different. I loved this part of my job. I love designing things. But nothing made me more angry when I saw those tools sitting in the back of the classroom unused because neurotypical people don’t think they are

important, or don't understand how to use them or how they help. Oh, and not to mention you must teach and train the child how to use the tool.

The contradictory part: If you taught the child how to use it, would they? If you had all the tools, would you? A tool can help you get over the wall, but a tool cannot make your brain automatically go from having the tool to using the tool. Because remember that sentence I made you read twice? There is a disconnect between knowing and doing. I know that tool will help me. It's sitting right next to me. But I'm not using it. There is still a gap. That brick wall.



A rope would help get us over the brick wall, but the rope might as well be cut in half, not long enough for us if we aren't going to use it. An anchor might help to attach to the rope, throw over the wall, and climb to the other side. The planner helps. The reminder helps. None of them magically removes the wall. And none of them work if we're busy counting the bricks on the wall or finding patterns, or hyperfocused on how we can actually solve this problem of getting over the wall with broken supplies. We spend all our energy during the day using those skills to accomplish the same things neurotypical people wouldn't have to waste time on. But we do it.

Chapter Three: Before We Know We're Different

I see the same gap in children, except they do not have forty years of experience trying to explain it. They do not have the vocabulary for executive functioning, nervous-system regulation, attention, motivation or dopamine. They are five.

A child gets up from her desk and walks across the classroom. Her teacher says, "Go sit down." She sits down. A few minutes later, she is standing

next to the pencil sharpener. Someone asks, “What are you doing?” and she looks genuinely confused.

Maybe she doesn’t know. Maybe her body wanted to move. Maybe the pencil sharpener made a sound. Maybe something bright across the room caught her attention. Maybe her brain became interested before she had the executive functioning required to stop, evaluate that interest, remember the classroom expectation and choose to remain seated.

She is not conducting that analysis. She’s still five. Instead, she learns another vocabulary. No. Stop. Sit down. Pay attention. What are you doing? Why did you do that? You know better.

I have heard negative language directed at children with ADHD so frequently that even I, as a special education teacher, have occasionally wondered whether ADHD alone could really cause this level of disruption. Then I look at the child and remember that this is a kid. They are not plotting ways to ruin anyone’s day.

I take them for breaks. I give them tools and accommodations. I let them move. I give hugs. When children tell me they think they are bad, I tell them they are not. Then I go home sometimes and lie awake thinking about how young they are to already be forming these beliefs about themselves.

That is one of the parts of ADHD that breaks my heart the most. Adults often carry ADHD shame. Children are still being taught it.

Chapter Four: Where Does Your Dopamine Live?

Dopamine, dopamine, dopamine. Are you sick of hearing about dopamine? I am.

I also love the word. I latch onto it because science gives me an explanation for why my brain behaves differently. ADHD is far more complicated than one neurotransmitter, but differences involving reward,

motivation and dopamine signaling are part of the picture, and having that explanation can be comforting.

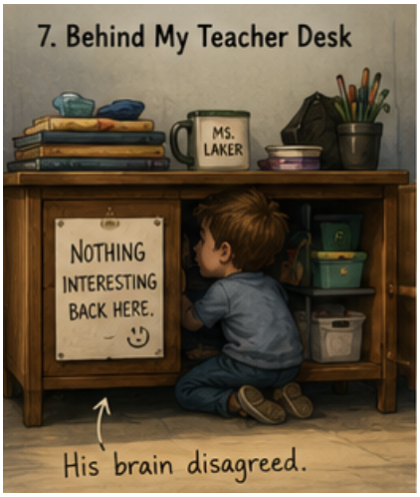
I hate the word sometimes too because I can practically see people without ADHD rolling their eyes when they hear it again. I understand why. Dopamine has become an internet buzzword, and sometimes we talk about it as though it is a tiny creature sitting inside our skull deciding whether today will be productive. Maybe mine is.

Right now, my dopamine lives on Threads. Confession: I have been banned from threads, or at least my comments have, three separate times because threads thinks I am annoying people. How rude. Even threads doesn't understand ADHD. Threads people are my people. They understand I am addicted. We literally talk just about that sometimes. And if I never talk to them again I'm okay with that. When threads takes my dopamine I see red. These robots don't support ADHD either. Unbelievable. Sometimes I really feel like we only have each other.



My wife's dopamine apparently lives in coffee. She didn't even start drinking coffee until she was forty-six, and now she drinks about five cups a day. Evidently her dopamine moved in a cup with hazelnut, cream and sugar and signed a lease. She doesn't care at all. She thinks it's perfectly normal. Meanwhile, I'm over here, a one cup a day coffee drinker since I was 11? Saying, you can't have that much coffee, what's wrong with you, it's too much. Um, neurotypical much? Let her have her dopamine for crying out loud.

The difference between her and I is that she doesn't care. Her ADHD isn't destroying her. She's just like, ya, it sucks, that's me. And she doesn't care when people are like, DO IT. CALL your student loans. Quit drinking five cups of coffee. She wants what she wants and does what she does. I think maybe that is the quality I should strive for.



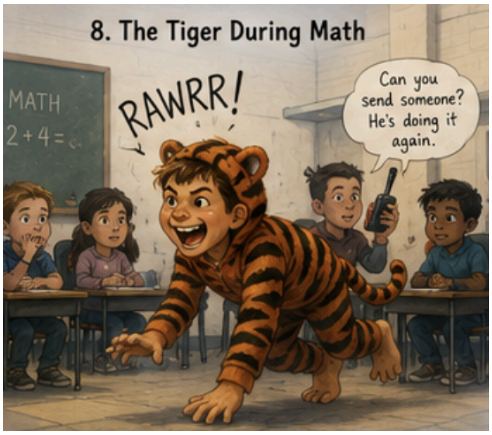
Back to dopamine: I have watched children find theirs in much stranger places. One child's dopamine appeared to live behind my teacher's desk. I explained approximately five thousand times that the area behind my desk contained my personal things and was not particularly interesting. I even gave tours. Look, nothing exciting. See? Yet there he was again.

Eventually I would say, “Grab your dopamine and let’s go.” Some children stared at me blankly. Others eventually learned that Ms. Laker was weird, laughed and came with me.

Then there was the tiger.

Chapter Five: The Tiger During Math

One of my students used to run around the classroom like a tiger. When I say tiger, I want you to picture the full commitment. Arms and legs bent, body low, galloping around the room while making tiger sounds.



Physically, I would probably have described the movement as more horse than tiger. However, he made tiger noises and personally identified the performance as a tiger, so I respected the artist’s interpretation. It was impressive. It was also math. Or reading. Sometimes circle time.

The confused stares of the other children did not appear to bother him. The radio call from the teacher to the principal asking for him to be removed from the classroom did not appear to be his intended outcome either. His goal was not removal. He was searching for something.

Maybe movement. Maybe stimulation. Maybe regulation. Maybe escape from a task his brain could not engage with. But my best guess; dopamine. He was searching for dopamine. Human behavior rarely has one clean explanation, especially when the human in question is a little kid.

What I knew was that sending him home for pretending to be a tiger seemed absurd. Instead, we called his mom because I was told to call his mom. I remember feeling like a tattletale. What exactly was I supposed to report? Your child turned into a tiger again? Now the child felt bad. The teacher felt bad. His mom felt bad. His mom was left wondering why her child would not listen and why the school needed to call every time he transformed into a jungle animal. Nobody won.

The easiest solution was often to bring him to my classroom. In my room, I could provide more support, smaller-group instruction, movement and flexibility. The problem was that he was on grade level. He belonged in his general education classroom to at least hear the instruction. He knew everything. I wasn't teaching first grade. I was teaching letter sounds to some. Blending to others. He was reading paragraphs. It was complicated. But I removed him a lot to teach executive functioning instead and really to be his safe place. To make him feel comfortable. We need reminders of our CANS, not our CANNOTS. Especially little kids.

We talk constantly in special education about the least restrictive environment. I believe deeply in inclusion, but physical placement is not the same thing as belonging. A child can technically be included in a general education classroom while spending the entire day being restricted by correction, shame, guilt, sadness and constant observation of other children who appear capable of doing everything they cannot. A child notices who gets corrected. A child notices who does not. Eventually a child can decide that everyone else is good and they are bad.

Being corrected every minute, or even every five minutes, changes a person. Children with ADHD are still developing executive functioning skills, and many of those skills develop later than they do in neurotypical peers. Yet we often place them in environments built around abilities they are still

developing and then repeatedly point out when they fail to demonstrate them. Kids need support before they need shame.

Chapter Six: The First Kid Who Taught Me

I have dreamed about a completely different kind of school for children with ADHD since my first year of teaching. Sometimes when parents ask me what we should do for children with significant ADHD, my brain gives me a very different answer from the one I am expected to write on an IEP.

My first student with ADHD had originally been diagnosed with ODD. Anger consumed him. His days were hard.

I built a relationship with him. He chose to follow me, although listening was often negotiable and happened primarily on his own schedule. Work completion was almost nonexistent.

His dopamine was not in the worksheet.

The strange part was that he knew how to do so much of the work. Knowledge wasn't always the problem. Again, there was the wall. He had not gathered enough skills yet to climb it.

Imagine being a child and repeatedly experiencing that. You know something. Adults know you know it. Then everyone tells you to do it, and you cannot consistently turn that knowledge into action.

The brick wall made him angry.

Other kids made him angry because they seemed able to do what he could not. His teacher made him angry even though she was polite and tried incredibly hard to support him. Sometimes compassion itself can trigger shame when you already believe you are the problem. I focused on our relationship.

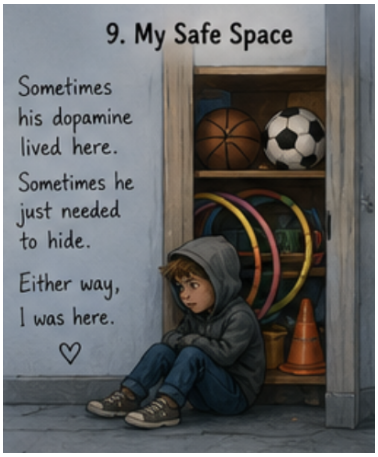
Not the anger. Not the noncompliance. Not the work he wasn't completing. We had already established that repeatedly demanding those things was

not working, and doing the same unsuccessful thing over and over seemed fairly pointless to me.

Looking back, something remarkable happened. After an elopement, a classroom destruction or another overwhelming event, he ended up with me. He found me. Sometimes he would simply walk beside me without speaking. At first I would immediately start asking questions because adults love questions.

“Hey buddy, what’s up?” Then he would disappear. Eventually I learned. He wasn't ready to talk.

This is why I talk so much now about not demanding conversation from children during meltdowns or periods of severe dysregulation. Sometimes they are not ready to explain. They are looking for safety. I became his safe space.



When I finally understood that, I stopped forcing language. I would make sure another teacher could be with my students, quietly follow him and ensure he was safe. Sometimes he ended up near the doorway where we stored balls, hula hoops and random outside toys.

Maybe his dopamine lived there. Maybe it was simply a place where he could hide and be alone. Today, as my ADHD is intensifying, I understand that too. When my feelings become enormous, sometimes all I want is to hide and be alone until my nervous system settles. Eventually, when his did, he came to me. He talked when he was ready. Or he ignored the situation completely and asked what he should do for work? Most people might not see this as a win. But it’s huge. He made it over the brick wall. And he did it without any tools. He basically grew wings and learned how to fly. That’s not ODD. You will never convince me otherwise.

Chapter Seven: Maybe We Need Goals for the Adults

One of the hardest parts of special education is figuring out how to translate human beings into legal documents. We write goals because we need measurable progress. The student will reduce elopement. The student will remain in the classroom. The student will identify emotions. The student will appropriately request a break. The student will complete assigned tasks.

Sometimes I wonder whether we are writing all the goals for the wrong person. What if we wrote one for ourselves? The adult will develop a trusting relationship with the child. The adult will learn what this child's nervous system looks like before a crisis. The adult will provide connection before correction. The adult will recognize when language is unavailable. The adult will become someone this child chooses as a safe space.

I know. Good luck turning that into tidy progress-monitoring data. But after a decade in special education and someone who obsessively loves data, is hyperfocused and also understands patterns, I'm telling you, I could. I have ways to track this. I have tools to ensure this is happening. Tools I give that aren't used but would have to be used if we want to see if relationships are building. Teachers would be held accountable to use them and track if they used them and then the data shows itself. I would provide parents with these tools and they could use them at home and progress monitor themselves, or we could check in together. Setting goals for yourself as an adult in addition to setting goals for the child could change a lot. Our behavior has to change too.

One of the greatest tools I ever built for a teacher was something called a silly word check in. This was a kindergarten student. He came late almost everyday. Left in the afternoon because he was very destructive. His teacher did not have many opportunities to interact with him. I saw a missing relationship. So I put a bunch of silly words on a piece of paper and laminated it and put it on his desk. Each morning when he came in late or

anytime, he circled a word. He was allowed to interrupt the class no matter what they were doing and hand this to his teacher. She read him the silly word. “You chose crockaloodle.” They laughed and gave a high five. This simple act is the start of a relationship.

Relationships change behavior. When a child knows you are comfortable with who they are, they begin trusting you. When they trust you, they can borrow some of your regulation. They can stay with you in that loud grocery store they hate just a little longer. They can remain in your classroom longer. They can learn, even when learning does not always connect neatly to the worksheet sitting in front of them. They shouldn’t have to be forced to show they’re knowledge only one way and we need to be okay with that.

That is inclusion to me. Understanding. Sometimes I fantasize that the real answer is to build an entirely different school for kids with ADHD and only allow people with ADHD to teach there. I realize this is not a particularly practical education policy.

But imagine the school. Movement would not automatically mean misbehavior. Regulation would be built into the day. Curiosity would be useful instead of inconvenient. Creativity would be developed instead of treated as something children may access after finishing their worksheet. Executive functioning would actually be taught.

The environment would be designed to support their needs while growing their abilities and harnessing their strengths. I have been dreaming about that school since my first year of teaching. Maybe that is another book.

Chapter Eight: My Mail Is on an Erupting Volcano

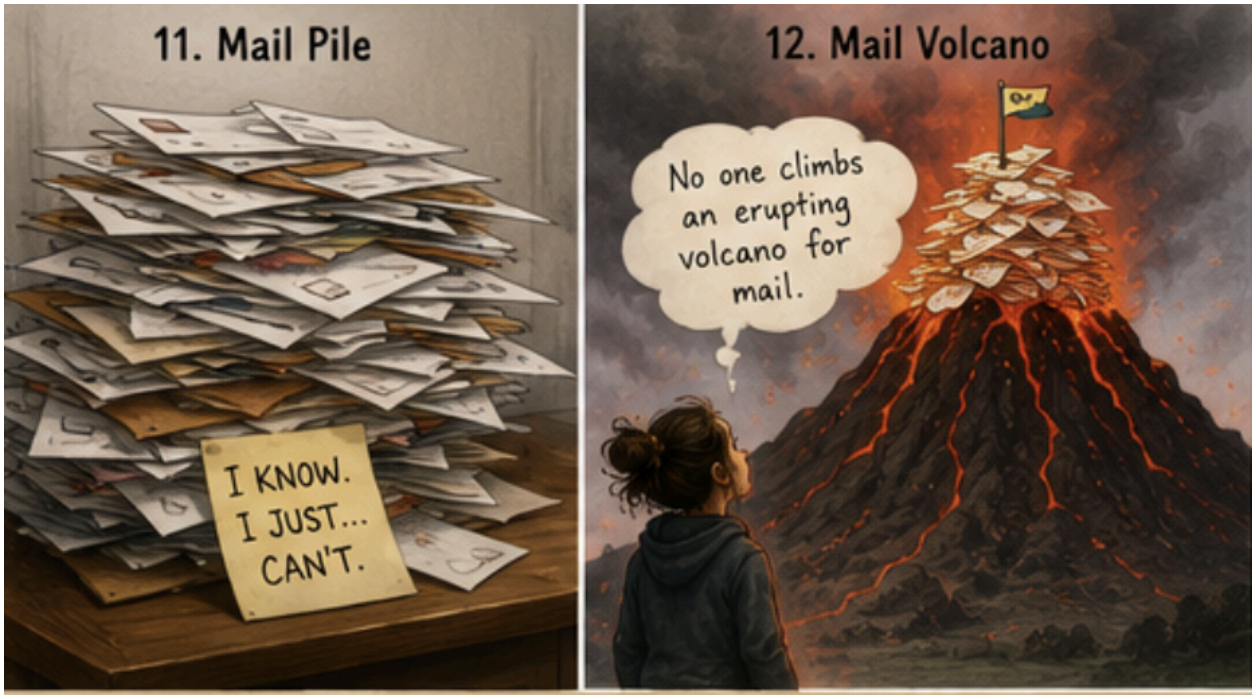
Brick walls come in different heights. My tallest brick wall is mail.

I hate mail. Sometimes when my wife asks me to clear the table because my pile of mail has once again become part of the furniture, I have finally learned to tell her, “You know I’m not going to do that.”

If you asked me whether I would rather choreograph an Irish jig with preschool students who speak Japanese or open my stack of mail, I would choose the preschoolers immediately. Somewhere in that tiny non-English-speaking crowd is my dopamine. The mail has none.

Sometimes when I am alone with my thoughts, I create a scenario in which my mail is sitting at the top of an erupting volcano. Lava is flowing down the mountain. Smoke fills the sky. I am standing safely at the bottom looking up at my envelopes.

Obviously I cannot get them. No reasonable person would climb an erupting volcano for mail. For a moment, the task finally looks as difficult as it feels. Then I remember there is no volcano. The mail is sitting on my table. Seriously? I can't open mail? Some days ADHD is preposterous even to me.



Chapter Nine: But Look at Everything You Can Do

This is usually where I start arguing with myself. Other people have harder lives. I am successful. I have helped people. I have built things. I have a family who loves me. I have opportunities many people do not have.

Get a grip. Then I have successfully turned executive dysfunction into a moral competition I cannot possibly win. Perspective matters. Gratitude matters. Privilege matters. Someone else's suffering still does not open my mail.

I can be grateful for my life and frustrated with my brain at the same time. I can recognize my strengths and acknowledge my disability. I can know other people carry enormous burdens without using their pain as evidence that mine is imaginary.

Both things can be true. I actually like my brain. I love how it connects things. I love what it creates. I love becoming fascinated by an idea and following it somewhere I did not expect to go. I also want to use my brain as a punching bag sometimes. Somedays I argue whether I'd have more seizures than this level of ADHD. Right now I average one every two months. How many would I trade ADHD for? One a week? ADHD brain says, no, that's stupid, seizures are so dangerous. Seizure brain: I want to drive, are you going to get a VNS already, you were supposed to make that phone call a month ago. ADHD brain: well I guess your seizures aren't going away as long as you have me. Lucrative random thought: Can I hire someone to make my phone calls and check my mail? Is that pathetic in some way? Too privileged? Melissa: "I just looked at the clock and I've been writing this book for four and a half hours. Even though I came back from my panic attack two hours ago and said I was finished, I took Lexapro to calm my nerves so I guess I got back to it without thinking about the actual task I'm supposed to be doing. This. Is. ADHD. I'm having conversations about the impossibilities in the middle of editing this book.

Which is not even my job right now. If you know you know. If you don’t, please understand us!

Chapter Ten: Give Me the Rusty Anchor

Let's go back to the wall.

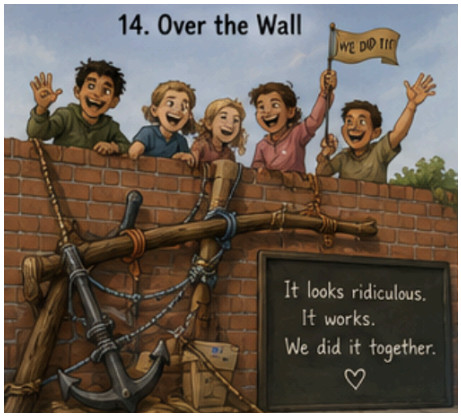
You need to get over it. Someone has helpfully provided six feet of rope and a rusty anchor with pieces missing.

Thanks. Seriously. Tools matter. But the wall is fifty feet tall. This is where our brains sometimes become incredible. Someone else looks at the anchor and sees broken equipment. We turn it around. Maybe one piece still works.

We notice a crack between two bricks and wedge the usable piece into it. The rope is too short, but somebody has a sweatshirt. We tie the sweatshirt to the rope. Still too short.

Then someone notices that the bricks on the left side stick out farther than the others. Pattern. We move everything. Someone finds a fallen branch and braces it diagonally against the wall. Now we have a foothold. The sweatshirt gets tied differently. The anchor slips. We curse. We rebuild. It looks ridiculous.

No climbing instructor would approve. Eventually, though, we are sitting on top of the wall. The neurotypical person beside us has been watching the entire operation and finally asks, “How the hell (heck, if you’re really reading this to your children) did you think of that?”



I don't know. We needed to get over the wall. I will not tell you ADHD is simply a superpower. ADHD can be disabling. It can hurt relationships. It can make ordinary tasks extraordinarily difficult. But our brains can also

see connections. We notice patterns. We imagine, problem-solve, innovate, hyperfocus and create.

Sometimes surviving daily life consumes so much energy that we do not get to use those abilities where they could matter most. That may be another tragedy.

Chapter Eleven: Patternize

Patternize is not a word. I checked.

Actually, I didn't check. I was supposed to be doing something else when I started writing this book, so researching whether I accidentally invented a legitimate English word feels like an irresponsible escalation.

For our purposes, I invented it. Patternize means collecting a seemingly random pile of information, noticing connections other people missed, and suddenly figuring out what to do with it. My brain patternizes constantly.

I see it in people with ADHD all the time. We collect bits of conversations, observations, emotions, random facts, strange ideas, things people said three weeks ago and something we noticed Wednesday morning (even though we can’t remember why we walked in our room for that thing five seconds ago).

Then suddenly they connect. That is a part of my brain I genuinely love. The same brain that cannot send five pictures can generate seventy six fascinating ideas by 7:30 AM. Others can solve a problem nobody else thought to approach from that direction.

The same child who cannot sit through circle time might construct an entire imaginary universe before lunch. The same kid galloping around as a tiger might someday see a solution everyone else missed. We should probably stop spending so much time convincing those brains that their primary contribution to the world is sitting still.

Chapter Twelve: The Real Tragedy

The tragedy of an ADHD brain is not that it forgets. The tragedy is what forgetting can teach a person to believe about themselves. A five-year-old begins believing he is bad. A teenager decides she is lazy. A spouse wonders why loving someone does not make remembering easier. An adult stares at unopened mail thinking, What is wrong with me? The visible symptoms become character judgments.

That is the tragedy. Children are particularly vulnerable because they do not yet understand why their brains behave differently. Their executive functioning skills are still developing. They cannot explain the knowing-doing gap because they do not know it exists.

They simply know everyone keeps correcting them. That can shape a person for a lifetime. I want us to interrupt that process.

Chapter Thirteen: Understanding Changes Everything

Understanding does not mean giving up. Understanding does not mean saying, “I have ADHD, so I guess I can't do anything.” Understanding means knowing what wall I am climbing so I can stop screaming at myself because I cannot walk through brick.

There is no shame in needing the rope. There is no shame in needing the anchor. There is no shame in using a planner, medication, a timer, body doubling, accommodations, movement, visual supports or another person.

There is no shame if your tools look different from everyone else's. There is no shame if sometimes they stop working. There is no shame if sometimes you still cannot climb the damn (darn) wall. Tools help us climb. There is no shame in having a morning like I did and breaking down because the feelings are too much. We hold a lot. Sometimes it needs to be let out. A

meltdown might happen and we just need someone to say, “it’s okay.” And maybe we cry some more.

Understanding helps us stop hating ourselves while we are standing at the bottom. Understanding gives us compassion, time, acceptance and the ability to see our strengths alongside our struggles. It gives us language for the people around us who cannot see the gap. They see the mail. We see the volcano. They see the unfinished task. We see the wall. They see the tiger. Maybe now they can see the child.

A Note Before I Go

If you get anything from this book, I hope it’s this: ADHD is a neurological disability. Just like my seizures, epilepsy. Both invisible. Yet, people have compassion every time I have a seizure. With ADHD, I don’t feel that compassion lives in the outside world. I want to change that. I want to teach understanding. I want to explain. I have trouble explaining. Each and every day I still say, “I don’t know how to say it,” or, “you just don’t understand.” I need your help. If you feel the same way about ADHD, and I know many of you do because I talk to you all the time, share what it really is. Have understanding for yourself, your beautiful brain, and make other people understand too.

And don’t be afraid of tools. But know that tools matter most when combined with understanding. Understanding gives compassion. Understanding gives time. Understanding allows people to recognize what our brain does extraordinarily well while accepting what it struggles to do.

I don’t have everything figured out. I don’t know why I feel the way I feel sometimes. Another tragedy. But I want to keep writing and making reels and posts, and trying my best to have conversations and help explain. ADHD is so much more than these little things the world thinks it is. I’m going to shout it.

Most importantly, understanding gives me a way to explain the wall to people who cannot see it. I think that might be the real tool; understanding. Find that tool every day.

Share this book with your friends. Share it with your family. Share it with teachers. Share it with the person who loves you but still cannot understand why you have not opened the mail.

We cannot make everyone experience an ADHD brain. But maybe we can help them see the wall. Maybe understanding is where judgment begins to disappear.

And maybe, if enough of us understand what is actually happening beneath the behavior, the next generation of kids will not have to spend forty years learning how to forgive themselves for having the brain they were born with.

Where Does Your Dopamine Live?

Before you close this book, I want to know something.

Where does your dopamine live?

I already told you about threads, coffee, behind a teachers desk, and somewhere inside the body of a galloping tiger. I genuinely want to know where yours lives. What do you do instead of doing “the thing?”

If you have a child with ADHD, where does theirs live? What activity makes their eyes light up? Where do they keep going even though you cannot understand why? What will they happily spend three hours doing while a pair of shoes somehow remains in the middle of the hallway for four days?

Come find me at **@heymslaker** and tell me. Instagram, facebook, TikTok, YouTube, X.

Tell me what this book meant to you too. Tell me which part made you laugh, which part hurt and which part finally gave you words for something you have been trying to explain.

I want to hear your stories because I want to keep changing the way we talk about these brains.

I also have a lot of tools if you want them. I have created tools instead of checking my mail, making a phone call, weeding my garden, packing my suitcase for a trip and editing my next YouTube video or reel.

Creating is what I like to do. I love to write and build.

I make free resources. I will eventually make paid resources too, because starting and running a business costs tens of thousands of very real dollars, unfortunately none of which can be paid in dopamine. But my passion is helping people. My passion is changing minds.

Let's do that together, shall we? Come find me at **@heymslaker**.

We'll patternize together.

