

# How I trained my unruly brain

**ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER: Jeff Hamilton's mind failed him. Badly. But the solution he found has inspired him to tell the world how he did it**

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As Jeff Hamilton plays happily with his two young kids in his Kitsilano yard, it's tough to tell that he's won a hard-fought victory over an invisible foe.

The divorced single dad is one of an army of B.C. adults battling attention deficit disorder, a syndrome that most people associate with children.

While between four and 12 per cent of children suffer from ADD, almost five per cent of adults continue to suffer from its symptoms.

These include hyperactivity, impulsive behaviour and difficulty concentrating.

"My challenges were trying to put everything on the one page," explained the 39-year-old computer software salesman. "I had a million thoughts but they were all over the map."

Hamilton was diagnosed two years ago and embarked on an aggressive counter-attack involving medication and receiving life-skills coaching.

"I had to look in the mirror and face myself," said Hamilton. "Life-skills coaching and medication taught me to have that extra split-second to think about what comes out of your mouth, how you react physically and mentally."

Although Hamilton didn't realize it, he'd been a classic example of an ADD sufferer since childhood.

"I was horrible in school," he said. "I was the class clown at the back, always goofing off. My grades were weak and I always had challenges to stay focused when I was reading."

When he left school, his problems continued when he began working.

"My biggest challenge at work was prioritizing and



Jeff Hamilton overcame his problems with attention deficit disorder through a combination of medication and life-skills coaching. Here he plays at home with his children Valerie, 4, and Jackson, 5½. JON MURRAY — THE PROVINCE

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focus," he said. "I would have my jobs for the day but, as the day evolved, I'd have to juggle balls and adjust. I had trouble with that and, as events would occur, I'd feel overwhelmed or frustrated."

One major emotion Hamilton lacked was empathy.

"It's something you understand in theory, but you don't

really get it," he said. "I'd say, 'Too bad,' 'Sorry about that,' but I wouldn't feel it."

While Hamilton says ADD was a piece in the puzzle when his marriage broke down, there were a lot of other factors.

"When I originally separated from my ex-wife, she said, 'You really need to get

checked for this,'" he remembered.

Two years ago, Hamilton was diagnosed with ADD by Vancouver specialist Dr. Gabor Mate.

"The last couple of years have been a complete evolution," Hamilton said.

He went on the medication Concerta, for what Mate described as a learning flaw that was correctable and manageable.

It was an immediate revelation.

"The first two weeks I was on it, all the circuits were firing and, all of a sudden, I'm able to feel things and experience things," he said. "It was emotionally overwhelming,

like an awakening."

But Mate told him he'd have to do more than take drugs.

"He made a great comment, that 'medication will definitely be a benefit for you, but pills don't teach skills,'" grinned Hamilton.

He went to Pete Quily, a Vancouver adult-ADD life-skills coach.

"It gave me that ability to have a clearer train of thought, which contributes to how you react, to your emotions, your levity. All of those things relate to how you function in life, in a marriage, in a career, as a friend, as a parent."

He also tuned in on his personal health.

"I was very lackadaisical about my diet and exercise,"

he said. "I lost 40 pounds and I attribute that to proper diet and exercise. Before, I could barely walk up a hill and now I run 10 kilometres three times a week, I'm at the gym, I Rollerblade and I mountain-bike."

Hamilton doesn't need to take the pills any more.

"It used to be that when I missed one, I noticed the difference, and then I got to the stage where I couldn't tell, and then I was wired and hyped. I could think better without them."

Hamilton says he's the happiest he's been for the last 10 years.

He wants to let other people learn from his experiences and has just finished writing a book about them.

He borrowed the title, *Pills Don't Teach Skills*, from his doctor's advice and is looking for a publisher.

"Being diagnosed is probably the best thing that's happened to me," he said.

Initially, he felt "broken, like I was screwed up and a mess."

It forced him to get better at everything and to realize he wasn't too different from most people.

"It forces you to stand up and look in the mirror and say, 'I've got some weaknesses and some of them are more predominant because of ADD,'" he added.

Dr. Margaret Weiss, director of the attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder program at B.C. Children's Hospital, said the clinic started treating adults, too, last September.

"Half our patients are adults," she said. "We're seeing 500 children and adolescents and our numbers have about doubled."

She said about half of children grow out of ADD, which is 80-per-cent determined by genetic factors: "You often see a child and the father says, 'I had that, too.'"

Hamilton is keeping his fingers crossed that his children, Jackson, 5, and Valerie, 4, haven't inherited his ADD genes.

"There are no signs of it in my kids," he said. "I've definitely looked for it. I don't see anything out of the ordinary and I'm hoping for the best for now."

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