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## When Adult ADHD Looks Something Like ‘Flow’

By Jenara Nerenberg

Writers, entrepreneurs, and creative leaders of all types know that intense focus that happens when you’re “in the zone”: You’re feeling empowered, productive, and engaged. Psychologists might call this flow, the experience of zeroing in so closely on some activity that you lose yourself in it. And this immersive state, as it turns out, also happens to be something that some adults with ADHD commonly experience.

It sounds like a contradiction in terms: You think ADHD and you think of a spaced-out, scattered kid, right? But by definition, ADHD is a “maldistribution” of attention — that is, people who have it often oscillate between splintered and hyperfocused attention. The latter is what Brandon Ashinoff, a psychologist at the University of Birmingham who studies hyperfocus, has called an “interesting paradox” — it’s too much focus, as opposed to a scattered attention span. “You’re focused so intently on something, no other information gets into your brain,” Ashinoff has said.

In other words, ADHD shows up in different ways depending on the person; the goal is to help people regulate their attention and harness the kind of attention necessary for the task at hand. (And recent research from Brazil and King’s College London, by the way, has suggested that despite its reputation as a childhood problem, it’s more common than you might think for the condition to show up for the first time in adulthood, even among people who never showed signs of it in childhood.) Generally speaking, ADHD is classified into two broad categories: inattentive type, and hyperactive/impulsive type. Hyperfocus is seen among both of these types — and yet it’s been largely neglected in academic research.

That’s surprising, especially considering the significant impact — both positive and negative — hyperfocus can have at work and at home. Hyperfocus is great for engaging in longer tasks which require intense concentration — but it’s not so great if that means that the more mundane tasks, chores, and assignments fall by the wayside. When composing a song or coding a new program, the tendency to lose sight of all else proves beneficial; when failing to get laundry or dishes done for days on end, the tendency becomes a potential problem.

One of the few pieces of research on the hyperfocus piece of ADHD is from South Africa, and was the subject of a University of Johannesburg master’s thesis by researcher and writer Rony Sklar — indeed, much of her work has raised the question of why hyperfocus isn’t being looked at in the literature, since her own work was limited by sample size. “The field is wide open and people really need to start researching it,” Sklar told Science of Us. “It’s not about having an attention deficit, it’s more a maldistribution of attention. It’s not about not being able to concentrate; it’s about being able to concentrate in different forms and different intensity.” Put another way, there is a spectrum along which attention gets channeled for human beings; those diagnosed with ADHD don’t have less attention than normal — it’s more accurate to say that their attention can be splintered or hyperfocused, or it can swing between the two. Their challenge is to learn ways to distribute their attention more evenly, by regulating it or even

manipulating it to serve their purposes according to the task at hand, often through the use of practical tools like timers, calendars, reminders, alarms, and breaking tasks into concrete steps.

In Sklar's limited research, she's found that people with ADHD tend to use less mental effort to play a computer game than people without ADHD, "which could mean that they entered the flow state more readily than the non-ADHD group," says Sklar. Additionally, the ADHD group had higher activation in the parietal lobe, which is notable because most studies have found that ADHD individuals have lower parietal lobe activation. This makes sense if you think about it — under normal day-to-day circumstances where shifting attention is required, the ADHD individual may struggle; the usual lower activation in the parietal lobe of those with ADHD is thought to be linked to impaired attention. But in Sklar's sample, where people were intensely focused — or in a state of "hyperfocus" — those with ADHD had higher parietal lobe activation than the non-ADHD group, which "could support the idea of people with ADHD being able to sustain attention depending on the specific context," says Sklar. So this could suggest something rather exciting: that ADHD individuals have, at least in some contexts, a leg up over non-ADHD folks, in that ADHD in fact helps people sustain attention for longer periods than normal in some situations. Under the right conditions, hyperfocus is ADHD's secret superpower.

For a child or adult with ADHD, the determining variable is interest — if the person loves to play music, they can do it for hours. If they hate doing dishes, they will clean one dish, lose focus, and jump to another activity. One metaphor that captivated Sklar's attention paints an interesting picture — first put forth by author Thom Hartmann, the theory suggests that those with ADHD have more of a "hunter" orientation, evolutionarily speaking, and those without ADHD are the "farmers." One group is more nomadic and needs to constantly scan the environment, with attention darting here and there for prey; the other group possesses the patience, calm, and nurturing ability to tend to repeated farming tasks with long-term consistency. The hunter mindset in some ways explains hyperfocus — once the prey is identified, the hunter intensely focuses on her pursuit.

But Arthur Caye, the lead researcher in Brazil's recent study, asserts that hyperfocus may be a result of overcompensating: that is, people who have ADHD may tend to zero in on one particular pursuit as a way to make up for the distractedness in other areas. So it may not be that hyperfocus is a clinical symptom of ADHD — and, indeed, hyperfocus is not listed in the DSM-5 — but it could be a response to having the condition, according to Caye, and it can be channeled into productive or unproductive pursuits. Hyperfocus is not a common topic of conversation among researchers, including Caye and his counterparts at King's College London, but it is among those with ADHD and their therapists and coaches.

This narrative sounds familiar to Maria Yagoda, a writer and Yale graduate who has ADHD. "I will definitely get sucked into something and have to devote all my time and energy into that," Yagoda told Science of Us. She has written previously for The Atlantic about how the condition affects her and how people are often surprised that someone like her — a successful Ivy League graduate — could have ADHD. "Sometimes on days that are the craziest — different news stories breaking, too many meetings, family drama — I'm able to focus more intensely than I could on a normal day. I feel like I kick into this special productivity gear."

Yagoda is an adult female with ADHD — an overlooked demographic in treatment and research circles — and yet the positive and negative symptoms of ADHD for her resemble what many other individuals with ADHD experience, regardless of age or gender.

Specifically with regard to hyperfocus, says Yagoda, “It’s like when I worked at a sandwich shop — during the lunch rush, I was a total beast. Slicing meats, throwing baguettes around, squeezing mayonnaise — I just got into a zone. Instead of being overwhelmed — which is really easy for me to be — all the pressure and stimulation helped me focus. I was great at it,” says Yagoda.

Borrowing Hartmann’s evolutionary metaphor, one could say that a chaotic newsroom is Yagoda’s “hunting” ground — she has to field fast-paced input when adrenaline-inducing news events happen around her, mentally scan her environment, and prioritize her stories of prey according to a hierarchy that is not based on size of the “kill” but the urgency of the story.

Sklar echoes this description — she says that many people with ADHD actually thrive in a more urgent environment where hyperfocus gives the person an advantage in terms of homing in on what’s important. This sentiment has also been expressed by high-profile people with ADHD, such as soccer star Tim Howard or musician Adam Levine of Maroon 5, who both say the energy of ADHD helps them perform at their job.

There are downsides to a tendency to hyperfocus on things, too, of course. Some people get lost in video games or TV shows and have trouble switching their attention to more pressing tasks. But for Yagoda, in particular, that has not been the case, and hyperfocus does not stand out as an impediment. “It’s a new thing for me to think about it as a strength,” she admits. “That’s a revelation.”

So far, the anecdotal evidence from stories like these is clear — the supporting data, alas, is not, namely because there is not yet enough of it. Sklar, for one, is hoping that changes. She receives regular contact from those in the ADHD community, particularly from coaches and therapists, who say that her conclusions are spot-on as evidenced by working with individuals who experience hyperfocus. And Sklar says that she is confident that research is heading in the right direction and that more people are taking note. “This is where the research is going and where it needs to go,” she says. “Hyperfocus can be very powerful. My hope is that people can become the best versions of themselves using the tendency.”

<https://www.thecut.com/2016/07/when-adult-adhd-looks-something-like-flow.html>

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## **Ruminations and Flow: Why Do People with a More Harmonious Passion Experience Higher Well-Being?**

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### **Abstract**

Research shows that harmonious and obsessive passion are positively and negatively linked to well-being respectively (e.g., Vallerand et al. in *J Personal* 75:505–534, 2007; *Psychol Sport Exerc* 9:373–392, 2008). The present study investigated the psychological mechanisms underlying the different impact of the two types of passion on well-being. A theoretical model involving passion, ruminations, flow experiences, and well-being was tested. Results showed that the more people have a harmonious passion, the more they tend to experience flow in their favorite activity, which in turn predicts higher well-being. Obsessive passion did not seem to be systematically linked to flow in the favorite activity. In contrast, the more people have an obsessive passion, the more they tend to ruminate about their passionate activity while engaging in another activity, which did not seem to be systematically the case for people with a harmonious passion. These ruminations are negatively related to flow experiences in the other activity, which are positively associated with well-being. Flow and ruminations thus seem to contribute to the understanding of the link between passion and well-being.

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## **ADHD Hyperfocus: What Is It and How to Use It**

Adapting Hyperfocus for Your Relationship

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Larry Maucieri

ADHD is of course well-known for creating roadblocks involving multi-tasking, sustained attention, and executive functions. But there are other less known signs of the disorder. One of them might even seem contradictory to our usual mental images of ADHD. It's one of the most interesting symptoms of ADHD, and it's called hyperfocus.

While hyperfocus is not officially listed among the DSM-5 criteria for ADHD, many clinicians and researchers recognize it as an interesting manifestation of ADHD. Hyperfocus is a little quirky, in part because it seems so different than most other problems usually associated with ADHD.

When hyperfocusing, a person's concentration becomes laser fixated on a specific event or topic. And it stays there! This type of focus is narrower and more intense than most of us have experienced when we concentrate on something. Dr. Ari Tuckman describes hyperfocus as "unbroken attention," to that extent that the person becomes almost completely engulfed in the topic, fun event, or activity of interest. We all do this to some extent of course -- losing track of time during a fun event or zoning out from the world when texting -- but the intensity is more ramped up in the hyperfocus experience.

It might seem great to be able to stay so focused on a topic or task for so long! Indeed, we will look at a few ways to use it adaptively in your life. Dr. Tuckman however notes that there is a potential problem. The over-absorption from hyperfocusing creates a loss of energy and time for the other tasks and duties in our lives, and this might lead to other more important or even vital tasks being forgotten about, lost in a sea of unfinished business, and left undone. There are techniques that an ADHD therapist or coach can help you with to efficiently manage hyperfocusing, like using like timers, reminder apps, day planners, and so on. But today we are taking a different look at hyperfocus. We are considering some ways to use hyperfocus to your advantage in your life, and specifically in your relationship.

## Relationships and Hyperfocus

In a relationship, hyperfocus may show up early on without even needing an invitation. ADHD specialist Melissa Orlov describes how hyperfocus often emerges in the early dating phase of a relationship that is impacted by ADHD. As a contributor to the book *The Distracted Couple*, she describes how certain brain chemicals, like the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine, ratchet up during feelings of infatuation, leading a person with ADHD to very closely attend to the needs and desires of his/her partner. That feels great for both parties but unfortunately it doesn't usually last. In other words, if hyperfocus were a theater goer watching an ADHD-impacted relationship on stage, it would have left during the intermission and gone to sleep at home not too far into the second act. The gradual loss of infatuation may lead to a decrease in hyperfocus, according to Orlov, and that is of course just when the relationship waters usually get a little trickier to navigate.

## Harnessing Hyperfocus

So we've looked at the down sides of hyperfocus. But are there any positives to it? Well, some working with ADHD would say... yes. For instance, there may be ways to draw on the intensity of the hyperfocus experience in ADHD to help a relationship.

New York City based ADHD coach Jennifer Koretsky provides examples in *The Distracted Couple* from her own life, in which she found an adaptive way to utilize her hyperfocus. She used her hyperfocus to intricately study and evaluate hundreds of donor profiles when she and her partner were looking to have a child through artificial insemination, and again when looking for a lawyer specializing in the specific legal issues related to their adoption process. Both partners were able to recognize when her hyperfocus would be beneficial and when it should be dialed down in this process. Her partner helped her disengage her hyperfocus, to adjust her evaluation criteria, and to use Koretsky's hyperfocus experience as a tool in their process and in a way that was supportive, accepting, and productive.

If you have hyperfocus as part of your ADHD, how might you and your partner use it positively? Is there a way for you to draw on it to benefit the relationship, and to get your partner's support for when to rely on it and when to turn it down? What would be the first area in your life that you might apply it to for a positive result?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-distracted-couple/201411/adhd-hyperfocus-what-is-it-and-how-use-it>