

## CREATIVITY AND ADD: A BRILLIANT AND FLEXIBLE MIND

*by Thom Hartmann*

*People with ADD are the descendants of Hunters! . . . They 'd have to be constantly scanning their environment, looking for food and for threats to them, that's distractibility. They'd have to make instant decisions and act on them without a second's thought... which is impulsivity. And they'd have to love the high-stimulation and risk-filled environment of the hunting field. . . . ADD! It's only a flaw if you're in a society of Farmers!*

Many teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and others who work with ADD children and adults have observed a correlation between creativity and ADD. Experts define the following personality characteristics as most necessary for creativity:

- **The willingness to engage in risk taking.** Daring to step out into unknown territory is almost by definition a creative effort. Picasso, Dali, Warhol, Salinger, Hemingway, and Poe all struck out in profoundly new and original directions—and were first criticized for their efforts. It's a risk to be original, to try something new. Yet risk taking is essential to the creative process, and is one of the classic characteristics of the Hunter.

- **Intrinsic motivation.** Creative people, while often not motivated by extrinsic factors such as a teacher's expectations or a job's demands, usually have powerful intrinsic motivation. When they're "on a job" that's important to them personally, they're tenacious and unyielding. Parents of ADD children often report the apparent incongruity between their ADD child's apparent inability to stick to his homework for more than fifteen minutes, and his ability to easily spend two hours practicing his guitar, absorbed in a novel, or rebuilding his motorcycle.

- **Independent belief in one's own goals.** Creative people, often in the face of derision and obstacles (look at Sartre or Picasso, both ridiculed for their early ideas), believe in their own ideas and abilities. When allowed to pursue those things which they find interesting (their intrinsic motivations), they can be tenacious for years at a time, often producing brilliant work.

- **Tolerance for ambiguity.** While Farmers generally prefer things to be ordered and structured, and think in a linear, step-by-step fashion, creative Hunters often have a high tolerance for ambiguity. Because their attention wanders easily, they can often see a situation from several directions, noticing facets or solutions that may not have been obvious to "normal" people. Einstein, who flunked out of school because "his attention wandered off," often pointed out that the theory of relativity didn't come to him as the result of tedious mathematical equations. Rather, the theory was a flash of insight that struck when he was considering the apparently ambiguous nature of the various natural forces. He pointed out that, "The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking" (*Physics and Reality*, 1936). Similarly, Carl Jung, when talking about the ability of creative people to let their minds wander among seemingly ambiguous paths, said, "Without this playing with fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable" (*Psychological Types*, 1923).

- **Willingness to overcome obstacles.** Creative people are often described as those who “when given a lemon, make lemonade.” Thousands of businesses and inventions originated with this ability of creative people, often after dozens of different tries. There’s an old model of “horizontal” and “vertical” problem solving: When a person who’s a vertical problem solver comes to a door that’s stuck or locked, he will push harder and harder, banging on it, knocking on it, and, ultimately, kicking it in. Conversely, a horizontal problem solver would look for other ways to enter the house, trying windows or other doors. While this is a simplistic view of different problem-solving methods, it does demonstrate the difference between “linear” and “random” ways of viewing the world. Creative individuals more often tend to fall into the latter category. They’re usually the ones who devise new ways to do old tasks or to overcome old problems.
- **Insight skills.** Creative people can make links between seemingly unrelated events in the past, to develop new solutions for current problems. This apparently relates to the ability to think in more random, rather than linear, ways—one of the cardinal characteristics of the typical ADD thought processes.
- **The ability to redefine a problem.** Rather than thinking of a problem in the same fashion, creative people often reframe it entirely. This enables them to find within the problem itself the seeds of a solution. Often, they discover that what was viewed as a problem in the past is, in fact, a solution to something else altogether. (The notion of viewing ADD as a Hunter trait might be considered an example of this “reframing” process.)

## **Nurturing Creativity**

When you look through this list of creative characteristics, it reads almost like a re- compilation of the American Psychological Association’s assessment criteria for diagnosing ADHD. And, reviewing the biographies of some of history’s most creative individuals, we discover that they have much in common with ADD Hunters, and, in fact, were most likely people who were “afflicted” with ADD.

A creative Hunter adult describes the experience this way: “The Hunter trait of a constantly shifting point of view is a fabulous asset here. It’s what lets you see unexpected things where others see only the obvious. It’s like looking for one elusive piece of a jigsaw puzzle, picking something up, and discovering you don’t have what you sought but you found some thing even better instead—it fits somewhere unexpected.”

Unfortunately, the risk taking so necessary to creativity is often pummeled out of our children in school. Robert J. Sternberg, the author of numerous books and articles on the creative process, points out that risk taking is often discouraged, or even punished, in a school situation.

Sternberg suggests that our schools, which are largely staffed by earnest non-risk takers and Farmers, are sometimes unintentionally organized in such a fashion as to discourage both creative people and the learning of creative skills. Similarly, many jobs demand that people not innovate. There are risks in coming up with something new that may not work, so risk taking is generally frowned upon in corporate America. These anticreative models are also, probably not by coincidence, anti-ADD/anti-Hunter models.

An educational model that’s more experience based will better preserve and nurture the creativity of the Hunter personality. This is not to suggest that the basics of education can or should be ignored; instead, we should consider establishing public-

school classrooms and systems that encourage activities to bring out the creativity that's wired into the brains of so many Hunter children.

In the workplace, Hunters may want to consider career or position changes into areas where creativity is encouraged rather than punished. In my years as an entrepreneur in the advertising and marketing industry, I've noticed a very high percentage of Hunters who are drawn to that business.

Hewlett Packard was famous in the 1960s for its workplace model that encouraged engineers to pursue areas of independent research, following their own intrinsic motivations. In *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters points out that Hewlett Packard had a policy of "open lab stock," actually encouraging engineers to take things home for their own personal use and experimentation. Two of their engineers, Steve Jobs and Steven Wozniak, came up with an idea for a computer that Hewlett Packard rejected, a computer that Jobs and Wozniak then built in their garage: it was the first Apple computer. Bell Labs, too, has historically offered their engineers a similar wide latitude in pursuing creative impulses. The transistor, the integrated circuit, and superconductivity are the result, revolutionizing our world.

Hunters frequently find the abilities that come with ADD too valuable to sacrifice with medication that modifies the disabilities. Many writers, artists, and public speakers with ADD report that, while their lives become more organized and their workdays easier when taking the drugs, their creativity seems to dry up. One novelist told me that he uses Ritalin when doing the tedious work of proofreading, but drinks coffee instead when he's writing: "Coffee lends itself to flights of fancy; it seems to make me even more ADD, which allows my wandering mind to explore new ideas, to free-associate. Ritalin brings me to a single point of concentration, which is useless when I'm trying to find that random spark of inspiration about how my character is going to extricate himself from a snake pit in India, or escape a horde of Mongols."

A professional speaker told me, "I made the mistake once of taking Ritalin before giving a three-hour speech to a group of about 100 editors in Washington, D.C. Normally when speaking, I'm thinking ahead about what I'm going to say next, formulating concepts into pictures in my mind, dropping in examples before I say them, and continually scanning the audience for cues that my words are either boring or exciting them. But with the Ritalin in my bloodstream, I found myself having to refer back to my notes for that speech—something I haven't done in years. It was a painful and embarrassing experience, and convinced me that Hunters make great public speakers, whereas Farmers, while probably well-organized in their material and presentations, are often boring to an audience because they're not continually scanning their environment."

A writer in the *New York Times Magazine*, describing his diagnosis at age thirty of ADD and subsequent successes with Ritalin, also commented on how much he enjoyed those days when he didn't take his medication. He found that the Ritalin, while smoothing out his emotional swings, stabilizing his time-sense, and giving him the ability to concentrate on his work, also took away a bit of his spontaneity, humor, and sense of the absurd, which he enjoyed. Reflecting on the dozens of successful public speakers, actors, magicians, other performers, and writers I've worked with and known over the years, I'd guess that many, many of them are ADD adults.

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