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ADHD

TEEN

TROUBLE

by Zoë Kessler

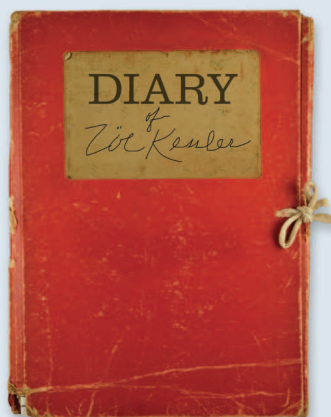
**I WAS ALWAYS DIFFERENT.** As a child, my mom used to say, “You say the weirdest things.” Like so many girls with undiagnosed ADHD, by the time I hit puberty my self-esteem had plummeted.

When puberty hit, things only got worse. I never knew when I’d say something off the wall, and my childhood mood swings grew in amplification. If teenage girls were moody, I was meta-moody. In fact my mood swings started well before adolescence. “Can’t you get on an even keel?” was my mom’s frequent refrain from childhood and into my late teens. As no advice or guidance was offered, I felt solely responsible for figuring out why I was so moody, while being wholly incapable of controlling it.

I had no idea why life was so dramatic for me but not others. If there was a family argument it would blow over and be quickly forgotten by the rest of my family members. Not for me. I felt stranded alone on an island of anxiety, hurt feelings, and sometimes, panic. Would the family fall apart? I catastrophized, alone in my fears.

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I enjoyed my large, boisterous adopted family, but at family gatherings I’d cloister myself in a bathroom and cry, overwhelmed without knowing why. Prior to my inevitable crying jag, I’d move from room to room, listening in on a conversation until I got bored, then move onto the next one. As the hours passed, the noise and commotion of kids, conversations, people milling about getting food, drinks, utensils and so on culminated in my feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. I’d retreat to the washroom furthest away from the throngs. Sometimes I’d opt for a walk around the block to collect and fortify myself until we were finally in the car and on our way home. I had no idea why I needed these survival tactics. Everyone else, including the many cousins my own age, was perfectly capable of enjoying our parties without the need for a respite.



While my coping mechanisms helped, they also accentuated my feeling of being different, of being utterly alone and strange. No one questioned my behavior. No one seemed to notice. This intensified my feeling of loneliness. I realized my behavior was odd, but the fact that no one commented, tried to help, or showed concern, seemed just as strange to me. Didn’t anyone care? I sank into a mild depression, sulking and sullen on the long car ride home. If these

events happened during my period, PMS further escalated the emotional trauma I felt.

The feeling of being different extended beyond my family. In high school, there were two groups of kids: the academic, nerdy types and the stoners. Constantly moving between groups, I never felt at home in either.

The straight-laced kids couldn’t satisfy my need for excitement. The risk-takers were too one-dimensional to fill my need for intellectual stimulation. Neither offered an outlet for my creativity. Caught betwixt and between, I experimented with



drugs at weekend parties in my early teens and went out dancing with a best friend in my last years in high school. While my girlfriend, a popular, pretty girl got asked to dance, I was left at the table sipping Singapore Slings. Driving home I ran red lights and broke the speed limit in a dangerous mix of exhaustion, alcohol, and ADHD.



Throughout my teen years, countless times I made friends, only to watch the friendship blow up in my face from an impulsive, careless remark. I'd be just as shocked as the friend I'd inadvertently insulted, but the damage was done and there be no going back. Another painful loss, another step on the way to losing self-confidence. The more losses, the more scared I became of trusting myself. I never knew what I'd say or do next, which led to a constant feeling of anxiety. The more anxious I became, the more likely it would be that I'd interrupt someone in conversation, say something awkward or inappropriate, or clumsily walking into someone or something. It was a self-perpetuating downward spiral. Still wanting to fit in, I'd grasp like a drowning person at any sign of affection thrown my way. This would lead to self-denigrating sexual behavior with uncaring partners, leaving me feeling used and violated. I learned not to trust my instincts and trusted the wrong people. Knowing my behavior would be disapproved of by my parents and my more upstanding group of friends, I began to feel betrayed by myself as well as others.

At seventeen, I'd finally met my first long-term boyfriend. During a school bus trip to Florida, I'd left my diary in my knapsack. I left my seat to go to the washroom and on my way back, the other girls pointedly whispered my boyfriend's name and quoted lines from my diary. I felt devastated, humiliated, betrayed yet again. I felt like a lamb thrown to the

slaughter, defenseless. Not only could I not fit in with the other girls, I'd become a target for their mockery.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, during the last week of my last year of high school, a teacher with a reputation invited me to lunch at a French restaurant. I was nineteen. He was married. What could I do? I had no idea how to handle the situation. I'd been raised to respect my elders, respect authority figures. I was afraid to say no. What if he docked my already middling grades? I was afraid to say no. I was more afraid to say yes. This teacher had a reputation for hitting on the female students. I said yes. On the appointed day, out of desperation I recruited a friend to come along as a bodyguard. It was the second most awkward moment of my high school career. Given my track record of awkward moments, that's saying a lot.

Fledgling research shows how girls' ADHD manifests differently than boys'. We are more prone to internalized shame, perfectionism, wanting to please and get along with others, yet suffering social isolation and ostracism in spite of our efforts. We're seen as strange and weird by classmates. In hindsight, I see all of this in my own history, especially

as a pre-teen and teenager. Like everyone, I wanted to fit in. I never questioned whether or not that was even desirable. Deep inside, I knew I was different. They were right, but not in the way they thought.

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I knew there was a creative, funny, warm, intelligent girl inside but couldn't find a way or a safe place to express it. Instead of thriving, I was surviving. Barely, or so it felt. I (just) made it into university at nineteen, a confused pre-law student who secretly yearned to be an author. It would take another thirty-five years, and an ADHD diagnosis and treatment before I'd finally have the guts to say no to fitting in and yes to

my lifelong desire. I embraced my ADHD and committed one hundred percent to my path as a writer. And yes, I've looked back, but only to better understand the path it took to get here so that I could understand myself and help others, especially teenage girls who feel as I once did.



**Zoë Kessler, BA, BEd**, is an author, journalist, and motivational speaker and noted authority on women and ADHD. Her latest book is *ADHD According to Zoë: The Real Deal on Relationships, Finding Your Focus & Finding Your Keys* (New Harbinger Publications, Sept. 2013).