

# Put Down the Stick, Pick Up a Feather

## ADULT ADHD & SELF-CRITICISM

by Elaine Taylor-Klaus, CPCC, PCC

**M**ANAGING ADHD AS AN ADULT requires more than just taking medication and putting a few systems and structures in place. It is a complicated condition that relies on self-education, setting intentions, and exerting effort for self-management—which are not always easy for adults with the condition.

But the hardest part to manage, I believe, regardless of whether an adult diagnosis is met with surprise or confirmation, is this: Adults with ADHD often have a lifetime of self-disappointment to overcome.

Decades of low self-esteem etch deep grooves into our brains. Years of self-bullying have taken up residence. It takes awareness and determination to see ourselves in a new light and overcome the years of shadow.

The good news is that diagnosis offers a legitimate explanation for feelings of inadequacy and lack of accomplishment. Once you understand ADHD, you begin to see your choices and decisions in a different light. You begin to identify how you compensated, and how you didn't. It's almost as if your whole life finally begins to make sense.

With understanding, you can cut yourself enough slack to begin the long and worthwhile exercise of self-management.

### Put the stick down

One of the first things I teach adults who are beginning to treat their ADHD is this: Put the stick down.

Years of speaking to ourselves in ways we would never speak to others are deeply ingrained. We beat ourselves up for the silliest things. "I'm such an idiot," we tell ourselves when we make a simple mistake, or "I can't believe I did that." All too often we model self-loathing—or at the least, self-judgment and lack of self-acceptance.

Or maybe we bully ourselves by putting everyone else's needs ahead of your own. We give and give to everyone else until we have nothing left to give—because somehow, we don't think we "deserve" to take care of ourselves.

We also beat ourselves up for all the "shoulds" we haven't done, instead of acknowledging the things that we do well. We focus on our deficits ("I'm so disorganized") and neglect to see our gifts ("I'm great in a crisis, but...").

But there is hope. Because while deep grooves of self-disappointment are difficult to rewire, the secret to helping you put that stick down is already part of you: your values. Just beware the treacherous "bully values."



## What are values (and why should you care)?

Your values are a reflection of who you are at your core. A constant in your life, they're what you stand for, what gives your life meaning. Understanding your own values can be a powerfully helpful tool for adults with ADHD. As a lens for decision making, values can help you set priorities and maneuver the natural ups and downs that come with adult life.

There are values many of us have in common, like kindness, respect, love, or caring. Then there are those that are more individual, like self-determination, excellence, service, or authenticity. Even if we're not aware of it, our personal values help us make choices in our lives.

Here's the catch: You cannot possibly honor all of your values in every decision you make. In other words, your **values are always in conflict with each other**, and so you must constantly make choices between them.

For example, if you have a strong value around health, you may honor that regularly by getting to bed at a reasonable time every night. Great. But sometimes, if you also have a value around playful celebration, you may find yourself excited to go out for a party, or to a concert, knowing that you may not get enough sleep that night. You're choosing to honor a different value.

When our values (naturally) come into conflict with each other, it can assist us in setting priorities. We must think through what's important to us and make decisions accordingly. For example, you may value education dearly, but a life-threatening illness of a loved one, or the birth of a sibling's child, might lead you to take your children out of school for a few days to connect with family.

To find out more about clarifying your own core values, an internet search for "values exercise" will lead you to a wealth of online resources (free and fee-based). In addition, many life coaches and ADHD coaches do exercises to help their clients identify their values.

## What about the dreaded bully values?

As an adult with ADHD, understanding your values can help you put the stick down and make decisions for yourself that are based on what's important to you now, not some leftover self-judgment from the past.

But there's one catch: You must watch out for bully values. When we unwittingly begin to treat

any of our values as if they are far more important than all of our other values, we are bullying ourselves with our own values.

For example, your key values might include "being true to your word," "showing respect," "love and connection," and "responsibility." But if "respect" or "responsibility" becomes a bully value, it could dominate or even eliminate your ability to express your value for "love and connection."

What does that look like in real life?

If "respect" consistently bullies out "connection," you may spend excessive time reacting to (or correcting) how your child or spouse speaks to you. Your constant refrain of "you can't talk to me that way" may prevent you from having caring, connected moments that nurture your relationship—which is also a value of yours.

In other words, you don't have to choose one value over the other in the grand scheme of things. But you would do well to prioritize them all at different times.

## Stepping out of your own way

Managing adult ADHD is complex and full of obstacles—and sometimes those obstacles start with you. Your values offer a lens to remind you what's most important to you. With that awareness, you can make decisions that are in alignment with all of your values, not just some of them.

And that enables you to stand up to the greatest bully of all: the bully within. Ultimately, that awareness will help you learn to put the stick down—and to embrace the curious process of managing your ADHD. 🍀

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### MORE INFO

Here are some helpful online tools for identifying your values.

**Life Values Inventory** | <http://www.lifevaluesinventory.org>

A free values clarification and personal development program.

**MINDTOOLS** | [www.mindtools.com](http://www.mindtools.com)

Video: *What Are Your Values? Deciding What's Most Important in Life* |

[https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED\\_85.htm](https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_85.htm)

