

Leaving Home, ADHD-Style

by Jon Thomas, EdD, LPC

ONE PARTICULARLY HOT SUMMER DAY during my Texas youth, I was cutting mesquite trees for a local rancher. As I worked my way from the cattle pens outward, I soon found myself a mile or so from the ranch house. I should mention that I have ADHD and often forget little things that can become big problems, like drinking water in this case.

I became so thirsty and dehydrated that I was wondering about the wisdom of walking a few hundred yards beyond and drinking from the muddy stock pond instead of heading back. As I thought of the brutally hot trip back to the ranch house, I began conjuring up scenes from movies. The one that kept popping up was of this guy stumbling through a desert with an empty canteen that he drops into the sand.

Before I could decide my fate, the rancher came driving up in his pickup with a large jar of ice water. It glimmered in the shimmering sun like diamonds and seemed more valuable.

He took this occasion to educate me about the importance of water in this cattle country. He went on to explain that unlike humans, cattle can go for nearly a week without water. But they seldom died of dehydration on cattle drives. I could hear one of his old cattle drive stories coming, but I planned to tolerate it—the mesquite trees could wait.

The most important thing I recall from his story, so many years later, is the reason cattle didn't die from lack of water. On the drive, the trail boss would usually ride ahead and find a place to water the cattle. If the cattle went much more than three days without water, they would turn and stampede back to the last place they drank. In this way they always stayed close enough to a source of water. Many died from a hard run in such hot dry country, but not necessarily from lack of water. And the trail boss got another chance to locate a watering hole close enough.

When students leave for college—or when young adults leave home for the first time—they also leave a ready source of fulfillment for most of their needs. There's the sense of community and belonging from high school... familiarity of surroundings... the structure of school... a ready source of encouragement from friends and family contributing to self-esteem... a sense of efficacy from recently completing high school. And much more.

Ideally, they begin learning to fill these needs in their new setting. For many reasons this might not happen quickly, if at all. At this point, it is not uncommon to “stampede” back to the last fulfillment center—home.

At times this may just be a respite and recovering period to rest and regroup before venturing back out. In extreme cases, this respite might stretch into a more permanent residence as the thought of taking another run at independence looms as an ever-growing threat.

Sometimes young adults will “stampede” into familiar alternatives that readily—though partially—fill unmet needs. The world of gaming and streaming offers rapid access to efficacy, perpetually novel entertainment, and the immediate belonging of an online community. When kept in balanced moderation, this can be a useful bridge to independence. But for many it becomes a disastrous drain of time and attention. For those who find themselves logging in a twelve-hour shift of online activity each day, it can assure the return home that academic (or work) failure brings.

Fortunately, you are probably smarter than most cattle and can engage in exploration and reasoning. And hopefully you realize the folly of doing the same thing and expecting different results. With supportive guidance, like coaching and counseling, you can begin to piece together the history of your decline. You can discover the beginning and tipping points at which filling certain needs became

too difficult. This discovery can lead to learning and developing the skills that are needed to keep you from returning down the same path. And help you muster the emotional strength to step out and try again. But this time, bring the water. **A**

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